

G8 and NATO summits take place without Putin

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Russian President Vladimir Putin is not attending the G8 summit taking place May 18 and 19 at Camp David, nor will he participate in the forthcoming NATO summit in Chicago. Putin's cancellation of his plans to attend the G8 summit, which comes just three days after the start of his third term, is an unmistakable sign of deteriorating relations between Moscow and NATO, in particular the US.

The G8 meeting had been moved from Chicago to Camp David especially to accommodate Putin. In his place, Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev, who is regarded as wielding very little political clout since he exchanged offices recently with Putin, will represent Russia at the talks. Instead of taking part in the G8 meeting, Putin preferred to participate in the summit of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), which began on Tuesday in Moscow. The CSTO includes Belarus and the former Soviet republics in Central Asia, with the exception of Azerbaijan, Georgia and Ukraine.

According to a report in the Russian newspaper *Kommersant*, the US administration was annoyed by Putin's refusal to attend the G8 meeting. President Barack Obama has since announced that he does not intend to take part in the upcoming APEC summit for Asian-Pacific cooperation, which is scheduled to take place in Vladivostok, Russia in September.

At the heart of the conflict between Russia and NATO is the Washington's plans to establish an anti-ballistic missile (ABM) system in Eastern Europe, which Moscow regards as a threat to its security. In addition, the Kremlin is opposed to western war preparations against Syria and Iran. Tensions between Russia and the US have been on the rise in the recent period. Putin opposed the US-backed overthrow of Libya's Gaddafi, which he viewed as a threat to

Russia's extensive economic interests in the region. In addition, the Kremlin has accused the White House of fomenting domestic opposition in Russia, which has witnessed a series of mass anti-government protests in recent months.

Despite Russian opposition, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen has stated that he will announce at the upcoming NATO summit that the first phase of the missile defence system is operational.

Russia has repeatedly relayed its concerns about the system. Most recently, the Kremlin has threatened to terminate its moves towards nuclear disarmament and cease cooperating with the new START treaty signed with the US in 2010, should NATO prove unwilling to compromise. Two weeks ago, the Russian General Chief of Staff Nikolai Makarov threatened a pre-emptive strike against ABM bases in Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, Rasmussen and German Chancellor Angela Merkel have reaffirmed the necessity of the defence system and pronounced the concerns raised by Moscow to be unfounded.

While NATO is not prepared to compromise on the issue of the missile system, the escalation of tensions with the Kremlin poses a series of problems for the military alliance. In particular, the NATO powers are dependent on Moscow's cooperation in order to draw down troops in Afghanistan and continue supplying those that remain. Against the backdrop of strained relations with Pakistan, NATO is reliant upon Russian transit routes to Afghanistan in order to move military equipment and personnel from the hinterland in the Hindu Kush.

The growing tensions between Russia and NATO have caused concern, particularly in Europe. In a commentary for the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Wolfgang Ischinger warned of a "return of the Cold War" and

urged NATO to “pause to consider”. Ischinger, president of the Munich Security Conference and a long-standing career diplomat, is one of the most influential voices in German foreign policy.

The background to Ischinger’s warnings is the dilemma confronting Germany and Europe as a whole with regard to its relations with Russia. Germany imports almost 40 percent of its oil and gas from Russia, with the EU importing around one-third of its total requirements. At the same time, Brussels and individual European governments maintain close ties with the United States. Among the political elites of Europe and especially Germany, there are consequently profound differences on the issue of how to orient towards Moscow.

Faced with growing geopolitical tensions and the fact that the attempt to establish a pan-European security policy has failed completely, EU countries have been working to develop a closer relationship with the US at the expense of Russian geopolitical interests.

The head of the Stratfor think tank, George Friedman, noted recently that a combination of the economic crisis in Europe, the recent defeat of Nicolas Sarkozy in France and the takeover of the Italian government by Mario Monti has significantly weakened the position of Russia in Europe. Unlike his predecessor Silvio Berlusconi, who was a close friend of Putin’s, Monti is pursuing a more pro-US policy. Having just assumed office, Monti recognises the legitimacy of the NATO ABM system. Friedman notes, “The days have passed when Putin could call a friend in Europe to help with NATO or with technological deficiencies.”

On the question of preparations for war against Syria and Iran, the European powers have now lined up solidly behind the United States. Alongside France, Italy and the UK, Germany has also indicated its readiness to participate in military action this time, despite its close economic and energy relations with Russia. Russia, however, together with China, has blocked two UN resolutions against Syria and repeatedly stressed its opposition to a military strike on Iran.

At an international forum in St. Petersburg on Thursday, Russian Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev warned that actions that undermine the sovereignty of Syria could lead to a regional war and the use of nuclear weapons.

The preparations for war against Iran were also the main theme of the CSTO summit held in Moscow on Tuesday. Taking part in the meeting with Putin were the leaders of Kazakhstan, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. The alliance decided to conduct comprehensive annual military exercises in Central Asia and the Caucasus. Both regions would be severely affected in the event of a US-Israeli military strike against Iran, which Moscow expects to take place this summer. Georgia and Azerbaijan, which quit the CSTO in 1999, are expected to line up with Israel and the United States in the event of a conflict with Iran.

The declaration adopted by the CSTO summit emphasized that member states would “strengthen their response to challenges and threats”. Large-scale military exercises are planned in the Caucasian states of Armenia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in September, in preparation for a military strike on Iran. Unlike previous exercises which were confined to the army, navy and air force, the Russian security agency, the FSB, Interior Ministry troops and other security forces are due to take part. Russian General Leonid Ivashov, president of the Center for Geopolitical Problems, said in January that the planned manoeuvres were necessary for the preservation of Russia’s geopolitical interests in the Caucasus.



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