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The G-8 Summit: Putting U.S.–Russia Relations Back On Track

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One of the last bilateral U.S.–Russia presidential meetings between George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin will take place on the sidelines of the G-8 Summit at the Baltic Sea coastal resort of Heiligendamm, Germany from June 6–8. The two presidents should use this chance to define a common agenda in order to repair the deteriorating relations between the two countries.

Since the end of the Cold War, the United States has remained Russia's obsession, its "principal adversary." President Putin has severely criticized U.S. foreign policy in several instances, including a speech in Munich on February 1, an interview with Al Jazeera, and a Victory Day speech in Moscow. U.S. criticism of Russian domestic and foreign policy has been more restrained; during her last trip to Moscow, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice explicitly called for a toning down of the acrimony.

Russia has engaged its neighbors Georgia and Estonia with harsh rhetoric and harsher measures; has limited political and media freedoms domestically; has used disproportionate police force to disperse peaceful demonstrations; and has steadfastly refused to allow Western and domestic private companies access to "strategic" energy and natural resources, assets, and pipelines. As often as not, Russia positions itself as an adversary of the United States.

Russia As a Geostrategic Heavyweight. There are deep historical and ideological roots to the current friction. Russia's global strategy is driven by military and security elites who view their nation as

the direct heir to the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, and cherish its role as America's principal counterbalance on the world scene. Today, many in Moscow advocate for a de facto alliance with the Muslim world, particularly with Iran and Syria, as well as with China. Moscow is reaching out to anti-status quo states such as Iran and Venezuela, and views Russians as largely culturally distinct from "the West."

Russia is using a full array of modern international relations tools to achieve its goals: public diplomacy; weapons sales to the Iranian mullahs and the Venezuelan dictator Hugo Chavez; strategic information operations aimed at depicting America as an out-of-control hyperpower; putting former political leaders on the petrodollar payroll; and coddling terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah. Playing its energy cards brilliantly, Russian diplomacy has become chillingly effective, especially along its periphery. But in the words of one incisive observer, Russia has left the West.

The Need to Pay Attention. Amidst escalating conflicts in the Middle East, the United States should pay close attention to a resurgent Russia. Moscow is taking steps to reorder the post-Cold

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War global security architecture, often in ways contrary to U.S. interests.

The more economic muscle the Russian state gets, the more truculent it becomes at home and abroad. It has reasserted itself as it has become flush with cash from energy sales.

Russian elites are searching for enemies old and new. They view Bush Administration policies—such as democracy promotion, including in Eurasia—as part of a sinister plot to undermine President Vladimir Putin’s Administration. They point to a series of “orange revolutions” along Russia’s periphery—in Georgia, Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan, and, they claim, eventually in Moscow itself. However, the Russian elites fail to notice that democracy promotion has lost steam after fiascos in the Palestinian territories and in Egypt, where the Muslim Brotherhood has risen with vengeance, and as reform movements in Ukraine and Belarus sputtered.

What the United States Should Do. Russia’s enemy-searching is likely to become a self-fulfilling prophecy, with dangerous consequences and a high price in treasure and, ultimately, in blood. The United States is fully engaged in two regional conflicts—in Iraq and Afghanistan—and in the global war on terror. Over the horizon, its relations with China may become complicated. The United States obviously does not need a new Cold War with a major land power in the Eastern hemisphere. Washington should remember that Moscow values certainty in relations, respects power and action, and is ready for a constructive engagement. The Heiligen-damm summit is one of the last opportunities for Bush and Putin to revive the stronger ties that existed six years ago, when both leaders took office.

In light of Russia’s confrontational foreign policy, President Bush should pursue the following strategies at the G-8 Summit:

- **Reiterate** to President Putin that nuclear-armed Iran is a long-term threat to Russian security, and

that the United States will expect Russian cooperation in the U.N. Security Council and elsewhere in using diplomatic and security measures to derail the Iranian nuclear program.

- **Explain** that the United States is not pursuing a strategy of overthrowing Mr. Putin’s regime, but that Russia’s heavy-handed tactics against domestic opposition will isolate it in the international community, including in the G-8, which is a leader of *democratic* nations. Democratic norms for domestic behavior apply to all G-8 members.
- **Continue** dialogue and cooperation with Russia on matters of mutual concern by demonstrating to Russian elites all that the United States has to offer. Fields of cooperation may include energy (especially nuclear energy), non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, science and space exploration, medicine, education, environmental protection, and economic issues of concern to Russia such as expansion of its mortgage market.
- **Confer** with European leaders regarding a concerted energy policy which would diminish Europe’s growing dependence on Russian natural gas and prevent emergence of a gas OPEC.

Conclusion. After a 20-year hiatus, Russia is forcing its way back onto the global scene as an adversarial actor. Washington decision makers can no longer take Moscow for granted and must design better strategies for coping with this old-new geopolitical challenge in Eurasia. Strategies should include hefty carrot-and-stick components and should not be limited to rhetoric, as happened in the past.

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