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The Sochi Bush–Putin Summit: Last Chance to Improve Relations

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This coming weekend, Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin will meet for their final summit, to be held in the Russian resort of Sochi on the Black Sea at Putin's invitation. This will mark the end of an era in a complicated relationship. The question is: Will the two leaders leave the scene while U.S.–Russian relations are at their lowest point since the Cold War, or will they attempt to rescue them?

Before the Sochi summit, President Bush should request that President-elect Dmitry Medvedev join the talks. He should also reiterate U.S. support for eventual NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia while clarifying that such membership would not endanger Russia. Bush should also discuss the participation of Russian observers in the United States' limited missile defense system in Central Europe.

President Bush should call for a more robust cooperation with Russia on limiting Iran's nuclear weapons, uranium enrichment, and ballistic missile programs. Washington and Moscow should explore Russian weapons transfers and training for Afghan military and security personnel. Finally, the two sides should launch a discussion of terms and conditions for allowing the investment of Russian sovereign state funds in the United States.

A Changed Relationship. Bush and Putin began their relationship on an upbeat note: In their first summit, held in Ljubljana, Slovenia, in 2001, Bush famously “looked Putin in the eye and saw his soul.” For his part, the inexperienced Putin not

only deferred to the United States, but backed it to the hilt after the 9/11 attacks. Putin at the time sought to position Russia's war in Chechnya, which had a jihadi dimension, as a part of the global war on terrorism.

In seven years, much has changed. First, Russia has vehemently opposed Bush's decision to go to Iraq—without cutting a deal with the Kremlin. Moscow correctly predicted in the spring of 2003 that the engagement would be long and bloody, and it had no illusions about the difficulty of pacifying Afghanistan. Some of the Cold War–era elite could hardly conceal their glee at America's predicaments in Iraq and Afghanistan, viewing them as a payback for its victory in the Cold War.

With oil prices having quadrupled since September 11, 2001, Russia is flush with cash. The Kremlin closed options to international corporations' involvement in the development of Russia's ample oil and gas reserves. It has expropriated leading private Russian oil companies, while western corporations, such as Exxon, Shell, and BP, have been pushed out of the most lucrative projects.

Moscow also became disappointed that President Bush failed to deliver on his promises to lift the

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Jackson–Vanik restrictions that prevent Russia from obtaining most favored nation trade status, thereby delaying its bid for membership in the World Trade Organization.

Its newfound wealth and America’s difficulties made Russia believe it could now defy the law of political gravity. With Putin proving to be a quick geopolitical study, Russia positioned itself as the leader of a loose, “multi-polar” anti-American coalition that has included Iran, Venezuela, and at times China. After 2003, Paris, Berlin, and Brussels (under Jacques Chirac and Gerhard Schroeder) were closer to Moscow’s position on Iraq than to Washington’s, and in many quarters in Europe there is little enthusiasm for fighting in Afghanistan.

With the looming handover of power to Putin’s selected successor, and in order to boost the regime’s popularity, the Kremlin needed and wanted an external enemy who was both credible and safe. This message sounded loud and clear in Putin’s Munich speech, which sounded like the new declaration of Cold War II.¹

Resuscitating Cold War–era fear and loathing of NATO and the U.S., the Kremlin has whipped up xenophobia and paranoia, circling the wagons of public opinion around the Putin administration and calling democratic opponents traitors and agents of the West.

A Modest Beginning? With the Putin–Medvedev transition secure, however, and with the U.S. staunchly pursuing a limited missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic, Moscow decided to tone down the vitriol and began exploring areas in which NATO and Russia could cooperate.

While still opposing NATO Membership Action Plans for Georgia and Ukraine, Russia is willing to offer cooperation on providing supply routes through Russian territory to Afghanistan, possible provision of helicopters, and a compromise over the missile base in Poland in exchange for the stationing of Russian officers there.

In the Sochi meeting, Bush and Putin will further develop a bilateral “strategic framework,” building on the current 2+2 format in which defense and foreign ministers of both countries consult regularly. Putin and Bush are likely to move the relations forward in order to leave a legacy of bilateral cooperation.

Today, the U.S. is engaged in a “long war” against radical Islamist terrorism that includes theaters of operation in the Middle East, Afghanistan, Africa, and elsewhere. The U.S. can benefit from improved relations with Russia while protecting its vital national interests. The U.S. should clearly identify where U.S. and Russian interests coincide and should vigorously pursue these interests while denying Russia a new Cold War posture.

In Sochi, President Bush specifically should:

- *Request that President-elect Dmitry Medvedev join the talks.* It is important for the U.S. and its allies to make sure that the presidential transition in Russia is genuine and that Putin does not remain the de-facto “national leader” of the country, as the Russian media took to calling him last fall.
- *Reiterate U.S. support for eventual NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, as well as for a limited missile defense in Central Europe.* Bush should signal to the Kremlin that such arrangements will not affect its security. Bush already has said that NATO troops will not be permanently stationed in the territory of the two candidate members.
- *Call for a more robust cooperation with Russia on limiting Iran’s nuclear weapons, enrichment, and ballistic missile programs.* These activities threaten Russia and its neighbors more than the United States. The two leaders should explore conditions for audits and disclosure of Russia’s past supply of military and dual-use systems and technology to Iran, as well as joint intelligence efforts to detect weapons of mass destruction and

1. See Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., “Confronting Putin’s Anti-U.S. Crusade,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 1356, February 12, 2007, at www.heritage.org/research/russiaandeurasia/wm1356.cfm, and Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., “How to Confront Russia’s Anti-American Foreign Policy,” Heritage Foundation *Background* No. 2048, June 27, 2007, at www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/bg2048.cfm.

military technology transfer to Iran by third parties such as North Korea, China, and Pakistan.

- *Explore weapons transfers and training for Afghan military and security personnel.* This could include helicopter pilots, tank operators, and technical assistance for economic development in sectors such as electrical grids and gas production.
- *Launch a discussion of terms and conditions to allow Russia's sovereign wealth funds to invest in the United States and raise concerns about limiting foreign investment.* Sovereign wealth funds raise particular security concerns because they are generally not transparent and can be used to facilitate political, rather than economic, goals. To help allay these concerns, Russia should seek an investment agreement with the U.S. that defines economic principles as the foundation for the operation of its sovereign wealth funds (as the U.S. recently concluded with Singapore and the United Arab Emirates). Bush should also raise grave concerns regarding the new "strategic sectors" investment law passed by the Duma on

March 24, as well as amendments to the 1992 subsoil law. These two pieces of legislation undermine foreign access to 42 domestic sectors, including natural resources, nuclear, media, telecommunications, and other markets, to promote domestic growth.

Conclusion. Russian elites, including President-elect Medvedev, appear to understand that Russia currently has no true significant allies (not counting Belarus, Armenia, or Tajikistan). While Russia has pushed for a multipolar world, it may find that such a world can be a lonely and tough place in which to survive, even for a large and rich country. As Putin departs the scene, improvement of bilateral relations is in the interest of both countries, and President Bush can make it his legacy.

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