

The Slovenia Summit: Bush Meets Putin

By Robert Cutler

The first Bush-Putin meeting will not take place in a vacuum. Their one-day summit in Slovenia will come after Bush concludes a swing through Spain, Belgium, Poland, and Sweden (which currently holds the rotating presidency of the European Union). President Vladimir Putin will have already assessed the new U.S. president personally through psychological profiling and consultations with European leaders who have met him. He already has his agenda, which is to use the meeting to influence European elite and public opinion, which is already skeptical about Washington's plans for National Missile Defense (NMD).

What is the background against which this meeting will take place? By objective performance, the foreign policy and diplomacy of the new administration looks less like a disaster waiting to happen and more like an unfolding disaster movie.

One need only think of Washington's abrogation of a cooperative stance against international money-laundering (because of a mistaken belief that this would harmonize national tax systems), its abandonment of the Kyoto climate change treaty, its ignominious loss of a seat on the UN Human Rights Commission, its failed attempt (undertaken despite justified public advance warning of failure) to get the UN Security Council to adopt new sanctions on Iraq, its ineptitude in the face of China's intransigence over the spy plane affair, its failure to persuade NATO partners to affirm the existence of a common missile threat from "rogue states," and its money-influenced ambassador nominations for Europe (taken directly from a list of large campaign contributors inexperienced in international affairs).

This pattern in Bush's foreign policy is more than the inevitable ironing out the kinks in a new administration. Instead, it looks to many

observers like a combined head-in-the-sand and shoot-yourself-in-the-foot syndrome. Secretary of State Powell and Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov have already held two series of meetings in the middle and at the end of May, at which they affirmed a willingness for consultations and negotiations about "strategic stability," meaning what to do about the ABM treaty. But, oblivious to the effects of its bull-in-a-china-shop behavior on even friendly countries, Washington has not altered its declared intention to abrogate unilaterally the ABM treaty.

Anticipating the absence of any real results at the Slovenia meeting, Washington has begun conditioning U.S. domestic public opinion. Starting in mid-May, anonymously provided background to selected journalists sought to emphasize the personal contact that will be established at the two leaders' first meeting. Bush is to "look Putin in the eye" and tell him that "Russia is not an enemy." But Putin hardly considers Washington's opinion important for his management of Russia's domestic and foreign affairs. In a recent poll, Russian public opinion ranked the U.S. in seventh place among the foreign powers whose view of Russia mattered to those questioned. When he talks to Bush, Putin will have an eye toward influencing not only Europe, but also China, India, and other Asian countries.

Also in mid-May, a memorandum describing U.S.-German discussions about Russia at the highest diplomatic level happened to be leaked to the German press. It noted in particular a U.S.-German agreement not to sponsor international financial assistance to Russia until Moscow has put limits on overseas capital flight. The Western press treated the memorandum as authoritative, and no one disclaimed it or claimed it was inauthentic. Putin's subtlety is revealed in his response, commenting that he did not believe the memorandum to be genuine

but that nevertheless “secret agreements will come out.” That remark was addressed to the Russian elite. Like Putin, the educated Russian public and foreign policy establishment will recall how the Bolsheviks, immediately after the 1917 revolution, published secret treaties concluded by the Tsar with Western powers. Putin was thus assuring his domestic constituencies that Russia will not reach secret agreements with the United States.

What sort of secret agreements might there have been? By coincidence, after Putin’s remarks there appeared revelations in the press that the U.S. had proposed purchasing Russian arms

systems to be integrated into an NMD system, if only Russia would endorse Washington’s idea for it. Cutting through the diplomatic jargon, Putin was saying that such an agreement will not happen. Such a quid pro quo would eventually become public knowledge, and probably sooner rather than later. One might add that Russia’s arms export industry is successful enough not to need the U.S. as a client.

The two presidents live mostly in different political worlds. They will meet and then go their separate ways. The Bush spin will claim that the fact of the meeting is itself a success. The Putin spin will politely agree then add

statements making clear that nothing was really accomplished. Because the meeting’s real significance will be its impact on European opinion, Moscow will emphasize the need for continuing consultations on nuclear matters about which Europeans are deeply concerned. After handshakes and statements of good will, the two sides will return home, each with its own fish to fry elsewhere.

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