

Eurasia Strikes Back: No War With Iran Likely

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Global Research, October 18, 2007

chroniclesmagazine.org/ 18 October 2007

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, Russia and FSU](#)

Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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The result of Vladimir Putin's [meeting](#) with Mahmoud Ahmadinejad at the [Caspian Summit](#) in Iran earlier this week is that there will be no "Operation Iranian Freedom" (or some equivalent thereof) in the remaining 15 months of this administration. A powerful Euro-Asian bloc, based on the Moscow-Peking axis that opposes American challenges along the Continental Heartland's outer perimeter, is now preempting threats to the existing balance in real time. Mr. Putin is effectively helping President George W. Bush avoid an adventure that would bring ruin to all involved, save the promoters of an Islamic end-times scenario.

The [Declaration](#) signed at the end of the summit commits the littoral states to a de facto non-aggression pact. It warns the outside powers to refrain from using the Caspian region for military operations or interfering in any other way, and supports the right of Iran to pursue nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. Articles 14 and 15 of the Declaration specifically state that the littoral states would not use their armed forces against each other, and—more importantly—that they would not allow any other state to use their territory for military operations against any of the littoral states. Regional commentators are in no doubt that this agreement has thrown a decisive wrench into any plans the Bush Administration may have against Iran:

[The entire Caspian region](#), including the convenient territory of Azerbaijan, is suddenly out of bounds for American military. It would leave Afghanistan and Iraq as the possible staging areas for American military operations against Iran. The fact that the US military options are suddenly limited is just one of the effects of Tehran summit. By a symmetrical sequence of commission and omission, the littoral states have locked Azerbaijan into a push-pull bracket. On the one hand Azerbaijan has been warned against any flirtation with the American military and on the other hand there is a big carrot of North-South corridor. If the Azeri leadership is half as smart as it appears to be, it would lose no time in barricading itself against any foreign military overtures.

This is payback time for Mr. Putin. His displeasure over U.S. missile defense installations along Russia's western borders and over the stated intention of Washington to recognize Kosovo come what may, was on symbolic display when he kept the US secretaries of state and defense [waiting for over 40 minutes](#) when they visited him in Moscow earlier this month. Now he has helped produced something tangible: before leaving Tehran he commented that the use of force in the Caspian region had been rendered unthinkable: "We must not submit to other states in case of aggression or some other kind of military action directed against one of the Caspian countries. We regard that authority in Caspian only belongs to littoral states. It is also connected with subsoil resources."

For months prior to the summit, Iran had conducted a broad diplomatic counter-offensive. Its leaders had met with Central Asian, Caucasian, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and North African leaders in a series of [talks on security and energy](#). It is developing a “counter-pipeline” to the [increasingly vulnerable Ceyhan-Baku pipeline](#). The new link should connect the Caspian Basin to the Gulf of Oman. In addition, one of the fruits of the Caspian summit is the agreement to build the Turkmenistan-Kazakhstan-Iran railway line that would link Central Asia with Russia in the north the Persian Gulf in the south. According to analyst Mahdi Darius Nazemroaya, a wide-ranging [Eurasian-based strategy](#) is taking shape: “In Central Asia, Russia, Iran and China have essentially secured their own energy routes for both gas and oil. This is one of the reasons all three powers in a united stance warned the U.S. at the SCO’s [Shanghai Cooperation Organization’s] Bishkek Summit, in Kyrgyzstan, to stay out of Central Asia.”

Indeed, the 25-point Tehran Declaration dovetails neatly with the [SCO Declaration](#) issued in Bishkek, and [connects China](#) with the [new Great Game](#). The new Eurasian architecture is largely the product of Mr. Bush’s own mix of mendacity and incoherence vis-à-vis Russia and China over the past seven years.

In the immediate aftermath of 9-11 Putin was the first foreign leader to contact Bush, promising that Russia would do “whatever is necessary” to help the U.S. His influence with the former Soviet republics in Central Asia was decisive in their decision to allow U.S. forces to use their bases. Mr. Bush subsequently attempted to make that presence permanent, however, in pursuit of the neoconservative policy of encircling, reducing, and ultimately eliminating Russia as a great power. In 2002 the United States unilaterally abrogated the ABM Treaty and announced a new major expansion of NATO. In 2003 and 2004 came the U.S.-supported and financed “color-coded revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine, the geopolitical equivalent of Putin engineering anti-American regime changes in Mexico and Canada. Elements of forward missile defense are now in Poland and the Czech Republic. All U.S. plans for the Caspian gas and oil still entail transit routes that studiously avoid Russia.

In relation to China Mr. Bush has been less brazen but more confused. He has tried a mix of containment, confrontation, and accommodation, in the manner likely to increase both China’s economic and military power vis-à-vis the United States and her distrust of American motives and goals. The [award of the Congressional Gold Medal to the Dalai Lama](#) is only the latest example of contradictory, even incoherent, U.S. policy.

If Mr. Bush had wanted to preempt the rise of China as a rival and potential enemy, he should have acted boldly to halt further American investment in the Chinese economy, to reverse massive outsourcing, and to erect effective trade barriers against the continuing deluge of Chinese-made consumer products in American stores. He had done none of those things. In facilitating the growth of China’s economic base he has acted as an appeaser of U.S. corporate interests to the detriment of a viable security policy and world affairs strategy.

If Mr. Bush was not willing to act vigorously to halt the transfer of American wealth and American industrial potential to Shanghai and Guandong, he should have accepted the rise of China as a first-class power with the best possible grace and on the grounds that no fundamental sources of conflict between America and China exist. Such a relationship could have been skillfully managed—with more reciprocity in the field of trade and exchange rates—but it was not thus managed. Its foundation was lacking: the acceptance that Taiwan

is part of China, that it will be eventually reintegrated, and that it is in the American interest to facilitate peaceful reunification of the island with the Mainland, perhaps using the Hong Kong formula.

After seven years of Mr. Bush's contradictory course, China's growing wealth and power coupled with mistrust of America have produced interesting results in the form of Peking's strategic partnership with Russia. Directly resulting from Bush's policies, the Shanghai process may soon reshape the Asian architecture by turning China into a distribution hub for oil and gas exports to South Korea and Japan, two of the largest energy importers in the world—which in turn may lead to their strategic realignment.

The Bush Administration has attempted to counter the growing SCO influence in Central Asia and the Far East by courting another Asian giant, India, as a future counterbalance to China's power. The final objective—the emergence of a “Quadrilateral of Democracies,” a political grouping consisting of the United States, Japan, Australia, and India—is yet another Bush pipedream, however. India is weary of an alignment with America that remains Pakistan's key backer, and aware that Washington's objective is to use New Delhi as a dispensable auxiliary. The Indians are developing close cooperation with the SCO instead. The policy of “superalignment”—an even-handed cultivation of everyone who counts—is paying dividends without tying India to a distant and unpredictable America.

The main reason Mr. Bush has found it so hard to attract overseas partners for his schemes—outside places like Tirana and Riga—is the loss of credibility resulting from the ongoing quagmire in Iraq. He is still staying the course there, predicated on the creation of military preconditions for an elusive political solution, and has no exit strategy.

If there is one thing to be thankful to Mr. Bush, it is for his unwitting contribution to the emergence of a multipolar world. External restraint, unimaginable a decade ago, is being imposed on America. It is dictated by the perfectly normal desire of Russians, Chinese, Indians and many smaller nations, to prove—contrary to Mr. Bush's repeated assurances—that “History” has not called America to anything. It is to be hoped that the emerging new global balance of power will reflect internationally what the system of checks and balances does at home. Its re-establishment will render ludicrous the hubristic ravings of Benevolent Global Hegemonists. It will also help re-legitimize the notion of America as a nation among other nations and a state among other states, with definable and limited national interests as the foundation of its diplomacy. Contrary to what Mr. Bush and his dwindling band of apologists may claim, this is neither defeatism nor isolationism; it is sanity.

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