

Obama versus Medvedev: Nuclear Standoff in New Europe

By [Mike Whitney](#)

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“US president-elect Barack Obama has told Polish President Lech Kaczynski he will go ahead with plans to build a missile defense shield in eastern Europe despite threats from Russia, Warsaw said on Saturday” AFP Warsaw

Dmitry Medvedev is a quiet and reflective man who enjoys reading novels, lifting weights and listening to rock and roll music. He has a large collection of vintage vinyl records. His favorite rock bands are Deep Purple, Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin. His parents were university professors who raised him in a crowded 500 sq ft apartment in Leningrad. He excelled at school and went on to become a lawyer before entering politics. He married his high school sweetheart, Svetlana Linnik, and is a close friend of former president Vladimir Putin.

Medvedev was elected President of Russia on March 2, 2008 in a landslide victory. He won over 70 percent of the vote. As Putin’s hand-picked successor, the election was never really in doubt, although critics in the United States have challenged the fairness of the balloting. No one, however, questions Medvedev’s public approval ratings, which are nearly as high as Putin’s (who usually polls in the 70 percent range) Both leaders are extremely popular among working Russians.

Medvedev is a strong proponent of democracy and is deeply committed to an independent judiciary, private property and free markets. He is an honest and reasonable man who is also fiercely nationalistic.

This biographical information is provided to help readers form an opinion about a man who the western media has decided to destroy. Medvedev is not Putin’s “puppet”, a warmonger, or the “new Hitler”. In fact, he is precisely the type of leader that the United States should be working with to deal with the critical issues of global poverty, energy depletion, climate change and the ongoing financial crisis. But that’s unlikely to happen because Russia has frustrated Washington’s ambitions in the Caucasus and is blocking Big Oil’s access to vital reserves in the Caspian Basin. That’s why Medvedev has been added to Washington’s “enemies list”.

Medvedev finds himself in the same position as Hugo Chavez and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad—the axis of diesel— both of who are regularly savaged by the media because they sit on massive oil reserves which are beyond the grasp of the transnational corporations. That’s explains why most of what is written about Medvedev is nonsense. The same corporations that own the politicians own the media as well. Their job is to demonize their rivals. In truth, most Americans would have a lot more in common with Medvedev than

they would with Bush, Cheney or any of their “silver spoon” elitist cronies.

US relations with Russia have steadily deteriorated under George Bush. Bush ignored his father’s promises not to push NATO into former Soviet territory and now is planning to deploy a nuclear missile system in Eastern Europe. Missile Defense poses a clear danger to Russia’s national security. It integrates the United States entire nuclear capability—including space-based operations—with systems that are inside Russia’s traditional sphere of influence. Putin summed it up like this in a press conference at the G-8 meetings:

“For the first time in history, there are elements of the US nuclear capability on the European continent. It simply changes the whole configuration of international security ... Of course, we have to respond to that.”

The Bush administration is trying to achieve what nuclear weapons specialist, Francis A. Boyle, calls the “longstanding US policy of nuclear first-strike against Russia”. By placing weapons systems and radar on Russia’s borders the US will have a critical advantage that will disrupt the delicate balance of power. Medvedev cannot allow this to happen. His first responsibility is to ensure the security of the Russian people who are clearly at greater risk by the proposed system. The planned deployment must be stopped. This is not a negotiable point.

SAAKASHVILI’S INVASION OF SOUTH OSSETIA

Russian/US relations reached a new low following the recent war in Georgia. The aggression was initiated by Georgia President Saakashvili who ordered the invasion of South Ossetia after dropping thousands of cluster bombs on civilian areas and leveling the capital of Tskhinvali. The media blamed Russia for the conflict, but a new report by Human Rights Watch confirms that Georgia was the real perpetrator. The report, which was presented at the Convention on Conventional Weapons, “adds to a growing body of evidence of Georgian atrocities in the fighting....The group said Tuesday that Georgia...used cluster munitions extensively in the war, which began when Georgia launched a major artillery strike against South Ossetia, a breakaway Georgian enclave, prompting Russia to invade large swaths of Georgian territory.” (New York Times)

Another report in the New York Times stated: “The accounts suggest that Georgia’s inexperienced military attacked the isolated separatist capital of Tskhinvali on August 7 with indiscriminate artillery and rocket fire, exposing civilians, Russian peacekeepers and unarmed monitors to harm.... The then senior OSCE representative in Georgia, Ryan Grist, said:

“It was clear to me that the attack was completely indiscriminate and disproportionate to any, if indeed there had been any, provocation...The attack was clearly, in my mind, an indiscriminate attack on the town, as a town.”

Mr. Grist has served as a military officer or diplomat in Northern Ireland, Cyprus, Kosovo and Yugoslavia.(New York Times)

An unknown number of Russian civilians and peacekeepers were killed in the aggression, which has fundamentally changed the political dynamic between Moscow and Washington. Just below the surface of diplomatic civility, a war is underway, which is why Russia is

strengthening alliances in Central Asia and Latin America, opening naval bases in the Mediterranean, and developing new weapons systems. Russia is not Iraq. It will be prepared if hostilities break out.

The war in South Ossetia was a turning point in US/Russian relations, as Medvedev points out:

“Events in the Caucasus dispelled whatever illusions people had remaining from the post-Soviet period. Those illusions were about the world being just and about the current security system being optimal.” (Russia Today)

Medvedev also sees the war in South Ossetia as symptomatic of a larger and more deeply-rooted problem.

Medvedev: “A barbaric aggression against South Ossetia and the global financial crisis – two very different problems which nevertheless have common traits and a common origin...A local reckless enterprise provoked a rise of tensions far behind the region’s borders, in the whole of Europe, in the whole world. It called into question the efficiency of international security institutions and practically destabilized the basics of the world order. The lessons of mistakes and crises of 2008 proved to all the responsible nations that it is the time to act, and it is necessary to radically reform the political and economic system.”

Medvedev is right. The present architecture for global security needs to be thoroughly revamped as does the global financial system. Unilateralism, preemption and the Bush Doctrine have only made the world a more dangerous place. So, too, Wall Street’s disproportionate influence on financial markets has precipitated the worst crisis in the last 80 years. There needs to be a new order based on mutual cooperation and international law which establishes greater parity between the countries (and their currencies) and a renewed commitment to fundamental principles of national sovereignty and self determination. Superpower politics-wherein one nation arbitrarily imposes its will on all the others-has proved to be a failure. Unipolar rule must end for the sake of global security.

Medvedev: “I emphasize; we do not have a problem with the American people, we are not anti-American. We want to be partners with the new U.S. administration, and have good relations with the United States. Together with all countries interested we will create a really democratic model of relations. But the world cannot be ruled from one capital. Those who do not want to understand that will be only creating problems for themselves and for others.”

RUSSIAN MISSILES IN EUROPE?

In his first State of the Nation speech on Thursday Medvedev addressed everything from South Ossetia, to terrorism, to Missile Defense, to a plan for global security. He said that he would deploy Iskander missiles in the Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad if the US administration went ahead with its plans for a missile shield in Europe.

Obama’s foreign policy advisers have taken Medvedev’s warning as a “test” of the new president’s mettle and persuaded him to publicly announce his commitment to Bush’s Missile Defense system.

According to AFP: “US president-elect Barack Obama has told Polish President Lech

Kaczynski he will go ahead with plans to build a missile defense shield in eastern Europe despite threats from Russia, Warsaw said on Saturday. The US wants to base 10 interceptor missiles in Poland plus a radar facility in the neighboring Czech Republic by 2011-2013 to complete a system already in place in the United States, Greenland and Britain."

Obama is walking into a trap. He doesn't understand that the proposed deployment is needlessly provocative and will only lead to further escalation. He's already facing two unfinished wars and a deepening recession; he doesn't need a nuclear confrontation with Russia. Marching in lockstep with the fanatical neocon agenda is not the "change" the American people were hoping for.

In his State of the Nation speech, Medvedev announced plans to make Russia a global financial center by the end of 2008.

Medvedev: "A package of bills forming the basis for the creation of one of the world's leading financial centers in Russia needs to be passed before the end of this year. This center should serve as the nucleus for an independent and competitive Russian financial system. Practical steps are needed to strengthen the ruble's role as an international settlement currency and to finally achieve the transition to settlements in rubles for gas and oil, over which we have, regrettably, taken a long time." (Russia Today)

Medvedev and Putin blame the United States for the current troubles in the financial markets. Wall Street's sale of fraudulent subprime mortgage-backed securities (MBS) and other structured investments have pushed the global banking system to the brink of a meltdown. It all could have been avoided with sufficient oversight and regulation. Even so, Medvedev still remains committed to free markets and democracy.

Medvedev: "I want everyone to know: our goals are unchanged. Sharp fluctuations in the political and economic situation, turbulence of the world economy and even forced military and political tensions will not become the ground to dismount democratic institutions, nationalizing industries and the financial system.....Political freedom of citizens and their private property are untouchable....Any infringement of civil rights and freedoms, or any action that worsens the material position of citizens, is immoral and illegal."

While Russia's young president is looking for ways to strengthen a progressive agenda and emerge from the darkness of Soviet-era repression, the United States is still in the clutches of hawkish neocons, recalcitrant cold warriors and self-serving banking elites. Obama must choose whether he wants to reconcile past differences and collaborate on a shared vision of the future with his Kremlin counterpart or put a knife to Moscow's throat and force Medvedev to respond. Which will it be?

"A Kremlin statement says Medvedev and Obama spoke by telephone on Saturday. Both parties 'expressed the determination to create constructive and positive interaction for the good of global stability and development.'" (Associated Press, November 8, 2008).

International security is in everyone's best interest. Bush's Missile Defense System must be stopped.

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