

Russia-US summit: Quiet diplomacy

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Confronted by multiple irritants from Washington, the Kremlin seems to have caved in.

A little over 40 per cent of Russians consider Russian-US relations strained or hostile, down slightly from 2004 when 46 per cent said they considered the US to be Russia's adversary. United States President Barack Obama's world PR campaign is working, despite the issues dividing the two countries, from Star Wars missiles in Poland and US plans for cyber warfare, to NATO's love-affair with Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Kyrgyzstan to name just a few of Russia's neighbours.

So Russia's agreement, announced at Obama's summit in Moscow 6-8 July, to ferry primarily US troops and arms through Russian land and air space to Afghanistan to accelerate the slaughter there - without any reciprocation on other outstanding issues - comes as a bit of a surprise. Obama faces a reservoir of resentment among Russians who believe that the US has rarely followed through on its occasional peace gestures. "At this point, there is a little bit of hope and a lot of distrust," said talk show host Vladimir Pozner on Channel One.

If the object is to stem the flood of opium, there is lots of evidence that the current Afghan government and the US occupiers themselves actually benefit from this lucrative business, and that the only conceivable endgame which the US can salvage there - a secular military dictatorship propped up by the US - will never deal with this albeit serious problem for Russia. True, Russia also fears the catalysing effect of a Taliban victory on its Muslim Central Asian neighbours. It apparently wants any kind of secular government in Afghanistan, come hell or high water.

But the humiliation of so directly supporting the US military campaign in Afghanistan after the earlier US-sponsored campaign there which destroyed the Soviet Union and led to the deaths of 15,000 Soviet soldiers is surely not lost on the Kremlin. And to drop this plum in Washington's lap as it continues to insist that Ukraine and Georgia will soon join NATO and that Poland will have its missiles looks too good to be true from the US perspective. Maybe the Kremlin is deriving some satisfaction from abetting the US in what it sees as a losing battle in Afghanistan, letting the Taliban give US troops some of the medicine inflicted on Soviet troops in yesteryear?

In addition to his meetings with President Dmitri Medvedev, Obama met Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, though he publically scolded him prior to the summit. "It's important that even as we move forward with President Medvedev, Putin understands that the old Cold War approach to US-Russian relations is outdated ... I think Putin has one foot in the old ways of doing business and one foot in the new, and to the extent that we can provide him and the Russian people a clear sense that the US is not seeking an antagonistic relationship but wants co-operation on nuclear non-proliferation, fighting terrorism, energy issues, that we'll

end up having a stronger partner overall.”

This is diplo-speak for “Take us or leave us.” Special assistant to the president and senior director for Russian affairs on the National Security Council Michael McFaul made the point less nicely when he said, “We don’t need the Russians.” This taunting of Putin was formalised by a US suggestion to establish a Biden-Putin working group to renegotiate the START treaty which expires in December, named after the Gore-Chernomyrdin task force that negotiated the 1991 treaty when Al Gore was VP and Viktor Chernomyrdin was Russian PM. That suggestion was immediately brushed aside. “I am not a vice president,” said Putin coldly.

Obama also visited Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev. None of the three presidents gave any ground on the missile bases, including Gorbachev, who told talk-show host Pozner the missile bases are aimed at creating a situation that makes it possible for NATO to be first to launch a nuclear strike while staying under its own shield. “There is a need for a common European security, which was written at a conference in Paris in 1990.” The USSR was preparing its answer to Reagan’s 1983 Strategic Defense Initiative, Gorbachev said. “I did not agree then and do not agree now with the opinions that it is a bluff and that one should not pay attention to it.”

The Obama camp may not be as united on the missile issue as the Russians are. Obama acknowledged “Russian sensitivities” in a Novaya Gazeta interview but made clear he would not link arms-control talks to missile defence. Grasping at straws, Medvedev said, “The current administration is prepared for discussions. I think we are smart enough to find a reasonable solution here. Really, to get this problem solved, one must not necessarily cross out the decisions made earlier.”

Obama threw him a bone by reiterating his readiness to draw a line between offensive and defensive weapons, something that Bush had refused to do since America withdrew from the 1972 ABM Treaty in 2001. The sides agreed to limit their nuclear arsenals to 1,500-1,675 warheads with the cap on the number of delivery vehicles set as low as 500-1,100 units.

No public mention was made of Georgia and Ukraine actually joining NATO, with Obama stressing, “NATO seeks collaboration with Russia, not confrontation.” But he nonetheless sent (allowed?) Vice President Joseph Biden to fly directly from Moscow to Georgia and Ukraine after the summit. “We’re not going to reassure or give or trade anything with the Russians regarding NATO expansion or missile defense,” warned McFaul.

Here again, the US administration is not united, with Obama having made no firm commitment to further NATO expansion. Just how much say he actually has in such strategic decisions is a moot point.

Obama was hoping to throw the Russians another bone by assuring them admission to the World Trade Organisation. But Putin unexpectedly suspended Moscow’s membership bid in June, deciding to approach the issue jointly through a customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan, without the need for US “help”.

After years of increasing strain, Moscow clearly did its best to ensure the summit was a success, giving Obama lots of rope. But Obama’s apparent attempt to drive a wedge between Putin and Medvedev will not bear fruit. If the US pushes ahead with its missile

bases, it is unlikely that even a cowed Moscow will go along with START II, despite its own desire to rid itself of costly, useless weapons. Maybe McFaul's crack about not needing the Russians means the US really doesn't give a damn about START.

The new Russian WTO plan, in light of the recent BRIC and SCO summits in Russia, suggests that the Russian government is more concerned about putting flesh on its project of creating a multipolar world than with confronting the US directly anymore. Perhaps planners are willing to let the US continue its Afghan gambit, gambling that it will merely sap US strength while helping to fill Russian coffers, a kind of poor man's revenge on Russia's Cold War enemy. Analyst Fyodor Lukyanov sees the establishing of a customs union with Russian neighbours as part of Russian plans to "transform itself into a centre of integration."

There has indeed been a significant change in Russia's relations with the rest of the world in the past few years, but it is not necessarily the one Washington would like. It's not so much a question of Russia ceding to US hegemony, as Obama's hawks think, but of acknowledging that Russia is not the powerful player that the Soviet Union was, and that the best Russia can do is help usher in a non-US centric multipolar world, which will include disparate allies from all but the North American continent and act to limit the US empire's wilder plans.

It's one of realism on the Kremlin's part, faced with an array of tinpot "democracies" around it, ready to sell out to what they see as the highest bidder. The most glaring example of this is Kyrgyzstan's President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who played Russia and the US off against each other over its Manas airbase, first telling the US to get lost when Russia promised \$2.15 billion in aid, and then last month reversing the decision and allowing the US to stay, tripling the rent and extracting other goodies in the process. Even Russophile Lukashenko in Belarus plays the same game with Russia and Europe. And then there's Uzbekistan's President Islam Karimov, who said yes and then no an agreement on the Collective Rapid Reaction Forces, not to mention Turkmenistan, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan or Lithuania, and on and on. "A game of chance has developed in the post-Soviet space: Who can swindle the Kremlin in the coolest way?" wrote analyst Aleksandr Golts when news of the Manas decision broke.

Russia cannot compete with NATO, certainly not without strengthening the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and certainly not with Afghanistan a black hole threatening to suck in its Central Asian neighbours. The CSTO is important less as a counterbalance to NATO than as a viable guarantor of regional security and it's only a matter of time for Russia's neighbours to realise this.

It looks like Washington has won this stand-off with Moscow, getting its Afghanistan yellow-brick road and its Polish cake. The market value of allying with flashy but fair-weather Washington outshines the more reliable but less alluring Moscow for the present. But US support is for local elites willing to do its bidding. Local populations will gain nothing, and they are wiser than their leaders, with fond memories of their Russian bulwark. The US may have won the battle. Let the US and NATO play out their lethal games in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. "Progress must be shared," Obama said in his "Moscow speech" to university students. Let's see what fruits his policies bear that we can divvy up.

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