

Limited concessions and unresolved tensions after US-Russia summit

By Niall Green
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US President Barack Obama flew to Moscow on Monday for a three-day visit to the Russian capital. Obama met with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev on Monday and held talks with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin the next day.

During the trip Obama also spoke with former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, as well as with opposition figures and media outlets, including the oppositional newspaper *Novaya Gazeta*.

The summit marked a definite attempt to improve relations between the two countries, with limited concessions offered by both sides. The proposed cooperation between Moscow and Washington does not, however, resolve any of the fundamental differences between them.

Medvedev and Obama signed eight separate agreements relating to nuclear weaponry. The presidents stated that the agreement would “substantially reduce our warheads and delivery systems” as part of a new arms control treaty to replace the 1991 Start treaty due to expire at the end of the year.

Under the new deal, Russia and the US could reduce their nuclear warheads to 1,700 each, from the current maximum of 2,200, within seven years. Less progress was made on the more substantive issue of missile delivery systems, with the Kremlin pushing for a reduction to 600 long-range ballistic launchers and bombers, while the White House is reluctant to reduce its capacities below 1,000 such devices.

The talks produced no concrete details regarding Washington’s proposed missile defense shield. Moscow has reacted angrily to plans to build radar and missile interceptor bases in the Eastern European states of Poland and the Czech Republic, a move that would weaken Russia’s ballistic missile capabilities. At the same time, the Kremlin has offered to participate in the US missile shield, which Washington maintains is intended to knock out an attack from a “rogue state” such as Iran, proposing for use a Russian base in Azerbaijan. The White House is reportedly considering alternatives to its current missile defense plan, including cooperation with Russia.

The creation of a missile defense system, primarily aimed at Moscow’s ballistic capabilities, has been a major military project for the US since the Reagan era. Continued throughout the 1990s and aggressively backed by the Bush administration, the missile shield is undoubtedly considered by US military planners as a weapon that could limit Russia’s long-range ballistic capabilities, shifting the balance of nuclear power further towards the US and its NATO allies.

Any concessions from Washington to Moscow’s concerns over the proposed shield would, therefore, be very limited and temporary. The missile defense system is not yet operational, and the bases in the Czech Republic and Poland have not been built, giving the Obama administration room to negotiate with the Kremlin in exchange for Russian assistance in other areas.

As an opening gambit prior to the summit, Moscow announced it would grant US military airplanes the right to transport troops and supplies over Russian airspace to Afghanistan. The Russian leadership has its own reasons for aiding the US occupation of the country, with Moscow keen to see the suppression of Islamist militant groups in a region close to its own Muslim-majority provinces.

In return for this help, the one significant concession to the Russian leadership made by Obama seems to have been over the ex-Soviet republics of Ukraine and Georgia. Both countries underwent US-backed “color revolutions” that brought to power administrations committed to closer ties to Washington and membership of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Georgia and Ukraine are considered by the Russian elite to be within its traditional sphere of influence, and Moscow is deeply hostile to US efforts to bring them into the US-led military alliance.

Obama appears to have offered to adopt a less confrontational approach over the ex-Soviet states’ accession to NATO. Though no official statement was made, a senior Kremlin official was cited in a press report as saying that Obama had told his Russian hosts that US policy would take Moscow’s concerns into account regarding Georgia and Ukraine.

“They spoke about Georgia, they spoke about Ukraine and generally about the post-Soviet area. The US president promised to take into account the peculiarities of our [relations] with these countries,” said Yuri Ushakov, a Putin aide.

Obama and Medvedev had a brief meeting during the G8 conference in London in April, but this was the first time the US leader had spoken in person with Putin, the dominant figure in Kremlin politics.

Media outlets commented on perceived awkwardness between Obama and Putin, speculating that the US president’s slight against the Russian leader last week—that Putin had “one foot stuck in the past”—had soured their relations. Seeking to smooth out the matter, Obama told the Russian prime minister, “We link hopes for the development of our relationship with your name.”

Behind the personal sentiments of either man, Obama's undiplomatic words and the cool reception he received from Putin are expressions of real strategic tensions between Washington and Moscow. The conflicts between Russia and the United States are not a matter of poor personal relations between its leaders—indeed, when they were presidents Putin and George W. Bush reportedly enjoyed a friendship—but the irreconcilable economic and strategic interests of rival national bourgeoisies.

Obama and much of the Washington foreign policy establishment are aware that Moscow seeks US backing for its status as the major power in the former-Soviet region. To this end, Moscow provided vital support for the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in 2001. In return, the Kremlin hoped for Washington's support for its campaign to crush the separatist movement in the Muslim-majority Russian republic of Chechnya.

Today, with falling revenues from energy exports due to the drop in the price of crude oil and the global recession, Moscow is even more reliant on Washington if it is to maintain its status. The approval of US military flights en route to Afghanistan, over Russian airspace, was intended to provide the Kremlin with a means to seek concessions in its “near abroad.”

The US does not want to see Russia in a position to threaten or even limit its aim of winning control over the main oil and gas production and distribution routes of Eurasia. This requires an aggressive weakening of Moscow's influence across the region, a situation that the Russian elite ultimately will not be willing or able to tolerate.

However, with the intensification of the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan, while the occupation of Iraq continues to absorb huge American military and financial resources, Washington is aware that it is prudent to make some concessions to Moscow—at least in the short-term.

As history has shown, tension has been the default setting between the two countries. The existence of the Soviet Union was viewed by the US ruling elite as not only an ideological and military threat but also a major limitation on its ability to exploit the labor and natural resources of a large portion of the globe. With the liquidation of the USSR by the Stalinist regime, American capital had the opportunity to enter a region rich in resources from which it had previously been barred.

During the years of deep crisis following the collapse of the USSR, Washington and US big business and finance were able to extract very favorable concessions in the former Soviet Union, including in Russia itself. However, tensions between Moscow and Washington remained high.

In 1999, following the US-NATO air war against Serbia, a traditional Russian ally, the NATO commander in Kosovo, General Wesley Clark, ordered his forces to occupy the airport outside the Kosovan capital, Pristina. Clark sought to prevent Russian Special Forces in the province from gaining control of the airport, threatening a direct military confrontation. The US general was met by a refusal to carry out the order from his British subordinate, General Michael Jackson, who famously told Clark, “Sir, I'm not starting world war three for you.”

A steep rise on oil wealth flowing into Kremlin coffers over the past decade gave the Russian elite an opportunity to attempt to

renegotiate its relationship with Washington. This, combined with US requests for support in the invasion of Afghanistan, encouraged the Putin presidency (2000-2008) to initially attempt to enter into a new partnership with the US.

After the toppling of the Taliban government, however, Washington quickly sought to reassert its aggressive roll-back of Russian interests in the ex-Soviet region. After the “color revolutions” and the proposal to deploy the US missile shield bases in Eastern Europe, Washington and Moscow again came to the brink of armed conflict over last year's war in Georgia.

In August 2008, US-backed Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili ordered an attack on the breakaway territory of South Ossetia, which has been under de facto Russian control since the early 1990s. In response, Russian armed forces invaded Georgia. The US, taken aback by the Russian response, sent a Navy detachment to the Georgian coast, within a few miles of ships sent from Russia's Black Sea Fleet.

Following his meeting with Putin on Tuesday, Obama addressed graduates from the US-backed New Economic School in Moscow. In the speech, Obama referred favorably to renewed Russian assistance over Afghanistan and potential cooperation regarding the US positions on North Korea and Iran. Moscow has helped develop Tehran's civilian nuclear program and has so far resisted US-led calls for harsher sanctions against the Islamic Republic.

Claiming that the US did not seek to control any country, Obama stated that the partnership of Washington and Moscow “will be stronger if Russia occupies its rightful place as a great power.”

Obama also offered criticisms of the Kremlin leadership that will be viewed with concern by an elite acutely concerned with a potential “color revolution” in Russia. Obama alluded to the pervasive corruption in Russia and told his student audience, “The arc of history shows that governments which serve their own people survive and thrive; governments which serve only their own power do not.”

In an earlier interview with *Novaya Gazeta*, part-owned by exiled Russian oligarch Alexander Lebedev and Mikhail Gorbachev, Obama criticized the Russian leadership over the imprisonment of billionaire former oil mogul Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Recently charged with new crimes and likely to spend many more years in prison, Khodorkovsky is a rival of the oligarchic faction around Putin.

“It does seem odd to me that these new charges, which appear to be a repackaging of the old charges, should be surfacing now, years after these two individuals have been in prison and as they become eligible for parole,” Obama said in an interview with the newspaper, which is a leading critic of the Putin-Medvedev regime.

Last year, Lebedev and Gorbachev launched a new opposition group, the Independent Democratic Party of Russia.

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