

FROM MUNICH TO MUNICH

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In Munich in 1938, the West abandoned Central and Eastern Europe to the dictators. On February 10, 2007, Vladimir Putin demanded that it do so again. In his confrontational speech to the annual Wehrkunde conference in Munich, Putin blasted U.S. policy, blaming American unilateralism for provoking a new arms race, destabilizing the Middle East, undermining international institutions, distorting the purpose of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), expanding the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and supporting democratic revolutions in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). He concluded by asserting Russia's foreign policy independence, clearly demanding that Washington accept Russia's demand for equality with it, in practical terms giving Russia a free hand throughout the former Soviet Union. Reflecting Moscow's continuing Cold War mentality, Putin also unwittingly revealed the abiding sense of illegitimacy and fear of fragmentation underlying so much of Russia's overall policies. Thus he confirmed that the sources of Russian discord with Washington are military, political, and ideological (struggles over democratization).

Putin's threat assessment, like its Soviet predecessors, derives from a false appreciation of reality on several fronts. First, since 1991 Russia has enjoyed the most benign threat environment in its history. This benign security environment is in large measure due to the democratization of Central and Eastern Europe that is both a precondition and a product of both NATO and European Union (EU) enlargement. Russian leaders know this because otherwise they would have spent much more on defense than has been the case. Second, as Alexei Arbatov's analysis and Putin's and Sergei Ivanov's own past statements indicate, neither U.S. missile defense in Eastern Europe nor bases in Bulgaria and Romania can threaten Russia or were previously regarded as threats.

Third, the charges that the United States instigated the color revolutions or uses the OSCE to overthrow Russia's government are canards, and Moscow knows it. These long-standing charges display Russia's inability to accept criticism of Putin's regime or offer the CIS anything other than more corruption and neo-imperialism. These charges reflect Moscow's efforts to conceal its inability to defend its clients, its enormous failed intervention in Ukraine in 2004, and the misrule of the Akayev and Shevarnadze regimes.

Fourth, NATO enlargement can hardly threaten Russia if one considers NATO's enormous post-1989 demilitarization and how NATO currently functions. Russia also cannot admit that what drove Central Europe and NATO after 1993 was the justified fear of Russia's return to autocracy and neo-imperialism. Finally, an alliance that cannot reach consensus about Afghanistan can hardly threaten Russia. Putin also ignored that

much of American policy towards members of the CIS, the new battleground in this rivalry, stems from similar apprehensions that Russia sought to undermine CIS regimes' sovereignty and independence beginning with its intervention in the wars in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Moldova, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Furthermore the expansion of America's military posture in Central and Eastern Europe flows directly from the Global Defense Posture Review of 2004 which was extensively briefed to Moscow and which was not seen as posing any threat to it. So to see these trends as a threat now is essentially grandstanding and based on a grievously faulty reading of U.S. policy.

Putin's diatribe also presages intensified pressure upon CIS governments from Moscow whether it is directed at their gas and oil economies or at their freedom of action with regard to their defense and foreign policies. In 2006 alone, Moscow tried to intimidate the Baltic States, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia to accept unfair terms either for the purchase of Russian energy or for the sale of their gas to Russia rather than to Western markets, where they would get a fair market price. This pressure applies not only to energy but also to these states' broader foreign policies, which Moscow aims to reorient to a position of utter subservience to its dictates. Similar tactics are also visible in Eastern Europe.

Russia has intensified its efforts to project its defense forces into these states, demonstrating that despite the breakup of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Russia's leaders still cannot accept that post-Soviet governments are fully sovereign states. In practice Russia regularly displays its belief that these states have or should have a diminished sovereignty just as the Brezhnev doctrine postulated for the former Soviet bloc. Certainly Russian efforts to compel the CIS' economic and military submission to its dictates reflects Moscow's continuing desire to create what Russian analysts themselves call a solar system, where it is the sun and they revolve submissively around it.

These pressures are closely tied to Russia's increasing domestic despotism. Russian commentators themselves admit that Putin's regime is a softer version of Communist rule and cannot survive without exporting itself abroad and corrupting local political processes as it has done in Russia. Moscow seeks abroad what it aspires to at home, a regime that answers to no one—including the UN—and does as it pleases, the classical definition of Russian autocracy. Such a regime is inherently irresponsible, corrupt, expansive, and inclined to military adventurism. Therefore, Moscow uses the energy weapon against all the CIS governments, including the Baltic states, either in selling Russian gas or in exporting Central Asian gas through Russian pipelines. Likewise, Chechnya and the manufacturing of phantom threats demonstrate the unending costs of this military adventurism. Putin's charges and belief that America is pushing Russia into an arms race or threatening it ultimately represent the outward projection of the regime's own inner and unappeasable fears for its own stability and legitimacy. Henceforth when Putin again invokes Franklin Delano Roosevelt (FDR), he should remember that the only thing Russia has to fear is fear itself, nameless paralyzing fear that inhibits all efforts at Russia's recovery, not American policy.

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