



Group of Eight Wrap-up: No clear measure of success

by Joseph Ferguson

In the lead up to the July 15-17 G-8 summit in St. Petersburg, there was a lot of debate about the agenda. The host nation – Russia – called for a three-prong focus on energy security, education, and health issues afflicting Eurasia (primarily HIV/AIDS). The United States wanted to discuss the twin nuclear proliferation crises in Iran and North Korea, the state of democracy in Russia and in Eurasia, and the war on terror. The European members (especially Germany) were anxious to hear Russia's views on energy security, given their reliance on Russia natural gas.

Ultimately, as is often the case, late-breaking events dominated the summit. The re-launching of the Israeli offensive against the Hezbollah in Lebanon was the primary topic of discussion, with all governments agreeing on the need for a ceasefire. North Korea's Fourth of July fireworks captured most people's attention, but this was quickly diverted when the first Hezbollah rocket landed in northern Israel. Russia, the U.S., and the other G-8 members (as well as China) did agree, however, to a concerted strategy to try and prevent Iran from going further down the road toward a nuclear-weapons capability. Meanwhile, both Russia and the U.S. called for the promotion of nuclear energy as a clean alternative to carbon-based fuels. This statement was made after the two sides had agreed to an extension of many of the CTR programs (Cooperative Threat Reduction program, known also as the Nunn-Lugar programs). Russia had hoped to reach an agreement with the U.S. about WTO membership, but last-minute discussions yielded nothing positive.

For those keeping score, the edge has to go to Russia, and especially President Vladimir Putin. Putin presides over a Russia that is re-emerging as a "power" of sorts, and is now a full member of the group of the world's leading democracies. The Russian press (state dominated as it is) published glowing reports of Putin and his performance at the summit. One Russian television station proclaimed that Russia has not had such influence over global issues since Yalta. George Bush and his European colleagues refused to publicly discuss civil society and democracy in Russia, despite some pressure to do so. Instead, the G-8 issued an "energy statement," a document affirming the need for "transparent, efficient and competitive global energy markets." Although the communiqué said all the right things, it probably did little to assuage fears in continental Europe about Russia's domination of gas markets. On the sidelines of the public discussions, Russian leaders made it clear that they would like a share in Europe's downstream energy sectors, hinting darkly about what might happen if they didn't.

Although G-8 leaders agreed to return the Iran nuclear question to the UN Security Council, North Korea got off

somewhat easier, with the G-8 expressing support for the UNSC resolution condemning the missile launches. There was speculation that Moscow (with Beijing's concurrence) agreed to swap action on the Iran crisis for continued inaction toward North Korea. Some wonder whether Beijing called on Moscow to back the DPRK on this issue. If this was the case, it only accentuates Russia's marginalization in East Asia.

The only Asian member of the G-8, Japan, probably scored high marks in Russian minds by studiously avoiding reference to the disputed Northern Territories. Tokyo upset every member of the group during the early 1990s by insisting that the Northern Territories – islands held by Russia but claimed by Japan – be included in the final declarations. Although the Japanese leadership did refrain this time, Tokyo is reportedly pushing for a fall bilateral summit with Putin to raise the issue again.

It is also interesting that Putin's first meetings at the conclusion of the summit were with Chinese President Hu Jintao and Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, both of whom had been invited as observers. Putin hopes that Russia can serve as a bridge between the West and Asia. Many in Russia favor Chinese and Indian inclusion in the G-8.

The summit did reaffirm the friendship between Presidents Bush and Putin. They seem to genuinely respect and like one another, and they were often spotted on the sidelines speaking in friendly tones. Bush refused to publicly chide Putin about the state of democracy in Russia. This did not stop Putin from obliquely criticizing the U.S. During the summit Putin made several sly remarks about U.S. actions and rhetoric (including one jab at Dick Cheney concerning his prowess as a hunter, and a reference to the state of democracy in Iraq).

History will likely judge this summit to have been among the most uneventful of recent G-8 meetings. Two of the last remaining independent journals in Russia lambasted the glowing references to Putin, decrying the lack of substance, and going so far as to call the G-8 a "waste of time."

Whatever the case, Putin avoided a public lecture from his Western colleagues, and the summit went off without a hitch in the beautifully restored Petrine palace at Strelna. Ironically, Russia's full inclusion in the G-8 as a host nation may mark the nadir of Moscow's standing in Asia. Bereft of political influence in Pyongyang, frozen in political relations with Japan, a distant second to the U.S. in India, Russia's only remaining card in Asia seems to be China, and we can only surmise just who is playing who in that bilateral tango.

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