

Bush vs Putin: Captain Marvel meets his nemesis

Written by Eric Walberg

A romp on the seashore gives Eric Walberg a chance to reflect on the Bush-Putin legacies

5/7/7 -- Wouldn't the Bush-Putin saga make a wonderful comic strip? The two most powerful men in the world first meet in June 2001, a few months before the Attack of the Evil Jihadis. "I looked the man in the eye. I was able to get a sense of his soul," Captain Bush praised his new friend Darth Putin. Perhaps the zenith of this farcical replay of the wartime Roosevelt-Stalin alliance was Bush presiding over the Red Square military parade in Moscow the following May as Darth's guest of "special importance", celebrating the victory over Nazi Germany, where the leaders signed a landmark nuclear arms reduction treaty and agreed to a broad cooperative agenda. The Alliance against the Evil Empires -- old and new -- was in good hands.

But then this budding romance begins to go sour. Darth protests angrily at the unilateral US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, he defies the captain over his rape of Iraq and he demands back "his" military bases in Central Asia. He angrily announces that building other, fancier missile bases in eastern Europe would be considered an act of war. It finally became clear even to Captain Bush that Darth was not really his soulmate after all.



Now, as both of these storybook politicians prepare to leave the stage, Bush humbly accepts Putin's invitation to visit him (that's right -- it was Putin that suggested a stopover on his way to Guatemala for a meeting of the IOC to lobby for Sochi's 2014 winter Olympics bid). Just like in the good ol' days, Darth gets royal treatment far and beyond what loyal lackeys like Blair get -- this time two presidents for the price of one. Putin even went on a striper fishing trip in daddy's speedboat, and gorged on lobster.

However, all the lobster in the world can't distract observers from the blush of humiliation on Bush's cheeks. With the US administration facing opposition on all fronts domestic and international, and Russia confidently continuing its climb out of the abyss, their many disagreements were unlikely to evaporate in the summer sun at Kennebunkport last Sunday, and they didn't.

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The results were thin, to say the least, but the meeting was no less significant for that. On Iran, Putin sidestepped, referring to the Security Council and even defended Iran: "We've seen some signals coming from Iran with regard to interaction, cooperation with the IAEA." One-nil for Putin.

On the US missile bases for Europe, Putin did not budge and underlined his position by warning "we are here to play. I would very much hope that we are playing one and the same game." He proposed that his alternative system using old Soviet bases in Azerbaijan and southern Russia be developed jointly by the NATO-Russia Council, formed in 2002. But US sceptics argue the system he described would be mostly under Russian control. And Putin insisted that "in this case, there would be no need to place any more facilities in Europe -- I mean, these facilities in Czech Republic and the missile base in Poland." Referring to the US militarisation of space, a Russian expert added that this also "implies the reversal of the US plan to locate a strike missile grouping in outer space".

And to top it off, only two days before Putin's meeting with President Bush, former president Bill Clinton, on a visit to Yalta in Ukraine last week, assailed US missile defence plans for Europe as a "colossal waste of money. My facts may be wrong, but my impression is that we are creating a crisis here when none is necessary." Two-nil for Putin.

Meanwhile, pesky Poland's Defence Minister Aleksander Szczyglo taunted that if the US were to accept the Russian offer, it would strongly suggest that Russia still maintains some kind of a sphere of influence and would confirm that "no decision can be made about Europe without Russia's approval." Three-nil for Putin.

As predicted, nothing was signed. US National Security Adviser Stephen Hadley said only that the two sides would "form working groups" and that the US and Russia would announce soon that they had finalised a pact allowing Russia to store nuclear waste from US- built reactors in Taiwan and South Korea. Hmmm. Shall we say 3-1 for Putin?

There was no breakthrough on independence for Kosovo. 4- 1 for Putin.

The trajectory of Russian-US relations seems to be set. Very simply, the disastrous policies of the neo-cons are bearing their bitter fruit, accelerating the decline of the US empire just as it

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reaches its zenith. Whether coincidence or providence, this has been happening at the very moment Russia is recovering some of its lost credibility as a voice of anti-imperial reason.

In the past six months, Putin has scored one political touchdown after another. Russia has gone from being a second rate nonaligned power among many to the only major world power with enough guts to take the US on. Putin's increasingly confident criticisms of the US culminated in his measured performance at last month's St Petersburg World Economic Forum, where he pushed the envelope with a call for new international institutions to replace the WB and WTO. This is not a build-up to a give-away on anything.

So why was Putin so interested in going to Kennebunkport? Well, both presidents are facing the end of their two terms in office, though Bush's popularity continues to decline as Putin's soars -- it's up to 84 per cent the last count, and both are no doubt concerned about their legacy. Putin most likely sees the inevitability of Kosovo becoming the West's latest poster child and was pushing for some movement on the US side concerning its missile plans for Europe. The count's still not in on the latter, where popular opinion is against the bases. Despite hard feelings in Poland and the Czech Republic for past Russia/Soviet sins, it seems that the populace at large is more sensible than the politicians. Funny how easily these "representatives of the people" so quickly become "representatives of US interests". So if Putin and Clinton manage to convince Bush to forget the bases in Europe, the people could have their say after all. Stay tuned, but even if Poland and/or the CR default, it's unlikely that the Azerbaijan feint will lead to any significant cooperation.

No. This summit was not about Kosovo or Poland or nuclear waste. Putin craves proper recognition for Russia, and he got it. Captain Bush even reiterated his friendship with Darth: "Do I trust I him? Yes. Do I like everything he says? No. And I suspect he doesn't like everything I say. But we're able to say it in a way that shows mutual respect." The key being mutual. For Putin the summit's photo op of a smiling, friendly Bush shows the world that he can tell the schoolyard bully niet! and get away with it. The US is suddenly treating Russia with some of the respect (or fear) it showed the SU. "Let us be utterly frank. The main thing is that the US and Russia should perceive each other as equal partners," Russian Foreign Minister Sergei V Lavrov said last month in Moscow. "A format other than this is unacceptable to us today." What a truly wonderful legacy for Putin to leave his people.

Disappointingly, Russia still bends to Western hysteria over Iran and yields to Western collusion in the destruction of Palestine, though the disagreement on both these issues is almost visceral: Russia continues to provide defensive arms to Iran and prevents the US from isolating it via the Security Council, and Putin balked at the latest metamorphosis of ex- PM Blair into the saviour

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of "peace" in the Middle East. But this really looks like careful playing of a difficult poker hand -- you can't give the show away at once, and you must hope for the next draw. Watch Putin or his successor add to his hand in the future. Let's hope it's a winner. And watch Russia elect a thoroughly Putinised duma and president. Perfect timing for him, with the US down and out and Russia on the ascendant. So a win-win for Putin. Who knows? Maybe after Blair has fallen flat on his face in Jerusalem, ex-president Putin could step in as a truly credible mediator of peace. His CV is much stronger, as is his sense of history.

There is still a long way to go to restore even partially the respect and influence Russia had in its Soviet days, and it will only regain this influence if it continues to challenge the West on its imperial agenda. A truly independent Russia would stand up to the US and Israel in the Middle East, would veto UN sanctions against Iran, and would move more assertively to create international institutions that are not just appendages of the US.

Still, the Russia of Gorbachev and Yeltsin, when it gave away the shop with a naïve or cynical smile, is gone. Lenin has finally found a worthy heir. For all the euro-sniping at Putin, Europe should be grateful that one of its members isn't afraid to take on the schoolyard bully. Without it, Europe would be just a US colony managed by the UK or, now, France. Still, though Putin's Russia is much better than its predecessors, Gorbachev and Yeltsin's Russia, it can't do that much yet. But we can thank Putin for at least leading the way.

A fitting metaphor emerged at the summit: Putin was the only one of the presidential crew to actually catch a fish, and he demurred, calling it a "team effort" which he proceeded to throw back into the ocean. Interpretation: Putin achieved what he wanted -- recognition as the real winner who can afford to be magnanimous.

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