

Talking Points by Mark Medish, Vice President for Studies- Russia, China, Eurasia

U.S. and Russia on the Eve of the G8 Summit

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G8 summits are both less and more important than is commonly assumed. Less because the G8 is an informal club without rules, it is not a world Politburo. Its writ is mostly hortatory. History is littered with the language of summit communiqués. On the other hand, the G8 meeting is still important because multilateral and bilateral diplomacy is vital for peaceful problem-solving. Behind closed doors, leaders can think aloud candidly and have an impact on each other, on the way others think about big or urgent issues—such as dealing with Iran, North Korea, Kosovo, and Darfur. The summit is also an action-forcing event for work already under way. An example is the bilateral U.S.-Russian civilian nuclear cooperation agreement that is expected. This may be the single most important development for global security coming out of the G8 process this time around. Another example would be a multilateral statement of core principles on global energy security.

What makes this G8 more intriguing and dramatic than other recent meeting is the controversy surrounding Russia and President Putin as the host. This is due mainly to concern about Russia's perceived democratic drift—its non-democratic direction, with restrictive pressures on civil society—in the past few years under Putin as well as some signs of a resurgent Russia on the regional and world stage, for example, rhetoric about being an energy superpower, etc. Indeed, the U.S. president is attending the summit despite calls from some prominent voices (American and Russian) not to attend, and not to give Putin the prestige and the photo opportunities.

The summit optics drama is compounded by the deeper drama within and around the Bush administration about how to handle Russia going forward. Much as with the case of China's transition and integration, there is no simple answer. European capitals are also flummoxed by Russia. In Washington, there seems to be a contest between neoconservatives and pragmatists; the former favors sharper tactics, less patience, more confrontation (some of them even call for a "soft war" with Russia), while the latter takes a more gradualist, contextualist, and diplomatic approach. Indeed, the most obvious "soft war" is the one between the neo-conservatives and the pragmatists. So much so that U.S. policy often looks like the average of two opposing poles, but without any strategic coherence, except maybe as a series of good cop-bad cop tactics. Hence, you have Vice President Cheney delivering a tough speech in Vilnius in May, but the President going to the summit two months later, ready to do business with Russia. Will the real U.S. policy please stand up? One could equally ask: Will the real Putin reveal himself—is this summit taking place in St Petersburg, a window on the West, or is it really taking place in Leningrad by another name, in a kind of post-Soviet hangover?