

The Clinton-Putin Summit and the Ultimate Security Issue: Democracy in Russia

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The centerpiece of President Clinton's June meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin will be strengthening national security. The Administration plans to do this by focusing on nuclear weapons and National Missile Defense. This is a short-term solution to a longer-term problem.

Ultimately, national security will be enhanced if the Russian state is tolerant of a plurality of views and becomes increasingly democratic. It is sobering but important to pay attention when Russian political and social activists claim that the modest movement in this direction under Boris Yeltsin has been undermined by Putin. President Clinton has an opportunity to be loud and clear about the importance of human rights and democracy, in contrast to other Western leaders meeting with Putin who have only whispered.

There is a tendency on the part of policymakers to talk about democracy and human rights when it seems strategically convenient. If they think that a focus on these issues threatens to interfere with traditional security matters, such as getting an agreement on nuclear weapons, democracy and human rights then fade from the agenda.

Unfortunately, this selective focus on democracy undermines the process of helping to build democratic institutions--a rhetorical cornerstone of this administration's policy towards Russia. It makes the US commitment to democracy appear uneven. Moreover, it suggests that policymakers do not understand that democracy promotion is defense by other means, which then leads them to miss opportunities to enhance Russia's security and our own.

Like-minded democratic states generally do not engage in arms races with one another. No one in the US is threatened by the nuclear weapons of Great Britain. The two countries share a wide range of common values, including democratic ones that have been nurtured and have evolved over the last 100 years. Nuclear weapons in North Korea, on the other hand, are a cause of great concern. Policymakers fear a potential strike from an authoritarian regime that does not value the lives of its own citizens.

Russia is neither Great Britain nor North Korea. Russia has made some progress (however incremental) in the development of democratic institutions since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Elections occur but are accompanied by much manipulation. Political parties exist but fail to represent the interests of citizens. But over the last year, those who

favor democracy in Russia have faced the renewal of tangible threats. The FSB has been emboldened under Putin's leadership, and actively harasses investigative journalists, as well as environmental and human rights activists.

The case of Andrei Babitsky--the Radio Liberty journalist who was held incommunicado for days as he was beaten for his reporting on the war in Chechnya--is well known. Less known is the fear that permeates the activist community. It stems in part from statements made by Putin in a Russian newspaper last summer where he claimed, but provided no evidence, that environmental groups were in the employ of foreign intelligence agencies. According to a letter of protest recently sent to Putin by Western environmentalists, Russian groups such as "Green World" and "Sakhalin Environmental Watch" that are trying to make life safer for Russians have been intimidated and treated like "enemies of the people." Organizations like the "Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights" are also increasingly isolated inside Russia, since the Russian government has claimed that it is not the business of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to protect human rights--only that of the Russian state.

What can the president of the United States do about any of this? He can show solidarity with those activists in Russia who believe in the plurality of views. That would be a change from the usual schedule; high-level officials from the US government that come to Russia always talk about the importance of creating democratic institutions, civil society, and respect for human rights. But they rarely meet with the people who work on these issues. This time, he should meet with investigative journalists like Andrei Babitsky, with environmental NGOs, and with Russian human rights groups such as "Memorial" and "Mothers of Soldiers."

To show Russians that the United States is really committed to democracy and human rights, particularly when the going is rough--and that would be right now--we must adequately fund democracy assistance to Russia. The US government's budget at present for "democratic initiatives" in Russia is \$16 million. That's a small fraction of the budget that goes for other forms of engagement with Russia (and pocket change compared to what the US spent on defense during the Cold War). Some money should be added to the democracy assistance budget now to show that the US government supports a plurality of views.

The summit agenda will surely include nuclear weapons agreements that only the two governments can negotiate and implement. But it should also have something for Russian civil society. The proliferation of shared values and democracy is another means to security. It is as good in the long term for our national security and Russia's as any deal on nuclear weapons.