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Middle Eastern Agenda for President Bush in Europe

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President Bush is in Europe this week, where his meetings -- several of which are directly linked to aspects of U.S. Middle East policy -- represent important opportunities to build diplomatic bridges. Today, he visits Prague to address a democracy promotion conference organized by former Czech president Vaclav Havel, former Israeli deputy prime minister Natan Sharansky, and former Spanish prime minister Jose Maria Aznar. The president's next stop is Heiligendamm, Germany, for the G8 meeting between the United States, Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and Russia. On June 8, he continues on to Poland, Italy, Albania, and Bulgaria in order to boost new democracies, cement alliances in the former Communist Bloc, and meet with the Pope.

Growing Consensus on Iran?

The issue of placing missile defense systems in Europe to counter the threat posed by Iranian proliferation is adding tension to the already strained relations between the transatlantic alliance and Russia. It will also likely be central to Bush's agenda for his bilateral meeting with Russian president Vladimir Putin, scheduled to take place on the sidelines of the G8 summit. Russia shares transatlantic concerns about Iran's nuclear program but is trying to block U.S.-sponsored antimissile defenses being planned for Poland and the Czech Republic, near the potential trajectory of any missiles fired from the Middle East toward North America. Moscow sees such installations as altering the balance of power between the West and Russia, as well as being an unwelcome display of America's closeness with former members of the now-defunct Soviet bloc.

Regarding Iran's military nuclear aspirations, there is less difference of opinion. The G8 summit comes close on the heels of a conference on nuclear disarmament in Luxembourg, and yet another round of inconclusive talks between Iran and European Union (EU) foreign policy czar Javier Solana, in Madrid. In Luxembourg, Putin insisted on a diplomatic solution as the only possible alternative to the current "dead end," but officials in attendance detected a new and more concerned tone in Russia's language, indicating that consensus on halting Iran's enrichment efforts is not faltering, despite continued Iranian noncompliance.

Indeed, Tehran has shown no intention of altering course: Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei struck a defiant note yesterday, warning that Iran was prepared "to pay a price" and "resist" in order to realize the aims of its contested nuclear program. Solana is due to meet Iran's chief negotiator, Ali Larjani, again in two weeks, and Tehran is, as usual, trying to divide Western allies on tactics and timing. Even so, it is unlikely that divisions within the transatlantic community, and between Russia and the West, will be affected at this time.

This seemingly unified front is partly a result of growing public concern over the Iranian nuclear issue. Public opinion in Europe is more hawkish than its political leadership, with a vast majority of Europeans convinced that Iran's nuclear goals are not confined to civilian purposes. Besides, the policy community is well aware that time may be running out for diplomacy unless red lines are redrawn. This alignment of circumstances and forces gives the G8 impetus to adopt strong language regarding Iran's failure to comply with UN Security Council Resolutions 1737 and 1747, setting the stage for a third UN resolution and a further expansion of sanctions.

The Middle East Peace Process and Lebanon

The G8 summit is not expected to offer new insights or initiatives on advancing the Israeli-Palestinian peace process -- especially after the Quartet (the UN, EU, United States, and Russia) met in Berlin less than a week ago and reiterated the international community's position on the current violence in Gaza and the necessary steps to break the deadlock. By contrast, the deteriorating situation in Lebanon -- though not high on the G8 meeting agenda -- will no doubt be addressed, especially in a scheduled bilateral U.S.-French meeting.

The latter meeting will be President Bush's first with newly elected French president Nicolas Sarkozy, who is expected to be much more supportive of U.S. positions than former president Jacques Chirac. Sarkozy has already displayed strong commitment to Lebanon and its embattled government. New French foreign minister Bernard Kouchner's first foreign trip was to Beirut to meet Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora, while Sarkozy's first post-electoral meeting with a foreign dignitary was with Lebanese parliamentary majority leader Saad Hariri, son of slain former prime minister Rafiq Hariri. The symbolism of these two meetings is obvious: France's change of guard bodes ill for Syria and well for a new bid to bolster Siniora in Lebanon.

With temperatures rising in Palestinian refugee camps north and south of Beirut, and Syria's blunt rejection of the UN resolution for an international tribunal to investigate the Hariri assassination, Bush should capitalize on the momentum created by the resolution and the sympathetic mood in Paris. If the G8 were to adopt some blunt language on the subject, it would send a strong message to Damascus: Lebanon will not be made ungovernable, its constitutional paralysis will not be tolerated further, and the Hariri tribunal will not remain a dead letter. U.S.-French leadership is needed again to save Lebanon from Syria's designs, and a G8 commitment to support Siniora would signal the readiness of other actors -- first and foremost the EU and the Arab League -- to take concrete steps in that direction.

Maintaining Unity in Afghanistan

Although the number of countries operating in Iraq as U.S. coalition allies has become a mere handful, the NATO-led operation in Afghanistan is holding up much better. Yet there are muted recriminations among NATO allies about troop commitment levels and rules of engagement there. U.S., British, Canadian, Australian, and several European contingents are taking the most casualties and are bearing the brunt of the fighting in the restive southern provinces, while Italy and Germany refuse to deploy troops in the country's combat zones. President Bush will hope to secure greater commitment during his trip, though this seems unlikely.

Other Issues

President Romano Prodi's government in Italy has been at odds with the Bush administration on several issues. Yet other political forces in Italy are even more inimical to U.S. policy in the Middle East. Prodi is currently weak and embattled, and his strongest detractors on the left flank of his governing coalition are calling for Rome to rescind a commitment to enlarge a U.S. base in northern Italy. They also support a peace conference for Afghanistan that includes the Taliban, in addition to supporting dialogue with Hamas and Hizballah. Bush has yet to receive Prodi in the White House and has not scheduled a bilateral meeting with him on the margins of the G8 summit. Bush will meet him in Rome, but only as part of an official visit to meet with the Pope. Little is expected other than papering over differences and testing the strength of a still important, yet wavering, ally.

Recent street demonstrations in the German city of Rostock, in which more than 1,000 were reportedly injured, suggest that many of President Bush's stops could be marred by similar incidents. G8 summits have been burdened by such riots for several years. This year, apart from the usual antiglobalization concerns, opposition to U.S. policy on Iraq and to President Bush himself could serve as a basis for more, and probably violent, demonstrations.

Evident differences between Bush and Putin on missile defense systems represent arguably the greatest threat to the summit's success. Putin's warning that Russia will aim some of its nuclear arsenal at Europe if the antimissile shield is built has surprised and shocked officials. In addition, German and U.S. views on global warming are at odds. It will take considerable tact for Germany, whose Chancellor Angela Merkel is chairing the summit, to avoid a diplomatic confrontation.

The itinerary for President Bush's trip suggests that he welcomes the opportunity to visit the parts of Europe (namely, the east) that still admire the United States, avoiding those parts (the west) that have become cooler since the September 11 attacks and the invasion of Iraq. Making the journey a success will be a diplomatic challenge.

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