

Published on Friday, July 7, 2006 by the [Inter Press Service](#)

Requiem for Bush's Unipolar Dream?

by **Jim Lobe**

WASHINGTON - A week before the Group of Eight (G8) summit in St. Petersburg, Russia, U.S. President George W. Bush finds his power and authority -- both at home and abroad -- at their lowest ebb.

With his approval ratings falling back into the cellar after a brief bounce following last month's death of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, escalating violence in Iraq, Afghanistan, and between Israelis and Palestinians, and shows of defiance by the two surviving members of the "Axis of Evil", Iran and North Korea, Bush's stature is much diminished compared to his previous G-8 appearances.

The man whose efforts to install a national order based on the dominance of the executive and a compliant Congress and a global order based primarily on U.S. military power and compliant "coalitions of the willing" now finds both under unprecedented challenge -- from the Supreme Court to Somalia.

The latest and boldest challenge, of course, was this week's launch by North Korea of at least seven missiles -- on the Fourth of July, no less -- despite the president's explicit warning less than a week before that such a move was "unacceptable".

But, now that the deed is done, it remains unclear what, if anything, Bush can do about it, particularly without strong support from Russia, China, and South Korea, the three members of the Six-Party Talks that have been urging him to lift financial sanctions against Pyongyang as a way to get it back to negotiating a rollback of its nuclear arms programme.

Pyongyang's "in-your-face" defiance came as Washington, in this case backed -- albeit somewhat uncertainly -- by its European allies, demanded that Iran agree to indefinitely suspend its uranium-enrichment programme before the G-8 summit or face sanctions at the U.N. Security Council.

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But most analysts believe Tehran will offer at best an ambiguous reply by Washington's deadline, sufficiently ambiguous to ensure that Moscow and Beijing will continue opposing sanctions, and that, ultimately, Washington will have to compromise on key positions that it has so far refused to concede.

These challenges come just a week, of course, after the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the president lacked the power to create military tribunals for detainees in the "global war on terror" whose procedures did not conform to U.S. military law or the Geneva Conventions without Congress' explicit approval.

In a sweeping decision that appeared to destroy the administration's legal defence of its controversial domestic spying programme, among other efforts to expand presidential power, the court "lectured Mr. Bush like a schoolboy on constitutional checks and balances, and on the dangers of an omnipotent executive," according to conservative constitutional analyst Bruce Fein.

That, of course, is not a lecture Bush -- or his eminence grise and long-time advocate of an "imperial presidency," Vice President Dick Cheney -- wanted to hear, just as they both despise the idea that the United States should have to rely on the backing of feckless Europeans, let alone on Russia and China, to deal with "evil-doers" like Iran and North Korea.

For them, a "multi-polar world" in which all countries do not simply defer to the U.S. is as repulsive as a political system in which they must compromise not only with Congress as a co-equal branch of government, but even with Democrats.

Yet, after striving mightily to avoid multi-polarity both at home and abroad, that is the world Bush now faces, a fact that is likely to be on vivid display in St. Petersburg next week.

In order to cope with what Thursday's Washington Post called a "world of crises", Bush badly needs the help, or at least the acquiescence, of other major powers, including those like Russia and China that have been the most wary about his unipolar positions.

This was not how it was supposed to turn out, of course.

Just as the administration's post-9/11 will and determination were supposed to -- and mostly did -- overwhelm critics in Congress and the courts, so its lightning military successes in Afghanistan and Iraq were designed to "shock and awe" local populations and potential rivals near and far into passivity and compliance, if not active cooperation.

"Power is its own reward," wrote neo-conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer -- a long-time advocate of a U.S.-led "unipolar" world and Cheney favourite -- after the ouster of the Taliban in Afghanistan. "Victory changes everything, psychology above all. The psychology in the region is now one of fear and deep respect for American power."

Indeed, after the U.S. conquest of Iraq, both Syria and Iran took steps to assure Washington of their cooperation and goodwill, offering concessions on a range of issues rejected by administration hawks who asked why they should settle for changes in "regime behaviour" when, with just a little effort, they could get "regime change" in both countries, and perhaps in North Korea, too.

Bush himself naturally dominated that year's G-8 summit at Evian-les-Bains, where pre-war critics German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and host French President Jacques Chirac were graciously received -- if only briefly -- by a triumphant but forgiving president.


Three years later, that triumphant image has faded rather dramatically due to a ragtag Sunni insurgency, for which the administration was totally unprepared, that has effectively punctured the notion of U.S. invincibility and, with it, the "fear and deep respect for American power" on which the new unipolar order was supposed to be based.

Iran and Syria -- not to mention North Korea -- are now openly defiant; the Taliban in Afghanistan are now resurgent; Islamist parties throughout the region have been strengthened; Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts have fallen apart; the U.S. military prepares to abandon Iraq to civil war; China and Russia are seeking the expulsion of U.S. military bases from Central Asia; and public approval of Bush's performance has fallen to the lowest sustained levels since disgraced U.S. President Richard Nixon.

The G-8 leaders in St. Petersburg, representing Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, Britain and the United States, will be dealing with a multi-polar world.

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