
Medvedev : oil and gas tour before G8 summit

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RIA Novosti - 7/7/2008

On the way to the G8 summit, President Dmitry Medvedev visited Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, our next-door neighbors and major Caspian oil and gas producers.

In Azerbaijan, he discussed the purchase of the largest possible amount of gas.

It became clear during the talks that Russia would prefer to buy all Azerbaijan-produced gas.

The same subject was discussed in Turkmenistan - a bigger purchase of Turkmen gas, also at market price. It is important for Russia to acquire Turkmen gas to compete with the alternative European Nabucco pipeline project. Presidential aide Sergei Prikhodko said that Turkmenistan is not going to take part in its construction. Judging by events, Russia has prevailed over its European rivals in the struggle for Turkmen gas.

Medvedev visited Kazakhstan to attend the 10th birthday of its capital. But again, the talks focused on energy resources. The Russian president and his Kazakh counterpart, Nursultan Nazarbayev, discussed the construction of the Caspian gas pipeline and expansion of the capacity of the Central Asia-Center gas pipeline.

During these visits, it was important for the Russian president not only to promote relations with these countries but also to consolidate Russia's priorities in oil and gas cooperation. It is now clear that oil and gas from these energy-rich countries will not bypass Russia.

After these talks, it has become obvious that Russia is leaving its rivals behind in relations with these major oil and gas exporters. Medvedev has arrived at the summit, having scored important foreign policy points. He is not a newcomer who would like to learn from his seasoned G8 colleagues, but a politician who has managed to score tangible results in a short span of time.

When a new power pattern was determined in Russia, under which Vladimir Putin gave up his first place to Medvedev and became the prime minister, analysts started talking instantly about the new distribution of their respective responsibilities. Considering Putin's tremendous political weight, his close personal links with many world leaders and his reliance on the siloviks, it was assumed he would play a much bigger role in foreign policy and that Medvedev would simply perform representative functions. Analysts believed that Putin would determine, implement and control Russian foreign policy.

The main argument was that there was simply no other option. They reasoned that Putin's prestige and influence on politics and the economy were so high that he would not wish to give up control over foreign policy. This sphere is too important and he had achieved too much just to let it go. Medvedev, as his diligent student, was supposed to do no more than sign the Putin-compiled documents.

But this scenario was not realistic, first of all because the head of state cannot keep a low profile in a presidential republic. Putin is too experienced and rational to destroy the established pattern of power for the sake of his personal ambitions.

But Medvedev does not seem to have introduced anything new into Russia's foreign policy. Putin was also actively lobbying Russia's interests in the energy sphere before. In other words, Medvedev does not take independent foreign policy steps.

Nevertheless, Russia's geopolitical interests are not Putin's invention. They took shape historically and exist objectively. They have been the same both under Putin and Medvedev. We had to have close relations with energy exporters under Putin, and this goal has not changed with Medvedev's advent to power. It would be wrong to say that Medvedev is not independent in his foreign policy steps. It would be correct to speak about the continuity of the line.

As president, Medvedev has put some new accents in his domestic policy. He has adjusted and specified the priorities. But foreign policy is much more conservative, and has much less room for a new approach.

It is obvious that Medvedev has a different style. Putin was rather tough and aggressive. But this is a stylistic difference and does not affect the gist of the matter. Medvedev will be as consistent and firm in upholding Russia's interests as his predecessor.

Eight years ago, Putin made foreign policy achievements no less serious on the eve of his first trip to the G8 summit (also in Japan) as Russian president. It is enough to mention his surprise breakthrough in the world's relations with North Korea.

This is a positive tradition for Russian presidents - to come to the first summit with a suitcase of achievements.

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