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Zimbabwe: Medvedev's Hokkaido Hop

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In his G-8 Summit debut, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev stunned his seven colleagues by supporting sanctions on Robert Mugabe's thuggish regime in Zimbabwe. "We will take further steps, *inter alia* introducing financial and other measures," said the July 8 G-8 Summit Statement from Toyako, on the Japanese island of Hokkaido. Then, as the next day's sun glimmered on beautiful Lake Toya, Medvedev backtracked. By week's end, Russia vetoed United Nations sanctions against Mugabe. Medvedev's Hokkaido hop offers some important insights for dealing with contemporary Russia.

Zimbabwe flashed onto television screens worldwide with the fraud and violence surrounding its March 29 election. On April 2, the Zimbabwe Election Commission confirmed that Mugabe's party had lost control of the parliament, but it withheld the presidential vote count for another month. "Only God," said Mugabe, could remove him.

Accordingly, Mugabe's youth militia, "war veterans," ZANU-PF Party thugs and security forces began a campaign that some dubbed "CIBD"—coercion, intimidation, beating and displacement. Hundreds of opposition supporters died, thousands are missing, and hundreds of thousands fled their homes. The government barred foreign journalists and humanitarian organizations from the country. Police arrested opposition members of the Election Commission.

On May 2, the rump Election Commission incredibly announced that opposition presidential candidate Morgan Tsvangirai received only 47.9% of the votes, forcing a runoff election with Mugabe. Violence continued. "What is happening today is not an election; it is an exercise in mass intimidation," said Tsvangirai, withdrawing his candidacy on June 22. Mugabe claimed 85.5% of the votes in the June 27 runoff election.

"Zimbabwe today," Michelle Gavin of the New York-based Council on Foreign Relations told the US Congress on July 15, "is a country held hostage by an illegitimate government...in a man-made economic catastrophe characterized by stratospheric hyperinflation, massive unemployment and food shortages."

(Inflation in Zimbabwe is now an incomprehensible 2.200.000%—imagine if, a year ago, you paid 55 Tetri for lavashi, today you would pay over 12.000 Georgian Lari.)

The G-8, meeting just ten days after Mugabe's sham election, was bound to discuss Zimbabwe. Meanwhile, all eyes were on Medvedev at his first big solo event. Apparently, he recognized that Zimbabwe afforded him an opportunity to cooperate with his colleagues without compromising core Russian positions.

"The need and urgency was indicated for sanctions at the UN Security Council," skeptical Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi told reporters. When "even Russia decided to go ahead, it seemed to me important to join in, voting unanimously."

Berlusconi's comment and the G-8 Summit Statement make clear that the leaders explicitly agreed to seek UN sanctions and that Medvedev played a key role.

It would be fun to know which song Medvedev's mobile telephone plays to signal calls from Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Whatever the tune, it surely sounded in Medvedev's bedroom that night.

The next morning, Medvedev told a post-summit press conference that the G-8 Statement only "gives the world community recommendations on how to act...but there are as yet no concrete decisions on how the United Nations should act in this situation and whether it is necessary to make any special additional decisions."

In New York, Russian UN representative Vitaly Churkin cautioned the Security Council to "be very careful about setting precedents." Some said he hinted that Russian cooperation on Zimbabwe would require the west to be more cooperative on Georgia.

On July 11, Russia and China vetoed the Zimbabwe sanctions resolution.

"We have seen an ever-more obvious attempt to take the Council beyond its chartered prerogatives and beyond maintaining international peace and security," Churkin explained. "This draft is nothing but the Council's attempt to interfere in the internal affairs of states."

Ignoring Churkin's habitual churlishness, the Russian position is not without merit—the UN would benefit from a civil, constructive discussion about whether and how its charter has evolved over six decades. Unfortunately, that was not Moscow's purpose.

In reality, Southern Africa is closer to Moscow's core positions than Medvedev initially thought at Hokkaido. "Declaring UN sanctions over elections," says a July 15 *Moscow Times* editorial, "would set a precedent that Moscow has no desire to see established, given its own record in conducting elections, not to mention the record of its allies."

The political system that Moscow would rather outsiders overlook hatched the Medvedev-Putin duumvirate, which has many westerners salivating to see the affable Medvedev pressing policies different from those of the lupine Putin.

Former US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger even writes in the July 2 *International Herald Tribune* that the duumvirate "may, in retrospect, appear as the beginning of an evolution toward a form of checks and balances." Maybe. For now, Medvedev's Hokkaido hop shows that Putin remains in charge.

The "U-turn in the Russian position," said US UN representative Zalmay Khalilzad, "raises questions about its reliability as a G-8 partner."

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