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Stage set for confrontation, not cooperation, at G20

By Peter Symonds

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In a joint press conference yesterday, Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott and his British counterpart David Cameron set a tone of confrontation for the G20 leaders summit due to start today in the Australian city of Brisbane. Both leaders zeroed in on Russia, bluntly accusing Moscow of expansionism, and, in the case of Cameron, threatening to impose further economic sanctions over Ukraine.

In the lead-up to the summit, Abbott had declared that he intended to “shirtfront”—that is, physically confront—Russian President Vladimir Putin over the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 over Ukraine. At this week’s APEC summit in Beijing, Abbott demanded a meeting with Putin at which he insisted—without providing any evidence—that Russia was responsible for the tragedy and called for an apology and compensation.

The Australian Prime Minister kept up the attack yesterday, accusing Putin of “trying to recreate the lost glories of tsarism or the old Soviet Union.” “Whether it’s bullying of Ukraine, whether it’s the increasing Russian military aircraft flying into the airspace of Japan or European countries, whether it’s the naval task force which is now in the South Pacific, Russia is being much more assertive,” he said.

British Prime Minister Cameron joined the attack. In a barely concealed comparison of Russia to Nazi Germany prior to World War II, he declared: “We have to be clear about what we’re dealing with here: it is a large state bullying a smaller state in Europe and we’ve seen the consequences of that in the past and we should learn the lessons of history and make sure we don’t let it happen again.”

Cameron said he intended to let Putin know in a “brush-by” meeting at the G20 summit that Russian actions were unacceptable. He bluntly warned that “if Russia continues to make matters worse [in Ukraine], we could see those sanctions increase. It is as simple as that.”

In a speech earlier yesterday in the Australian parliament, Cameron also took a swipe at China, attacking the idea that so-called “democracies” like Britain and Australia would be “out-competed and out-gunned by countries that believe there is a shortcut to success [via] a new model of authoritarian capitalism.”

Quite apart from the lies and distortions involved, the language employed, or perhaps more accurately deployed, by the two leaders was highly provocative. It was not the measured, nuanced language of diplomacy, but that of militarism, aggression and war. That is not to say that such words are never used at summits—behind closed doors. But in this case, it was out in the open, before the G20 leaders had even begun to formally meet.

The Australian government has billed this G20 summit as critical in establishing international cooperation to boost the global economy and create jobs. Treasurer Joe Hockey has boasted of setting the definite goal of an additional two percent GDP growth. The wall-to-wall media coverage of the summit in Brisbane has been accompanied by hours of breathless commentary and speculation on the outcomes to be expected.

In reality, all of the leaders jetting in to Brisbane understand that no agreement is going to be reached on economic cooperation, much less on meaningful action on climate change or any of the other myriad international issues being touted. In the five years since the G20 first met in the face of the 2008 global financial crisis, the world economy has been mired in an intractable breakdown, signalled today by acute financial instability, deepening economic slowdown and fears of further crises.

The limited economic cooperation of the first G20 meeting has been replaced by an increasingly open resort to the beggar-thy-neighbour policies accompanied by threats, provocations and the use of military force. So obvious are the antagonisms that today’s editorial in the *Australian Financial Review* commented: “Australia is hosting the G20 in a year when old-fashioned geopolitics has made a stunning return.”

As the G20 meets today, a small fleet of Russian naval vessels are being shadowed by Australian frigates and surveillance aircraft as well as American warships somewhere in international waters off the north-east Australian coast. Whatever the exact calculations of the Russian government, this show of force only compounds the already tense atmosphere at the summit.

However, the chief responsibility for rising geo-political tensions around the world lies with US imperialism, which has ratcheted up a confrontation with Russia by engineering the fascist-led coup in Ukraine in February and launching a new war in the Middle East, aimed primarily at ousting Russia's ally, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In a bid to impose its dictates on Moscow, Washington, in league with its European allies, has imposed sanctions on Russia that are crippling its economy.

Speaking to the TASS news agency yesterday, Putin made the obvious point that the sanctions "run counter to the very principle of G20 activities, and ... to international law" and violated the principles of the WTO and GATT. "The United States itself created that organisation at a certain point. Now it is crudely violating its principles," he declared.

Putin acknowledged that the sanctions were harming Russia which faced the prospect of "catastrophic fall" in energy prices on which its economy depended. Russia's central bank is forecasting zero growth for next year, amid a falling rouble and share prices. But Putin warned that such measures would also impact on other economies, including the US and the EU. "Everyone must understand that the global economy and finance these days are exceptionally dependent on each other," he said.

Putin's appeals for greater economic cooperation are certain to fall on deaf ears. As the Russian president himself pointed out, the US is intent on establishing two agreements—one Transatlantic and the other Transpacific—that specifically exclude China, the world's second largest economy, and Russia, which ranks ninth.

At the APEC summit this week in Beijing, Obama provocatively hosted a meeting of Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) members that pointedly did not include the host nation. Obama is also waging what US economic analyst Fred Bergsten described to the *Australian Financial Review* as "Washington's jihad" to undermine China's plans for a regional infrastructure bank.

For the past five years, Obama has been engaged in a confrontational "pivot to Asia" aimed against China that was formally announced on the floor of the Australian parliament in November 2011. The American president will deliver a keynote speech in Brisbane today on American leadership in the Asia Pacific that will set the stage for a further escalation of tensions in the region.

US national security official Evan Medeiros told the media: "It will be his vision for what he wants to accomplish in the Asia-Pacific and the ways in which he will do it, covering diplomatic issues, economic issues, security issues, people-to-people issues."

"It will be very forward-leaning," Medeiros declared.

In other words, Obama will set out in unmistakeable terms an aggressive, all-embracing strategy for ensuring the predominance of US imperialism in Asia, through diplomatic provocation, economic bullying and preparations for war.