

THE UNINVITED GUEST

The symbolism of Vladimir Putin inviting himself to NATO's gala banquet should not be missed. I've already suggested that Bush's efforts mark his—and our—declining influence in Europe. Leave it to the old KGB spook to capitalize on that reality.

The presidents and prime ministers and their spouses had gathered at the Athenee Palace Hilton hotel for a gala dinner on the final night of the NATO summit when suddenly an unexpected visitor crashed the party — Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Although Russia does not belong to the alliance, and Putin had not been invited to the dinner, he showed up anyway, to everyone's surprise. The NATO leaders politely made room for him — as it happened, Afghan President Hamid Karzai had backed out at the last minute, leaving an open seat — but they were all buzzing at the breach of protocol and its larger meaning.

As Peter Baker suggests, its larger meaning is fairly clear.

Russia succeeded this week in staring down NATO on where it should expand next, persuading Europeans dependent on its plentiful energy supplies to defy President Bush and refuse membership road maps to the former Soviet republics of Ukraine and Georgia. Anxious about the U.S.-Russia dispute over missile defense, NATO endorsed Bush's system but appealed to him to cut a deal with Putin to avert a new arms race.

"Russia is stronger than it used to be," said Charles A. Kupchan, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations. "If Russia objects and is alienated by NATO

enlargement, the cost to the West potentially grows higher. . . . We should not allow such objections to dictate NATO policies. On the other hand, to proceed with a plan for European security that doesn't take into account Russian positions would be shortsighted."

[snip]

"What we're seeing in Europe is interest in what Russia can give European countries and particularly European business," Celeste A. Wallander, a Georgetown University specialist, said by phone. "European business is very interested in Russia . . . and the business interests are very important in foreign policy."

And, as Baker points out elsewhere, Europe is fairly reliant on Russia for energy.

Don't get me wrong—I fault no one for treating Bush with disdain. But I believe that Putin intended to crash the party as a symbol that he is in the position to do just that, diplomatically. It's one thing for Europe—and the United States—to have to negotiate with Russia rather than dictate terms. It's an entirely different thing when Putin overshadows the US' influence in Europe. Putin is no better a leader than Bush, he's just a whole lot smarter.

Bush, as a person, deserves disdain. Unfortunately, the disdain the rest of the world feels for him will increasingly translate into disdain for the United States. January 2009 can't come soon enough.