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MINNPOST

On Syria, Putin upstages Obama at G20 Summit

By Nick Hayes | 09/09/13



REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque

Russian President Vladimir Putin, left, walks past President Barack Obama during a group photo at the G20 Summit in St. Petersburg on Friday.

Last week was tough on Russian President Vladimir Putin. An art gallery in Moscow had opened an **exhibition of paintings** of Putin dressed women's underwear and fondling a similarly clad Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev.

Putin wasn't amused. The exhibition was closed. Fearing prosecution, the artist has requested political asylum in France. On Thursday and Friday, Putin pretended unconvincingly that he welcomed the visit of President Obama to St. Petersburg. The week ended Sunday with the **election for the mayor** of Moscow, giving the Kremlin's candidate an unconvincing victory and his challenger, the opposition leader Aleksey Navalny, enough votes to convince any observer that Putin's political troubles at home are far from over.

Obama's visit to St. Petersburg was an unexpected gift. It turned out to be the only thing last week



that worked in Putin's favor.

A month ago, when the Russians granted temporary political asylum to Edward Snowden, Obama canceled plans to combine the G20 Summit in St. Petersburg with a separate summit meeting in Moscow with Putin. A U.S./Russian Summit had not been canceled since 1960 when Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev withdrew his invitation to President Dwight Eisenhower to visit Moscow. The Berlin crisis (1961) and the Cuban missile crisis (1962) came in the wake of this chill in relations between Moscow and Washington.

Irony of canceling meeting

Explaining the decision to cancel a Moscow meeting, Obama said there was no point in a meeting "just for the sake of appearances." The irony was that the G20 meeting in St. Petersburg was all about appearances. The media dubbed it the "**Sultry Summit**" and begrudgingly gave the victory to Putin.

Or, perhaps, it is better said that Obama's loss was Putin's gain on the only issue of substance at the G20 Summit. Obama achieved at most tepid support from 10 of the 20 G20 nations for a watered-down resolution that called for "a strong international response" to Syria's use of chemical weapons but left open exactly what such a response would mean.

Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel discretely waited until the day after the meeting to give her support and thus broke the tie. Her delay was a political gesture to distance herself from Obama. Germany had not participated in the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya. Do not expect it to participate in any military intervention in Syria.

Even Pope Francis **tweeted** and wrote a personal letter to Putin supporting his opposition to a military strike in Syria.

What Putin gained at Obama's expense in St. Petersburg was the opportunity to place his views on the Syrian crisis in the context of numerous issues of concerns to members of the European Union. At least on the issue of intervention in Syria, the St. Petersburg Summit was a rare case where the Russian president, not the American, seemed more in touch with European and world opinion.

Before we lapse into a latter day Cold War Russo-phobia, we would do well to listen to Putin's points. Some of his arguments are disingenuous. For example, his refusal to accept the evidence that the Assad regime is responsible for deploying the chemical weapons does not help his credibility. Nevertheless, privately, Putin and his aides express a personal distaste for Syria's Bashar al-Assad. They share the international community's aversion to the use of chemical weapons.

Above all else, Putin's arguments rest on three points: 1) Only the Security Council of the United Nations can authorize the use of force against a sovereign nation. 2) Assad is an odious figure but the most likely alternative, a radical jihadist regime with ties to Al-Qaeda, would be worse. 3) U.S.-led military intervention and sponsored regime change is neither an acceptable nor effective international response to the revolution that is sweeping across the Middle East.

Obama in trouble

On this issue, Obama needs to realize that he is in trouble when Putin, an ex-KGB agent, seems to have the upper edge in winning the minds and hearts of world opinion. No one quibbles over the evil of chemical weapons. Read again Wilfred Owen's "Dulce et Decorum Est," the English poet's horrifying depiction of the German use of gas at the WWI Battle of Ypres in 1914. Most of us, however, are skeptical that a military strike would have any effect on deterring Assad's use of such weapons. An indictment by the International War Crimes Tribunal would serve as a more effective deterrent.

Our media and political debates over intervention in Syria is a war of metaphors. Obama's supporters and critics support their positions with analogies from history. References to the Bush administration's build-up to the Iraq War, the NATO intervention in Bosnia in 1995 and bombing in Kosovo (1999), Reagan's bombing of Libya (1986) and numerous other incidents from the long list of U.S. military intervention since WWII have convinced this historian that the United States has relied too heavily on military solutions to political problems.

Let me suggest metaphor from much further back in history. In 480 BC, the Persian King Xerxes constructed a bridge to cross the Hellespont (today known as the Dardanelles Strait) and invade Greece. A storm raged. The turbulent sea destroyed the bridge and much of Xerxes' prized fleet of ships. An angry Xerxes tried to punish the sea by ordering his soldiers to whip the sea. The soldiers punished the Aegean waters with 300 lashes of their whips.

A military strike to punish Assad's regime in Syria is about as helpful in finding a diplomatic or even military solution to the Syrian crisis as Xerxes's whips on the water were to the punishment of the Aegean Sea.

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