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Syria Expected to Hijack G20 Agenda

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A man passing banners that hang on an embankment near the Neva River in St. Petersburg to promote the upcoming G20 Summit of world leaders. **Alexander Demianchuk**

Amid escalating tensions between the U.S. and Russia over a possible military strike on Syria, the upcoming G20 Summit in St. Petersburg is likely to put the topic of the global economy on the back burner.

More than $60 million were spent to prepare Russia's northern capital to host the event this Thursday and Friday, which will see leaders and heads of treasury agencies from 20 developed and emerging economies gather together for top level negotiations.

Six leaders of guest countries and eight heads of the largest international financial bodies will join them.

As part of the official agenda approved by the Russian delegation, the leaders are expected to discuss such topics as global economy growth, financial stability and financial crisis regulatory reforms.

But as Yury Ushakov, President Vladimir Putin's foreign affairs adviser, told reporters last week, the agenda may be adjusted due to the situation in Syria.

Differences between Russia and Western countries on Syria have erupted after an alleged chemical attack in the Damascus suburb of Eastern Ghouta on Aug. 21 that left hundreds of civilians dead. The U.S. and Europe have said the attack was carried out by the Syrian government, but Russia insists that it was done by Syrian rebels to lure the West into war and derail peace talks.

Calls for military intervention intensified in Europe and the U.S. in the immediate aftermath of the attack, but NATO members, some of whom first said they would support the military action regardless of the UN Security Council decision, said later there was not enough evidence to prove that Syria's President Bashar Assad was behind the attack.

Putin called on the U.S. to use the G20 to discuss the Syria crisis instead of launching a military strike.

"Of course, the G20 is not a formal legal authority. It's not a substitute for the UN Security Council, it can't take decisions on the use of force. But it's a good platform to discuss the problem. Why not take advantage of this?" he said in his first public comment Sunday on a possible military strike on Syria.

Russian politicians seem convinced that Obama will take Putin's advice and use the G20 to prove that a strike on Syria is necessary.

Head of the State Duma's Foreign Affairs Committee Alexei Pushkov said Sunday that Obama will use the G20 to justify a military attack.

"Despite the official agenda, the summit will mostly be about Syria," he wrote on Twitter.

Pushkov's first deputy Vyacheslav Nikonov agreed with that sentiment, saying by phone that Obama would likely use any chance to justify the U.S. position, and the G20 would be no exception.

As for Putin, who found himself as an outsider at the G8 Summit in Northern Ireland over the Syria issue after Russia vetoed a series of UN resolutions, the G20 may prove to offer a more receptive audience.

According to Fyodor Lukyanov, editor-in-chief of Russia in Global Affairs magazine, "Putin's decision to discuss Syria is rather obvious. He will likely appeal to the uncertainty surrounding the decision, since most EU countries have refused to support the attack. So he will raise the question of why the attack is so necessary."

It seems that the question may be considered quite seriously by some G20 member states that hesitated to support an immediate U.S. attack on Syria.

Britain, which was the first country to voice calls for military intervention, had to refuse to participate in the attack after the Labour Party opposed the move.

France's President Francois Hollande, however, said his country would support the attack

despite Britain's decision. France sent a ship to the Mediterranean last week.

On Monday, a report by French intelligence said the chemical attack was launched from an area under the government's control.

The UN chemical weapons team left the alleged site of the attack, where it spent five days working, on Aug. 30 but still hasn't announced the results of its investigation. The results will probably not be able to determine who carried out the attack, however.

Although no bilateral meeting between Obama and Putin is planned at the G20, the leaders will have a chance to speak with each other, Ushakov said, attributing the decision not to hold the meeting to a recent refusal by Obama to visit Moscow ahead of the summit for talks with Putin.

Senior officials from the Obama administration didn't expect a bilateral meeting either.

"This is less a visit to Russia than a trip to the G20, which happens to be hosted by Russia," the officials said, adding that the two presidents would still have plenty of opportunities to engage during the G20 session.

Obama chalked his decision not to visit Moscow up to a lack of progress on a number of issues between the two countries.

Russian analysts didn't see anything surprising in his decision.

"The U.S. and Russia have nothing to talk about, so G20 will not influence U.S.-Russia relations, which currently can be characterized not by hostility but by alienation, and the summit will simply secure this state of bilateral relations," Lukyanov said.

Senior U.S. officials said there was a variety of ongoing conversations, however, and that even though the bilateral summit with Russia had been canceled, the U.S. was prepared to cooperate with Russia pragmatically on issues such as the Northern Distribution Network, Iran's nuclear tests, and the six-party talks on North Korea.

"Russia and the U.S. have had relations that are often marked by both cooperation and contested policies. So this is not new for us," the officials said, adding that it was impossible to predict what the atmosphere between the two leaders would be like during the G20.

Lukyanov said the friction over Syria would probably taint the atmosphere of the entire summit, while Nikonov said the Syria issue might negatively affect the discussion of other unrelated topics.

"Since there are such major contradictions [on Syria], work on other issues can't be fruitful," he said.

Putin will hold a number of bilateral meetings with other leaders during the summit, however, according to Ushakov, including with British Prime Minister David Cameron, who still supports military intervention in Syria.

Putin is also expected to meet with China's President Xi Jinping — Russia's ally on the Syria

issue — with whom he will discuss a number of bilateral and international issues; with Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe to discuss economic cooperation and investment policy; and with South Korean president Park Geun-hye, Spain's Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy, Brazil's president Dilma Rousseff and Singapore's leader Tony Tan.

One of the main events at the summit is a meeting of BRICS member states to discuss the creation of the BRICS Bank of Development.

The bank's structure, its founding members and registered capital of $50 billion were approved in Durban, South Africa in March.

At the G20 meeting, BRICS member states intend to discuss questions of adding new stockholders, increasing the bank's capital and allocating the founders' shares, Ushakov said.

But many say the BRICS discussion might not be confined to economic issues.

"It will be interesting to see if Russia tries to persuade the BRICS countries to condemn the U.S. plan to attack Syria," Lukyanov said.

Other observers are more optimistic about an economic agenda prevailing.

A U.S. administration official said that economic issues would be a top priority.

"I think in St. Petersburg you will see a united focus around the importance of growth and job creation as the overriding priority for all the leaders when it comes to the global economy. G20 members need to boost domestic demand and create jobs. This is our top priority in St. Petersburg," he said.

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said on national TV Sunday that she wanted to see concrete steps taken by G20 leaders in regulating financial markets and fighting tax evasion.

China's Central Bank Vice Governor Yi Gang said he expected the question of how nations might cope as developed economies tighten monetary policy to be a primary focus at the G20 meeting.

In a statement published on the Kremlin's website, Putin said he hoped leaders could agree on a decision on how to encourage investment.

"A road map on long-term investments financing has been formed [during Russia's presidency in G20], and principles for an institutional investor have been approved," he said.

The main aim of the summit, he said, was to improve the quality of people's lives.

Dmitry Travin, an economist and professor at the European University in St. Petersburg, said the summit was unlikely to influence the global economy in any significant way, however.

"As history shows, none of the previous G20 summits led to the creation of real mechanisms that would be able to change any aspect of the global economy," he said.

Ksenia Yudayeva, Russia's G20 Sherpa, told reporters ahead of the summit that the member states would probably take on more practical obligations this year, which would be reflected

in the summit's final declaration.

"The document is currently being approved at the top level, but what we see from interests voiced by leaders is that the wording of the declaration should be more strong and more practical and

specific obligations should be undertaken," she said.

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