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No Russian Retreat at G20

By James Nixey

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The gathering of the Group of 20 Summit in St. Petersburg may be more awkward than usual for President Vladimir Putin. As the buildup to Western intervention in Syria reaches a crescendo, Russia's position differs markedly from many of the other significant powers. The leaders of those Western powers may also feel uncomfortable as they wallow in splendid Russian hospitality. But if Western leaders can find some collective backbone, as U.S. President Barack Obama managed recently when he canceled his one-on-one session with Putin, then they ought to be able to put an unusual degree of pressure on Russia.

This explains Putin's apparent concession on Sept. 4 that Russia would not exclude the possibility of punitive military force against the regime of Syrian President Bashar Assad. Russia has not changed its position on Syria for the past two years, and it is not likely to now. The latest comments were a way to avoid embarrassment ahead at the G20, and they will fool none but those uninitiated in the ways of Russian political machinations.

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There is some irony that both Russia and the West "agree" that military operations in Syria are undesirable. The last thing America and Europe need is to be dragged into another war in the Middle East. The difference is that they have clear principles on intervention. For America, the use of chemical weapons meant a red line was crossed, provoking a possible military response. Russia, for whom sovereignty is absolute, has lacked guiding principles and hitherto objected to intervention no matter what occured in Syria.

This attitude leaves Russia with little room to maneuver when facts on the ground change. The Russian position first denied that chemical weapons were used in Syria, then questioned which side was using them and finally questioned the professionalism of the international investigators. As damning evidence seeps out, Russia's arguments disintegrate. But national pride prevents progress, and even former British Foreign Secretary Lord Owen's suggestion that Russia could be brought on board if it had an integral part in the removal of chemical weapons from Syrian territory seems overly optimistic.

Russia's official position deserves attention, though not so much for its insistence on United Nation's authorization — essentially a self-serving Russian stamp of approval. Russia's argument that military intervention has unpredictable consequences is eminently reasonable but undermined by both an inability to propose an alternative that will save lives and the fact that Russia's shipments of arms to the Assad regime extinguishes them. Russian arms sales constitute less than 5 percent of its gross domestic product, and sales to Syria amount to less than a 10th of that figure, so this is not a question of money.

Instead, this is far more about the familiar but entirely warranted Russian fear that it is losing influence. It is Russia's official position to be "an independent pole in world politics," and it performs this role with bluster, but without conviction.

It needs to be said that Russia is not alone or by any means the worst miscreant of the G20 when it comes to respecting international norms. China and Saudi Arabia, for example, arguably treat their populations with even more casual disdain. But Russia shouts the loudest, which tends to highlight its own shortcomings.

Russia's common tactic is to defend itself by pointing out flaws in the West. Deficient democracy? Look at the U.S. 2000 election. Human rights abuses? I take your Sergei Magnitsky and Pussy Riot complaints and I'll raise you the Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib prisons. No free press? Rupert Murdoch dominates Britain's. Loss of (Soviet) empire pangs? What about Britain again in Gibraltar, the Falklands or Ireland? Friendly with corrupt dictatorships? Two words: Saudi Arabia. It's an easy game to play because it is essentially right. The West does have double standards and makes errors that it is unable or unwilling

to correct. The comparisons are patently absurd. But it is an argument that plays well with the ill-informed or those of a certain political persuasion.

So Russia makes both arguments. It is different because it holds non-Westphalian views, but apparently the same because its domestic and international policies are — to its way of thinking — no less ethical than the West's.

Whether this contradictory stance will stand the test of the G20 — and, more importantly, beyond — depends on a combination of Western solidarity, Russian defense under pressure and events 3,000 kilometers to the south in Syria.

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