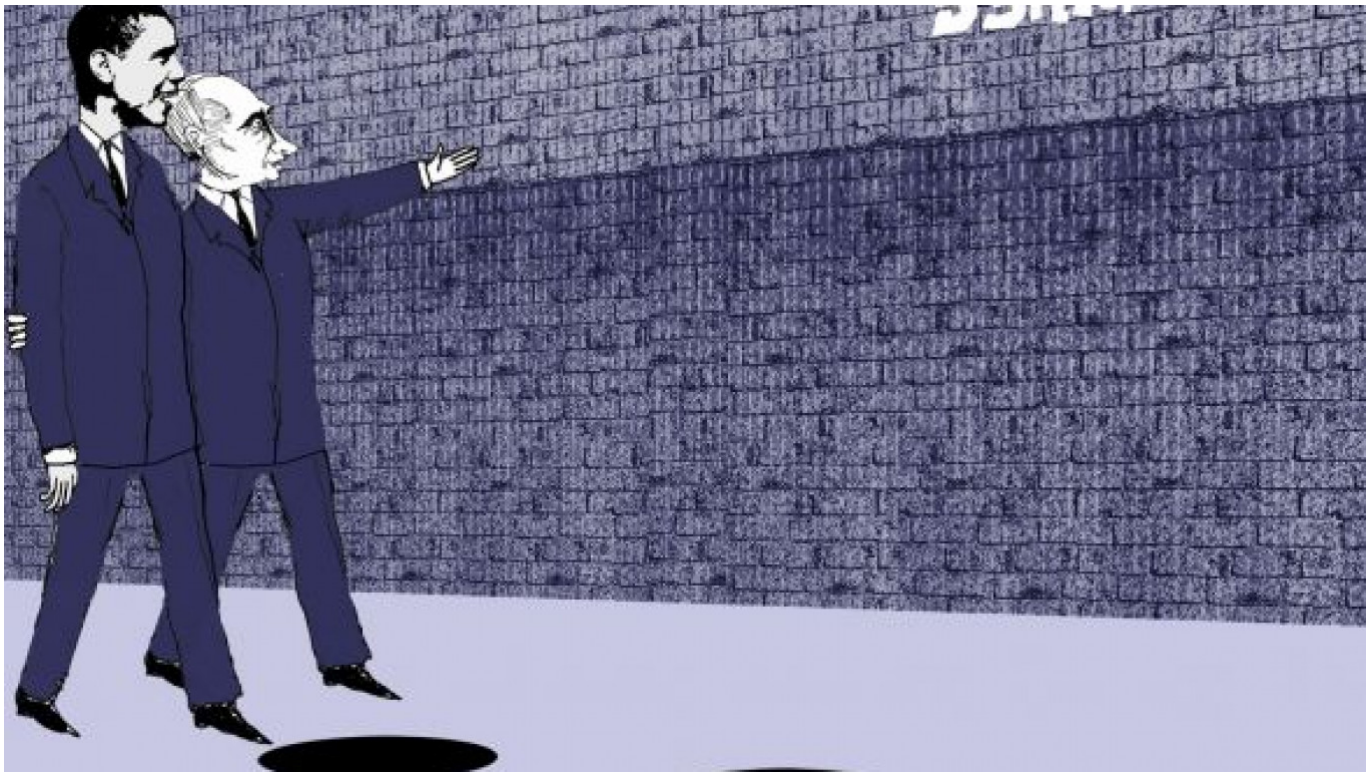
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Obama Falls Right Into Putin's Trap

By Michael Bohm

September 12, 2013



President Vladimir Putin loves to set traps for U.S. President Barack Obama. The only thing Putin loves even more is when Obama falls smack into one.

Trap No. 1. Putin set his latest trap Monday with a seemingly attractive proposal to have international monitors identify and destroy Syrian President Bashar Assad's vast stockpile of chemical weapons.

If Obama falls for this one, he and international monitors will be jumping through hoops for years — first, trying to agree on acceptable language for the United Nations Security Council resolution, and then trying to find the dozens of suspected chemical weapons sites that Assad is hiding or constantly moving around the country. What's more, amid Syria's fierce civil war, inspectors will be constantly dodging bullets as they search for Assad's sites.

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Without a foreign military intervention, Assad will never fully give up his chemical weapons. After all, they are his main trump card against the rebels and nuclear-armed Israel.

Former Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein — who, like Assad, had a huge chemical weapons stockpile and used them on civilians throughout the 1980s and in 1991 — played a similar shell game with the U.S., UN Security Council and weapons inspectors from 1991 to 2003. During those 12 years, Hussein sent inspectors on wild-goose chases as he violated UN resolutions at will. Meanwhile, Russia served as Hussein's chief apologist and "defense lawyer" in the UN — and it is fulfilling the same exact role with Assad.

After Hussein's ruse, is Obama so naive to fall for the same hoax from another brutal Middle East dictator?

Regardless of all of these factors, Putin's Potemkin disarmament idea for Assad's chemical weapons is fundamentally flawed. It is like a judge telling a mass murderer, "OK, you don't have to serve any time in prison as long as you give up your automatic assault rifles." Assad should be punished for committing crimes against humanity in any event, and his chemical weapons sites should be destroyed as a given, not as an alternative to punishment.

Trap No. 2. Putin's second trap for Obama is Russia's strategic obstructionism as a permanent member in the Security Council.

On the surface, Putin is correct when he says only the Security Council can mandate foreign intervention. But there is one extremely important condition to that rule: All members of the Security Council must observe the Responsibility to Protect doctrine, or R2P, to protect civilians from crimes against humanity. By blatantly neglecting the R2P principle, Russia is undermining the foundation of the Security Council, and the UN, to serve as a guarantee of global peace, security and stability.

R2P — which the UN developed in 2005 after the world was silent in the face of the 1994 Rwanda massacre that killed more than 500,000 civilians — has become the international norm to define the collective responsibility of leading nations in cases of crimes against humanity. That responsibility is particularly strong when a tyrant uses chemical weapons, which is a breach of at least three documents: the 1925 Geneva Protocol banning their use and signed by Syria in 1968, Security Council Resolution 1540 and the 1997 Chemical Weapons Convention, signed by 189 countries.

By obstructing the U.S. in the Security Council, Putin makes two huge propaganda scores for domestic audiences. He automatically makes any U.S. military operation in Syria "illegal" and once again turns the U.S. into an "aggressor." Apparently, these objectives are more

important to Putin than stopping civil war crimes. But then again, turning the U.S. into a bogeyman for political gain has always been a priority for Putin since he came to power 13 years ago.

Putin's other disingenuous position is that Assad's regime is the "legitimate Syrian government" and that any U.S. military attack would be a violation of Syria's sovereignty. Putin has a strange understanding of political legitimacy. Syria's pseudo-elections — which have kept both former leader Hafez Assad and his son Bashar in office for 42 years despite the fact that the ruling Alawite regime represents only 11 percent of the population — are about as legitimate as North Korea's.

Putin has an equally strange understanding of Syria's "sovereignty." According to basic UN principles regarding crimes against humanity, no country has the "sovereign right" to kill its own citizens. By committing crimes against humanity, Syria a priori loses all sovereign protection and must answer to the international community under the R2P principle.

Trap No. 3. Putin may be covering his ground by devising a third trap in the event that Obama doesn't fall for his trap with weapons inspectors. While Trap No. 1 was intended to avoid a military invasion, Trap No. 3 may be intended to actually provoke one — something that is still very much on the table, as Obama stressed in his address to the nation Tuesday.

As David Samuels suggested in a Sept. 3 comment in The Tablet magazine, Putin might have implicitly encouraged Assad to use chemical weapons with the objective of driving Obama into a huge foreign policy and military trap.

Although Obama never wanted to get involved militarily in Syria, he gave Putin a golden opportunity to force this option a year ago when Obama made his fateful "red-line" threat to intervene in Syria if Assad used chemical weapons. Putin's objective, the argument goes, was to force Obama's hand by pushing Assad to cross that red line.

Since that red line has now been crossed, Obama will look weak and his credibility as a global leader shattered if he doesn't respond with a forceful missile attack against Assad's military installations. But if Obama does respond, he will step into an even larger trap that will likely entangle the U.S. for years. A U.S. attack will likely provoke a response by Tehran, which considers an attack on Syria as an attack on Iran.

If Iran, together with its close ally Hezbollah, targets a U.S. embassy or carries out some other attack — which it has already threatened to do in the event of an attack on Syria — the U.S. will once again be forced to respond. From there, it is a slippery slope toward a U.S. military quagmire in a messy and bloody regional conflict in the greater Middle East. Obama's "limited military response" could quickly escalate into a decade-long U.S. morass — much like the Vietnam War, but only worse because of the additional factor of Islamic radicalism in the region.

Putin certainly has a lot to gain by drawing the U.S. into a regional war. He can sit back and enjoy the U.S. military failures — as well as the rise in global oil prices — while at the same time endlessly preaching about the global dangers when the U.S. flouts international law and engages in military aggression against sovereign countries.

You have to give Putin credit, though. He is a master of political intrigue and provocation. Perhaps this is why he had such a wide grin when he greeted Obama at the Group of 20 summit last week — a far cry from the bored, irritated slouch three months ago during the Group of 8 meeting in Northern Ireland. But those dog days are over. Now, Putin is experiencing the best days of his 13-year rule.

The only question is why was Obama also smiling when he met Putin in St. Petersburg. Regardless of which trap Obama falls into, the last smile and laugh will be Putin's.

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