The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Final Encounter: Obama and Putin Meet for the Last Time

Anticipating Hillary Clinton's presidency, Vladimir Putin doesn't want to spoil his final chance with Barack Obama.

By Vladimir Frolov

September 02, 2016



Democratic Presidential nominee Hillary Clinton hugs President Barack Obama after joining him on stage during the third day of the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia , July 27, 2016. **J. Scott Applewhite / AP**

Russian President Vladimir Putin heads to the G20 summit in Hangzhou, China, on Sept. 4 to lock in his geopolitical gains in a private meeting with U.S. President Barack Obama before the clock runs out for the Obama administration.

Moscow is traditionally averse to entering into strategic deals with lame-duck U.S. presidents, preferring to open a new page with the new U.S. leader. Thus, when President Bill Clinton made his final visit to Moscow in the summer of 2000 with a sweeping proposal

to modify the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and make deep cuts in strategic nuclear weapons, Putin opted to wait it out, a decision he might have regretted later.

With Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump running on what looks like a Kremlin-sponsored foreign policy platform, Moscow might have even more incentive to procrastinate on serious diplomacy with the outgoing U.S. team. But the opposite is the case. The confluence of acute geopolitical crises, the need to cash in Russia's winning diplomatic chips in Syria and Ukraine, the strategic realignment of the Obama administration's policy in Syria with Moscow's goals and the fear of dealing with of the Clinton administration in 2017 push Moscow to secure last-minute deals with Obama. The hope is to lock in certain political agreements on terms favorable to Russia and thus limit the policy options for the incoming administration.

With Trump trailing badly in the polls, Moscow is bracing itself for a Clinton presidency. Putin has a testy relationship with Clinton, who has always been more skeptical of Obama's "reset" with Russia, taking a darker view of Putin's intentions. Her public comments on Putin ("he has no soul" in 2008, or comparing him to Hitler in 2014) have not endeared her to the Kremlin ruler who once tried to impress her with personal tales of his family surviving the siege of Leningrad during World War II. The ultimate offense, in Putin's view, was Clinton's 2011 OSCE statement on the "undemocratic nature" of Russia's parliamentary elections that were followed by mass protests in Moscow.

Now Moscow views the future Clinton administration with poorly concealed dismay. The Kremlin expects her to be much more forceful in pushing back Russia's attempts to challenge and disrupt the U.S.-led world order and more willing to deploy military forces to advance U.S. interests and democratic regime change in Russia's neighborhood.

It is unclear whether this perception is true — Clinton has not expounded on her Russia policy choices other than challenging Trump's overly Putin-friendly views. She said that Putin appreciates "toughness and resolve" and pledged to push back against the Russian leader. But what specifically that means on issues like Syria, Ukraine and European security, she and her team have not spelled out. The Russian state media, in gross disregard for Russia's foreign policy interests, is running a character assassination campaign against Clinton, mouthing the most absurd and debunked conspiracy theories about her. Together with allegations of Russian hacking of the Democratic National Convention (DNC) emails and even voter registration systems in some states, this seems to be crudely designed to tell Clinton that Russia is not to be messed with.

For Putin, the G20 meeting with Obama is perhaps the last opportunity to personally clinch a deal on Syria and to advance Russia's vision for the Minsk-2 settlement with Ukraine. The Kremlin believes the Obama administration is eager to settle Ukraine and significantly advance on Syria before its time runs out. Moscow is making a last-ditch effort to negotiate directly with the West over the terms of the settlement that Ukraine needs to be pushed to implement, but its proposal for a trilateral meeting on the sidelines of the G20 with French and German leaders, instead of the Normandy Four format that includes Ukraine, fizzled out.

Thus, the meeting with Obama is considered crucial in pushing Kiev to accept Russia's

demands for a federal state with the Donbass separatists. It is unclear whether Moscow is prepared to push for this by leveraging its cooperation in Syria or whether Obama would even be prepared to accept implicit linkages between the two issues.

On Syria, the United States has moved closer to the Russian position of keeping Syrian President Bashar Assad in power for the transitional period, provided Russia forces the regime to stop the indiscriminate bombings. But Moscow is still pushing against Washington demands for a virtual veto over Syria and Russia's air operations in a deal that otherwise would grant Moscow's wishes for a military alliance with Washington to combat terrorism.

Obama will probably use the encounter with Putin to warn the Russian leader of the imminent U.S. response to Russian cyber operations in the United States that go beyond legitimate intelligence collection.

It's a full plate for their last meeting, but still a chance to make history.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/09/02/the-final-encounter-obama-and-putin-to-meet-at-g20-summit-a55180