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Big 20 to Big Game: Power Politics Are Returning, Which Suits Russia

By Fyodor Lukyanov

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State leaders take part in a group photo session for the G20 Summit held at the Hangzhou International Expo Center in Hangzhou in eastern China's Zhejiang province, Sept. 4, 2016. **Ng Han Guan / AP**

The G20 meeting in China was a milestone in international relations. Until only recently, world leaders were certain that the global economy and increased connectivity had helped stabilize and define the new world order. Now, however, the pendulum has turned back towards a classic game between the great powers, and Russia is again feeling right in its element.

Two years ago, when arriving at the G20 summit in Brisbane, Australia, President Vladimir Putin was met at the airport by a low-level clerk from the local Foreign Affairs Ministry. Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbot publicly promised to grab the Russian president by his lapels and throw him to the floor. While shaking Putin's hand during a formal greeting, then-Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper told him to "Get out of Ukraine."

Commentators gloated over a photo of Putin sitting at an empty lunch table. In the end, the Putin cited urgent business back in Moscow and left the meeting before the official closing.

This year's meeting in China's Hangzhou has demonstrated that the key players have not forgotten about the Ukrainian crisis, but are concerned about other things. This time, the controversy concerned not Putin, but U.S. President Barack Obama, who was forced to disembark from the rear exit of Air Force One after the Chinese failed to provide a rolling staircase to the main door.

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte called Obama a "son of a wh*re," and then, after learning that the U.S. president had cancelled their scheduled meeting, became frightened and began apologizing.

Putin was very much in demand. This was primarily due to the Middle East, where another turning point is approaching. But that is not the only reason. The global focus is shifting — not only geographically, but also in terms of content.

The Group of 20 was originally created as an economic forum, first at the ministerial level, as a response to the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s, and later at the level of heads of state, in the middle of the global economic panic of 2008. The role of global "Politburo" went to the G8 — a venue that also began with an economic focus before switching to politics once Russia joined.

With the world changing so rapidly, it made little sense to discuss anything within the framework of a club in which Russia was the only non-Western power. At the very least, such discussions should include China, and preferably, a range of countries prepared to play a role in world affairs.

As a result, every year the agenda of the G20 becomes more politicized and economic issues take on an increasingly formal importance. Although China announced that the official theme of this year's summit would be innovations and their role in economic growth, speakers addressed almost every subject but innovation — halts in oil production, the consequences of Brexit, the crisis in Aleppo and territorial conflicts connected with China.

This is perfectly natural. Since the start of the financial crisis in the late 2000s, the division between politics and the economy has vanished, with politics gaining the upper hand. That process began when governments started "nationalizing losses" by using taxpayer money to bail out private banking institutions. That changed the balance of power between corporations and governments in favor of the latter. The growing chaos in the Middle East and the related terrorist threat in Europe made security a priority, and the Ukrainian and Syrian crises have spawned a new rivalry between the major powers. What is most surprising is that China has become involved, despite previous careful avoidance.

The actual results of this G20 summit will become apparent later. Did Putin and Obama "reach an understanding of each other and the problem we face" in Syria, as the Russian president said? Are Moscow, Washington, Ankara and Riyadh making progress toward engineering a new Syria based on the de facto division of the spheres of influence there? Will Moscow and Tokyo compromise on territorial issues? Is China ready to switch from interdependence with the United States to political competition? How can all sides

extricate themselves the Minsk process with minimal loss of face?

Now, 25 years after the curtain had seemingly fallen for the last time on the struggle between the world's major powers, that drama has returned to center stage.

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