

# Obama cancels summit, escalates tensions with Russia

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The US decision to cancel a planned summit between President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin is a major escalation of US pressure on Russia and a ratcheting up of tensions between the two nuclear-armed countries. It is the first time since the end of the Cold War that the US has canceled a publicly announced presidential meeting with leaders in Russia.

The immediate issue behind the move is the decision by the Russian government to grant temporary asylum to whistleblower Edward Snowden. There are, however, broader geostrategic issues at stake. Among the factors cited by the White House as driving the decision are “missile defense and arms control,” “trade and commercial relations,” and “global security issues”—a reference to divisions over US policy toward Syria and Iran.

An editorial in the *New York Times* published Wednesday morning, just before the announcement (“What’s the Point of a Summit?”), calls for canceling the summit. In the editorial, the newspaper lines up squarely behind Washington’s vendetta against Snowden and in support of the police-state spying apparatus that the former National Security Agency contractor has exposed. With this editorial statement, the *Times* provides yet another demonstration of the integration of the media into the military/intelligence apparatus.

At the same time, the editorial expresses a growing consensus within the American foreign policy establishment that Russia is an obstacle to major US objectives around the world and a more confrontational posture is necessary.

The *Times* begins by bitterly denouncing Putin’s “provocative” decision to “stick a thumb in Mr. Obama’s eye” by rejecting Washington’s demand that

he extradite Snowden, and instead abiding by international laws recognizing the right to political asylum.

The newspaper cavalierly dismisses Snowden’s claim to qualify for asylum, writing that “asylum is for people who are afraid to return to their own country because they fear persecution, unlawful imprisonment or even death because of their race, their religion...or their political beliefs.”

The *Times* writes as if there were no such thing in America as indefinite detention without trial, force-feeding and other forms of torture at Guantanamo, drone assassinations, or show trials and frame-ups of political dissidents. This whitewash of political repression comes a week after Private Bradley Manning was convicted on espionage charges carrying a possible life sentence for the “crime” of exposing US atrocities and war crimes in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The newspaper offers no opinion on the massive violation of constitutional and democratic rights involved in the sweeping and secret surveillance programs exposed by Snowden, which involve the monitoring of every phone call, email and Internet communication. This silence, combined with backing for the prosecution of Snowden, signifies support for these programs and the agencies that carry them out.

Beyond Snowden, the *Times* writes: “The bigger problem is that the partnership that Mr. Obama sought to build with Russia is seriously broken,” citing Russian positions on Syria, missile defense and reductions in nuclear weapons.

When he first came to power, Obama called for a “reset” of US-Russia relations, seeking to utilize Russia’s services in the war against Afghanistan and other imperialist operations. Putin himself has been more than willing to collaborate with the United States,

including in dealing with Snowden, who has been instructed to stop all political activity as a condition for his stay in Russia.

The calls for a “reset” followed the invasion of South Ossetia by Georgia in 2008—backed by the Bush administration—which nearly led to a direct military conflict between Washington and Moscow.

Following Russia’s decision to grant Snowden asylum last week, top officials of both political parties called for the US to “rethink our relationship with Putin’s Russia,” in the words of Republican Senator John McCain.

The decision to cancel the summit comes as the US is preparing to step up its intervention in Syria, a principal ally of Russia. Last month, the Pentagon revealed that it is considering several different plans, including setting up a “no-fly zone,” which would be aimed at destroying Syria’s air force. Last month, the House and Senate intelligence panels voted to directly arm the main opposition forces involved in the US-promoted war for regime-change.

The US is also moving forward in the construction of a missile defense system in Eastern Europe, which would be directed principally against Russia and Moscow’s influence in the region.

Last month, following joint naval exercises by Russia and China (coinciding with joint US-Japanese air drills), a column in the *Times* by Leslie Gelb and Dimitri Simes, both major figures in US strategy circles, complained that Russia and China, “to better advance their own interests,” were seeking to “knock Washington down a peg or two.”

None of this is acceptable to the United States, which is pursuing a “pivot to Asia” to isolate and weaken China at the same time that it seeks to maintain a dominant position in the Middle East and Central Asia. There are now clear signs that the Obama administration, frustrated by its inability to this point to dislodge Syrian President Assad and install a direct US client regime, is preparing a military escalation in the Middle East.

The shutting down of US embassies throughout the Middle East and North Africa as part of a global terror alert is a cynical attempt to justify the illegal spying programs and counter growing opposition within the United States and internationally to the attack on democratic rights.

It is, at the same time, an ominous warning—part of the “chatter” from Washington indicating that something major is being planned. The threat of a terror attack—or an actual attack if one is carried out—would provide the Obama administration with the pretext for intensifying its operations not only against Yemen, which is already the target of a fresh wave of deadly drone strikes, but also against Syria and Iran. Any such action could quickly involve a direct confrontation with Russia and China and potentially trigger a wider war with catastrophic consequences.

It is within this context that the canceled summit with Putin must be understood.



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