

Obama, Putin to meet at UN talks on Syria, Ukraine

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US President Barack Obama will meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin during next week's session of the United Nations General Assembly, the White House announced Thursday.

The meeting will mark the first time the two leaders have spoken directly since 2013, when the Obama administration suddenly cancelled discussions with Putin in response to Russia's decision to grant temporary asylum to ex-US National Security Agency whistleblower Edward Snowden. High-level talks between the two governments were subsequently frozen indefinitely by the US in retaliation for the integration of Crimea into Russia in the wake of the US-backed and fascist-spearheaded coup in Ukraine.

US officials have sought to present the talks as a response to "desperate" pleas from the Putin government. According to White House spokesman Josh Earnest, Obama agreed to the meeting after repeated requests from Putin, concluding that "it was worth it at this point to engage with President Putin in a face-to-face meeting to see if the interests of the United States could be advanced."

"Given the situations in Ukraine and Syria, despite our profound differences with Moscow, the president believes that it would be irresponsible not to test whether we can make progress through high-level engagement with the Russians," an unnamed Obama administration official told *Politico*.

Obama plans to "test Putin's intentions" in relation to Russian military deployments in Syria during their discussions, White House officials said.

This face-saving presentation of the planned talks is intended to conceal the fact that US policy in Syria is in shambles, and that the debacle has reached such depths that leading sections of the American state are considering a climbdown from previous demands for

the complete liquidation of the Assad regime.

As part of diplomatic overtures to Moscow earlier this week, US Secretary of State John Kerry sought to downplay the possibility of clashes between US and Russian forces inside Syria and scale back US rhetoric against Putin and Assad.

Kerry claimed that the positioning of combat aircraft by Russia inside the country was only for force protection. "For the moment, it is the judgment of our military and experts that the level and type represents basically force protection," Kerry said Tuesday.

Kerry's remarks stand in contrast to Obama's strident denunciations earlier this month of Russian operations in Syria as "doomed to failure." They come days after the renewal of military-to-military talks between US and Russian military officials following more than a year of a US-enforced diplomatic freeze and crushing economic sanctions.

Washington's probing of a possible political deal with Moscow comes amid conflicting and contested reports about deployments of Russian military assets inside Syria. Reports suggest that Moscow is deploying unconfirmed quantities of armor, artillery, infantry and combat aircraft to bases inside Syria, including at least four SU-27 jets and two Mi-24 helicopter gunships.

The US military-intelligence establishment and sections of the media have begun seizing on the Russian deployments as the basis for a stepped-up propaganda campaign against the governments of Assad and Putin.

A flurry of unsubstantiated reports based solely on paraphrased comments from unnamed US military sources have been circulating within both major news outlets and online media claiming that Russia has formed a joint military planning cell with Iran and the Assad government and is preparing to deploy thousands

of ground troops.

The true scale of Russia's military presence and future footprint remains unclear. What is evident is that the reopening of diplomatic channels does not foreclose the possibility of a further escalation by the US aimed at toppling the Assad government and confronting Russian forces in Syria.

Sections of the US ruling elite remain implacably hostile to any deal with Assad, Russia's most important regional ally, whose removal has been the overriding US goal from its initial backing of anti-Assad Islamist militias through to the present war against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

The turn by the White House to negotiations has cut across the agenda of sections of the political establishment and the military and intelligence apparatus, prompting increasingly extreme proposals for finishing off Assad. In remarks that exposed the fraud of the "global war on terror," former US General David Petraeus recently suggested that the US might bolster its position on the ground by recruiting sections of Al Qaeda's branch in Syria, the al-Nusra Front, to serve as US proxies against the Assad government.

"It might be possible at some point to peel off so-called 'reconcilables' who would be willing to renounce Nusra and align with the moderate opposition... to fight against Nusra, ISIL and Assad," Petraeus said during an interview with CNN.

This week, in testimony before a Senate committee, Petraeus attacked the Obama administration's Syria policy and called for Washington to escalate its military intervention, establishing a so-called "safe haven" within the country as a base for US-backed "rebels" to topple Assad.

Other media voices have called for Assad's overthrow and replacement with a neocolonial confederation of mini-states controlled by various US-backed sectarian militias.

In a syndicated column this week, "An ally poised to strike the Islamic State," *Washington Post* pundit David Ignatius promoted a force of some 25,000 "battle-hardened" Kurdish militants affiliated with the People's Protection Units (YPG) as the ideal candidate to serve as the latest US proxy army.

Ignatius argued that the Kurdish fighters are "ready to roll" against areas of Syria now controlled by Islamic State. Washington should airdrop some 100 pallets of

military hardware, already pre-positioned at US facilities in the Persian Gulf, to support the YPG fighters, Ignatius urged. These supplies would enable the YPG to assault the de facto ISIS capital at Raqqa, Syria.

Such a battle plan is already the subject of active discussions between YPG leaders and US commanders, and would involve close air support from US planes and drones, Ignatius wrote.

Whatever the course of the Obama-Putin talks, Washington is preparing to escalate the US-NATO military buildup in Eastern Europe, which poses the threat of military conflict with nuclear-armed Russia and a new world war. Upcoming US-NATO Trident Juncture 2015 war games, reportedly the largest ever held by NATO since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, are aimed at preparing Western forces to engage in hybrid warfare operations in the Baltic region and beyond.

"For the first time since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US Department of Defense is reviewing and updating its contingency plans for armed conflict with Russia," Julia Ioffe wrote in an article for *Foreign Policy* magazine last week, entitled "The Pentagon is Preparing New War Plans for a Baltic Battle Against Russia."

Washington further signaled its determination to enhance US military power along Russia's Central Asian underbelly this week, with Pentagon officials indicating Thursday that the US military will maintain a much larger occupation force in Afghanistan than previously acknowledged. As many as 10,000 US ground forces will continue to occupy Afghanistan through 2016, US officials said.



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