

Obama-Putin meeting highlights crisis of US policy in Syria

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The 90-minute meeting Monday between US President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin has brought to the fore the acute crisis of US policy in Syria and the broader Middle East. The very fact that the White House offered to meet with the Russian leader in pursuit of a political settlement in Syria, breaking its two year freeze on such contacts, testified to the debacle Washington has suffered in its bloody, four year war for regime change in that devastated country.

The meeting followed dueling speeches before the 70th annual United Nations General Assembly. In his speech, Obama attempted to portray Washington's wars of aggression and military interventions in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and elsewhere as efforts to uphold international law and promote peaceful diplomacy. Citing Russia's actions in Ukraine and its support for the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, he cast the Putin government as an international outlaw and threat to world peace.

For his part, Putin pointed to the catastrophic consequences of Washington's wars for regime-change, which had turned one country after another into a haven for Islamist terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State of Syria and Iraq (ISIS, alternatively known as ISIL). He defended the Assad regime as a bulwark against ISIS and proposed a new coalition to fight ISIS that would include Iran and Syria as well as the Western powers and their Middle Eastern allies.

The contradictions and general disarray wracking US policy were reflected in the fact that having excoriated Russia, Obama turned around later in his speech and declared his readiness to negotiate with both Russia and Iran, Assad's two main allies, over the fate of Syria. Articulating a tactical shift in his administration's policy, Obama indicated that, while any settlement had to include the departure of Assad, the current president could remain in power during an unspecified transitional period, and elements of the Baathist regime could be included in the eventual successor government.

It is no secret that this shift in policy reflects a general weakening of the US position in the region. A series of recent events have underscored the failure of the US-led war against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, now more than a year old, to significantly weaken the organization in either country. Last

week, it was announced that the top US officer in the anti-ISIS campaign, Gen. John Allen, would soon resign his post. This followed congressional testimony by Gen. Lloyd Austin, the head of US Central Command, in which the general admitted that a year after it was launched at a cost of \$500 million, the Pentagon's program to recruit and train a non-Islamist US proxy fighting force in Syria had been able to field a grand total of "four or five" soldiers inside the country.

Of the forces thus far trained by the US, some were wiped out by the Al Qaeda-linked al-Nusra Front as soon as they entered Syria, others defected to anti-Assad Islamist militias, and still others turned over their weapons in exchange for safe passage.

Russia has strengthened its position in Syria by expanding its military support for Assad, reportedly setting up a new air base in northwestern Syria, the traditional stronghold of Assad's Alawite Shiite regime, a development Washington has been unable to block. And on the eve of Obama's speech to the UN, the US-backed Iraqi government announced that it had signed an intelligence-sharing agreement with Syria, Iran and Russia, evidently without the prior knowledge of the US government. An Iraqi government official said Monday that Baghdad would welcome Russian surveillance flights over the country.

While no agreement was reached in the talks between Obama and Putin on the key issue of Assad's future, and no concrete details of the discussion were released by either side, both governments sought to portray the meeting as a positive step. US Secretary of State John Kerry told the MSNBC "Morning Joe" program on Tuesday that the meeting was "generally productive."

Calling US critics of Obama's Syria policy "dead wrong," Kerry said the two presidents had agreed on "fundamental principles," including the need for a unified and secular Syria, a "managed transition" of government power, and the defeat of ISIS. He indicated Washington was prepared to offer Russia incentives to pressure Assad to stop dropping "barrel bombs" on US-backed "rebels." Press commentaries suggested the incentives might include some scaling back of onerous sanctions imposed by the US on Russia in retaliation for its support for pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Suggesting that serious negotiations are underway for a political settlement that would involve the easing of Assad out

of power, the *New York Times* reported Tuesday: “There are intense discussions underway on how long that transitional period should be and how many in Mr. Assad’s close circle would have to go, several United Nations Security Council diplomats said.”

The twists and turns of US policy in the Middle East reflect massive contradictions between Washington’s actions from one targeted country to the next and fierce divisions within the US foreign policy and military-intelligence establishment over the general course being pursued. None of these contradictions are explained to the American people, and no accounting is given for the catastrophes inflicted on the peoples of the region or the manifest failure of US actions to achieve their stated aims.

Instead, the US ruling elite moves from one war to the next, any temporary pullback merely a brief pause before the next eruption of military violence. The same can be said for any agreement that might be reached between the US, Russia and Iran over Syria.

The US-instigated sectarian civil war in Syria, engineered as part of a broader plan to deprive Iran of its sole Arab ally in preparation for a possible war for regime change against Tehran, has to date resulted in some 300,000 deaths and turned 11 million Syrians, nearly half of the country’s pre-2011 population, into refugees. The flood of refugees from US-led military operations in Syria, Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan and other countries has created a massive crisis in Europe, exacerbating internal tensions and exposing the brutal face of European capitalism. The refugee crisis is a major factor in the German government’s open dissent from US policy in Syria and promotion of Russia’s call for a broadly based political settlement. Last week, German Chancellor Angela Merkel called for such talks to include Assad himself.

The logic of the US wars in the Middle East—motivated by a naked drive for control over the region’s energy resources, geo-strategic advantage against America’s international rivals and global hegemony—leads inevitably to war against Russia and China, two nuclear powers.

There are contradictions within contradictions. Yesterday’s demon Putin is suddenly today’s potential partner for peace. Essentially the same jihadist terrorist forces that constitute ISIS were financed and armed by the CIA, Washington’s Sunni Gulf allies (Saudi Arabia, Qatar) and Turkey to serve as proxy forces in the overthrow and murder of the secular Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, as well as in the war for regime change against the secular regime in Syria. Iran, yesterday’s evil empire, is today a potential asset of US imperialism in the region. The US is backing a Shiite sectarian regime in Iraq that is aligned with Iran, even as it collaborates with Sunni Saudi Arabia in waging war in Yemen and the effort to topple the Shiite Assad regime in Syria.

None of this is discussed either by the US government or the media with a population that is overwhelmingly opposed to all

of these dirty wars. The constants of US policy are the murderous methods employed against defenseless populations and the predatory character of the war aims.

At the same time, the Obama administration is besieged by substantial sections of the political and security establishment that are unwaveringly committed to war against Iran and also Russia. These factions are implacably opposed to the nuclear deal, or any other agreement, with Iran, and view talks with Russia as verging on treason. There is little doubt that such divisions are reflected as well within the administration.

On Monday, Republican Senator and former presidential candidate John McCain issued a statement calling Obama’s decision to meet with Putin “as misguided as it is unnecessary.” He continued, “It plays right into Putin’s hands by breaking his international isolation, undermining US policy and legitimizing Putin’s destabilizing behavior—from dismembering Ukraine to propping up Bashar Assad in Syria.”

The *Wall Street Journal* editorialized on Tuesday: “Even as he concedes the growing world disorder, Mr. Obama still won’t admit that his policy of American retreat has created a vacuum for rogues to fill.”

Last week, the former commander in Iraq and ex-CIA director, David Petraeus, appeared before Congress to denounce the administration’s policy in Syria. He called for the creation of “safe havens” in Syria to be policed by US planes and troops and urged the American military to stop the Assad regime from dropping barrel bombs by destroying its air force and air strips—a proposal that would almost inevitably involve bombing Russian forces and facilities in the country.

Such demands are being raised not only by Republican-aligned elements. Writing Monday for the Democratic-linked Brookings Institution, Charles Lister, in a piece entitled “The West is walking into the abyss on Syria,” declared: “Unfortunately, Russia’s intervention comes as US policy on Syria has fallen to an all-time low... To label the mission a catastrophic failure would be a generous assessment.”

The mounting danger of a military confrontation with Russia was reflected in a chilling speech given Monday by NATO’s top commander, Gen. Phillip Breedlove, to the German Marshall Fund. Warning that Russia was creating a “no-go zone bubble” in northwestern Syria, the NATO commander said, “These very sophisticated air defense capabilities are not about ISIL.” NATO, he declared, had to “contest that [such no-go bubbles] are not forbidden spaces,” which meant investing in forces that could “break the bubble.”



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