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Putin opens Benghazi door for Obama

By M K Bhadrakumar

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At a time when the United States-Russia "reset" lies in limbo, it should come as no surprise that President Vladimir Putin has made one of the most important statements of his four-month-old presidency, drawing attention to the commonality of interests between the two major world powers and indeed between Russia and the West on one of the hottest issues of current world politics - the Middle Eastern question.

Putin's statement on Thursday came in the nature of his reaction to the terrorist attack on the US consulate in Benghazi, Libya, and the killing of the American ambassador. Without doubt, it was a structured statement - albeit couched as *ex tempore* remarks to the media - that amounts to a dramatic call for Russia and the West to jointly mould the Arab Spring in the right direction.

The Kremlin statement stands apart from harsh Chinese comments, which have been more in the nature of critical finger-pointing and "I-told-you-so" homilies. To be sure, Moscow sees a window of opportunity to bridge the dangerous hiatus that has appeared in the respective positions of Russia and the West over such contentious issues as Syria and Afghanistan - and Iran.

Putin spoke at some length. He "condemned" the Libyan attack in exceptionally strong terms, calling it a "terrible crime" that lies "outside modern civilization". The vehemence of the condemnation made it clear that Moscow will not strive to take advantage of the US' predicament in Libya, although the two countries have profound differences over the NATO's intervention in that country.

Interestingly, Putin completely ignored the ground reality that it was only the Western intervention that spawned the radical Islamist groups in Libya, which have now come to hit at US interests. Obviously, Moscow estimates that this tragic moment is inopportune to say harsh things or even aim subtle barbs.

'We're all Americans'

Putin then went on to speak at length about the "many differences of opinion" that Moscow has had in the recent years with Washington over the "ways of resolving problems in troubled countries." He said Russia too shares with the US the principles of democracy and freedom and would agree with the US that there is a deficit of democracy in "numerous political regimes".

But the difference lies in the respective Russian and US approaches to creating a better world. Moscow believes that these problems need to be solved through peaceful negotiations so that the authoritarian regimes can evolve in a positive direction that ensures social harmony at the level of faiths, religions and ethnicity. Admittedly, this may be a "difficult, painstaking process that requires patience and professionalism", but there is no real alternative.

The nearest that Putin came to obliquely touch on the Syrian crisis was when he said Moscow cannot support the alternative course of regime change through force and external intervention. If armed groups labeled as "freedom fighters" are supported from the outside, "an absolute deadlock" may result and the "region could descend into chaos, which indeed, is what is already happening".

Putin also had an indirect message for Egypt. Without mentioning President Mohammed Morsi by name, Putin underscored that leaders like Morsi who led the successor regimes bore "personal responsibility" for "what is happening". Putin seemed to echo the sense of disquiet in Washington that Morsi took well over 24 hours to make his first reaction - and that too, via Facebook - on the mob attacks on the American embassy in Cairo.

In historical terms, Putin has once again stood up and is allowing himself to be counted as a friend - and potential ally - of the US at a time of distress and emotional trauma in Washington. The previous such occasion was 11 years ago in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington. This trains the searchlight once again on Putin's political agenda, which is to integrate Russia with the West but as an equal partner with mutual respect and acknowledging its legitimate interests as a great power - and the failure of successive US administrations to recognize the *raison d'être* of the Russian leader's policies.

In fact, Putin summed up Thursday's statement in a spirit of total solidarity with President Barack Obama:

I really expect that this tragedy - this certainly is a tragedy, one that, I want to stress, concerns all of us, as we and our Western partners, including US partners, are combating terrorism together - I really expect that this tragedy will motivate us all to intensify our joint - I should emphasize the word joint - struggle against terrorism and terrorist threats.

Clearly, Moscow has put out an important signal to the Western world and to Obama in particular. What needs to be noted is that Putin has certainly factored in the attack on Obama by his Republican opponent Mitt Romney over the crisis of the Benghazi incident and has desisted from any sort of direct criticism of US policies in the Middle East.

Putin's statement naturally becomes the final word on the Russian position on the issue of the setback to the US in the Middle East, no matter what the media organs in Moscow may say. Equally, the salience that cannot escape attention is that Moscow has taken a strikingly different approach in comparison with the reaction from Beijing on the Libyan terrorist attack.

The Chinese foreign ministry has given a formal reaction expressing shock and condemnation of the "violent deeds" and underscoring the imperative to observe the norms of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations. It was brief, crisply worded and very correct but devoid of any empathy.

A new stakeholder ...

On the other hand, the leading Chinese dailies opened a virtual broadside on the US policies in the Middle East, holding them responsible for the tragedy on Monday. A signed article in the Global Times said:

The assassination of the ambassador and his colleagues underscores the bankruptcy of US foreign policy in the region. Washington's policy of regime change in the region may well lead to an "Arab Winter" ... and the so-called pivot to Asia may stumble in the Middle East quagmire.

Looking at the overall situation in the Middle East and North Africa, it is becoming clear that the political trend is Islamist rather than secular ... There are sharp contradictions in Washington's Middle East policy. The policy of regime change in Syria aligned the US with extremist Salafist and Wahhabi political and terrorist groups in the region ... Some of these groups have links with Al Qaeda.

Calm and searching reflection are [sic] needed by Washington on its Middle East policy ... Americans are reaping the tragic whirlwind and it is time for a serious and searching reappraisal agonizing as it may be.

In another commentary, Global Times pointed out:

Arabs demand the US respect their culture. But the cannon-loaded warships will not serve that purpose. ... US warships can only generate more hatred from the Islamic world ... Americans hold a deep sense of cultural superiority. They see many other cultures as being marginal with an exotic value. If other cultures stand against the West, they would be labeled as bizarre and harmful.

Islamic culture is sensitive due to its relatively disadvantageous position in the world. The world should respect their sentiments ... Provocations against the Islamic faith have occurred repeatedly in the West ... Americans must sincerely learn about other cultures. They should be able to find the merits of other cultures, which have helped many emerging countries develop rapidly ... Many people in the world are restraining their discontent toward the US. Washington also needs to exercise restraint to better communicate with other parts of the world.

The Chinese reaction is partly at least motivated by its growing anger at the US' containment strategy in the Asia-Pacific. Having said that, the stunning geopolitical reality is also that China is steadily becoming a stakeholder in the epochal changes taking place in the Middle East, including the region's steady gravitation toward Islamism as the dominant ideology.

The dramatic choice made by Morsi to make first state visit to China brought out that Beijing is meeting with success in positioning itself on the "right side of history". The Chinese oil companies are gaining a presence in Iraq's oil industry; China is mulling over the prospects for making investments in Egypt (BP has just announced a US\$10 billion investment to exploit Egypt's gas reserves); China has wide-ranging relations with the Persian Gulf countries (both the Gulf Cooperation Council states and Iran). Even the relations with Israel and Turkey are on upward swing.

... and a status quo-ist

The competitive tone of the Chinese criticism of the US' Middle East policies stands out. Russian regional policies, on the other hand, are struggling uphill. Russia has to clear the backlog of ties with the Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt; its ties with Iran are complex and inchoate and would have to disentangle forever from a painful past history; contradictions exist in Russia-Israel ties (especially with Israel's thrusts against Russian interests in the Caucasus and the Caspian and Russia's alliance with Syria); its ties with the Gulf Cooperation Council states, especially Saudi Arabia, are in doldrums. Suffice to say, Russia is far from engaged in a competition with the US for creating a "level playing field" for the future expansion of its regional influence in the Middle East.

Russia's concerns are principally as a status quo power. The Middle Eastern revolutions do not suit Russian interests, even if they may, arguably, lead to further weakening of the US' regional influence. The Russian frustration is that the US does not realize that in actuality in a long-term perspective the two countries could have shared interests and concerns in the Middle East.

Again, by no means can Russia view the rise of Islamism with the same equanimity with which China is apparently addressing the historical processes in the Middle East. Russia's "soft underbelly" lies adjacent to the Middle East and is highly vulnerable to the winds of radical Islamism.

Also, China is willing to see the rise of Islamism in countries such as Egypt in a broader cultural context of Arabism imbued with "anti-Western sentiment" (to quote Global Times), which could even provide a conducive setting for the future expansion of its influence in the Middle East.

Of course, both Russia and China abhor the ascendancy of the Salafist fighters in the volatile situation in Libya or Syria. Both resent Western intervention to force "regime change" in Middle East countries. And for both, the sovereignty of independent states and the observance of international law and respect for the territorial integrity become sacrosanct principles that are intertwined with their national interests.

But what ultimately differentiates Putin's reaction from the Chinese comments is that Moscow is

probing for new thinking in Washington. Moscow would visualize that the Obama administration has received a traumatic shock in the past 72 hours and that may prompt a rethink if not a hard appraisal of US policies. Specifically, in the current situation, Moscow would hope for a new US approach on the Syrian crisis, where Russia has high stakes.

The Obama administration's policy on Syria is highly calibrated, stopping short of intervention but relentlessly creating the momentum for regime change in Damascus. Moscow would seek a fundamental course correction on the part of the Obama administration. Moscow expects that Washington would sit up, finally, and begin to comprehend that if Syria unravels, it will be manifold more catastrophic than what the Libyan "revolution" turned out to be in its aftermath.

It is this expectation that Putin's statement has sought to convey to Obama. The statement is intended as a signal to Obama at a moment when he is most receptive to fresh thinking on the Middle East question. It signals that if a window of opportunity arises for Russia to work together with the US on a political transformation in Syria, that would open up a new vista of possibilities in the UN Security Council, and, in turn, even the flame of the Russia-US "reset" may begin to shine again.

The big question is whether the Obama administration will see things that way. In 2001, George W Bush took Putin's support and then forgot about it for the next seven years.