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## The US-Russian Cold-Shoulder War

by Robert E. Hunter

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The cancelling of a projected summit meeting next month with Russian President Vladimir Putin by President Barack Obama has probably attracted more attention than anything substantive likely to have occurred in that meeting. Or at least anything that could not have been achieved through ordinary diplomatic means. In other words, the significance of this meeting was overrated from the beginning, like most other summits in modern history.

Summits involving the Russians have featured in world politics since Napoleon met Czar Alexander I in 1807 on a raft in the middle of the Neman River in the town of Tilsit. Notable were the three World War II summits wherein Marshall Stalin met with the US president in Tehran, Yalta and Potsdam — with the British prime minister tagging along — that dealt with wartime strategy and the future of Europe. Not so much was at stake this time around.

Admittedly, Obama is not cancelling his attendance at the G-8 summit in St. Petersburg, also in Putin's Russia. But even the G-8 summits are not worth much in terms of substance, compared with what could be achieved, again, through so-called ordinary diplomatic means.

This is not the place to review the full history of modern summitry. In the main, they are held because publics (and politics) expect them and demand "results." The invention of the airplane and global television, not the seriousness of the agenda, is the causative agent. Almost always, summit agreements, enshrined in official communiqués, are worked out in advance by lower-

level officials, with perhaps an item or two — a “sticking point” or “window dressing” — to be dealt with at the top. To be sure, a forthcoming summit, like “the prospect of hanging” in Samuel Johnson’s phrase, “concentrates the mind wonderfully” or, in this case, provides a spur to bureaucratic and diplomatic activity. Issues that have been sitting on the shelf or in the too-hard inbox may get dusted off and resolved because top leaders are getting together with media attention, pageantry, ruffles and flourishes, state dinners and expectations. This is not something to be left to chance nor to risk a potential blunder by the US president or his opposite number, whether friend or foe.

This is not cynicism, it is reality. Yours truly speaks from experience, having been involved with more than 20 meetings of US presidents with other heads of state and government. I witnessed only two where what the president and his interlocutor worked out at the table made a significant difference: President Jimmy Carter’s 1980 White House meetings with Israeli Prime Minister Meacham Begin and (two weeks later) with Egypt’s President Anwar Sadat. Serious decisions were taken because the US president was the American action officer for Arab-Israeli peacemaking; he “rolled his own.”

Summits can also cause damage, as did the 2008 Bucharest NATO summit, where European heads of state and government balked at the US president’s desire to move Ukraine and Georgia a tiny step toward NATO membership. Instead, they made the meaningless pledge that, in time, it would happen. Both the Georgian and Russian presidents read this as a strategic commitment. The upshot was the short Russia-Georgia war that set back Western and Russian efforts to deal with more important matters on their agenda.

Most notorious was the summit President John Kennedy hastily sought in 1961 with Nikita Khrushchev. Their Vienna meeting was represented as having set back the untested president’s efforts to establish himself with the bullying Soviet leader. Some historians believe this encounter encouraged Khrushchev to take actions that produced the Cuban Missile Crisis.

Even worse than the expectations of success that summits generate is the notion that good chemistry between leaders can have a decisive influence. Nonsense. Of course it is better for there to be positive relations, the ability to “do business” as Margaret Thatcher once said about Mikhael Gorbachev — provided, of course, there is “business” to be “done.” Indeed, assessments of chemistry or the lack thereof just get in the way when they obscure realities of power, the interests of nations and leaders’ domestic politics, which are the real stuff of relations between and among states. Many of history’s worst villains have been charming in person.

Cancelling the Obama-Putin summit has taken place over developments that in the course of history are relatively trivial, confirming that it was unlikely to have been significant. If something of importance was to be settled, ways would have been found to finesse the distractions.

Russian misbehavior included not handing over Edward Snowden, the master leaker of sensitive US information, and the *Duma*’s passing a law against gays and lesbians. US misbehavior included Congress’ condemnation of the Russian trial of a dead man, Sergei Magnitsky, who had

been a thorn in Putin's side. Notably, the reasons for cancelling this summit lean heavily on domestic politics, not matters of state.

What happened with Eisenhower in 1960, referred to above, was much more consequential. The leaders of the four major powers (the US, Soviet Union, Britain and France) were to meet in Paris, for the first time in years, to reduce misunderstandings between East and West that were making inherent dangers even worse.

Ironically, the triggering event then was also about intelligence; this time it is Snowden, that time it was Francis Gary Powers, the hapless pilot of a US U-2 Reconnaissance aircraft shot down over the Soviet Union less than two weeks before the summit. What then transpired — Obama cancelling in 2013 and Khrushchev displaying his patented histrionics in 1960 — fed into the domestic politics of each side. Just as Obama and Putin must both be wishing that Snowden had gone to Venezuela instead of Hong Kong and then Moscow, Khrushchev may well have cursed the Soviet Air Defense Forces for their untimely shooting down of an American spy plane that both sides knew reduced fears of an accidental nuclear war. Ike probably also cursed himself for letting the CIA launch a U-2 flight so soon before the Paris summit.

The comparison of 1960 and 2013 can be taken a step further. Then, at a particularly dangerous moment for the world, the Soviet Union was one of the two most powerful countries. Now Russia is a second-rate power whose greatest importance to the US lies in what it could well become in the future and its current impact, by facts of size and propinquity, on places and problems the US at the moment cares more about.

But a new Cold War? Again, nonsense. Rather, as political analyst William Lanouette has jibed, a "Cold-Shoulder War."

To begin with, "Cold War" needs to be defined with precision. It refers to the period when the US and Soviet Union were psychologically unable to distinguish between issues on which they could negotiate in their mutual self-interest and those on which neither could compromise. They were so locked into their perceptions and rhetoric that they could not even fathom possible common interests. That is clearly not true, now, and will not be.

The US-Soviet Cold War began to end in the 1960s, when the two countries developed the weapons and doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), which in practice meant that each side accepted responsibility for the others' ultimate security against nuclear annihilation. This spawned détente, the eventual end of the Cold War, and the sinking of the Soviet Union and European communism through their internal contractions.

Do US-Russian relations matter? Certainly, but not like US-Soviet relations before 1989. The difference is visible in today's elevation of US concerns over internal developments in Russia, although, for Russia to be fully accepted, respected and trusted on the world stage, it must conform to growing civilizing tendencies in international relations and state behavior within at least a fair amount of the globe. Far more importantly, there are US-Russian differences, both in view and national interests, which make relations difficult at times but must be sorted out in one way or another.

A key focal point of today's differences exists in the Middle East. The US objects to Russia's unwillingness to assist efforts to depose the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, which the US president called for before thinking through the means or implications. It is also not confident that Russia truly supports the US-led confrontation over Iran's nuclear program.

But both US positions beg big questions: on Syria, what the consequences would be there and in the broader region if the US got its way with Moscow, given the unlikelihood of a good outcome in Syria, the slow-rolling Sunni-Shiite civil war underway in the heart of the Middle East, Washington's lack of clarity over what it is prepared to do militarily and even what outcome would best serve US interests. Russia might thus be cut some slack over its temporizing.

Regarding Iran, the US wants Russia, China and Western powers to hold firm on sanctions (while Congress wants to ratchet them up, despite the inauguration of a new Iranian president who could be better for the US than his predecessor). But Washington has yet to demonstrate that it will negotiate seriously with Iran, and, as states do when there is a vacuum, Moscow is taking advantage.

In addition to dismantling some remaining Cold War relics, notably the excessive level of nuclear weapons both countries still deploy (some absurdly kept on alert), is the issue of when and how much Russia will regain a prominent role in international politics, how and how much the US will try to oppose that inevitable "rebalancing" while its own capacity to affect global events has diminished significantly and if Washington and Moscow can work out sensible rules of the road with one another in the Middle East, Southwest Asia and elsewhere. Russia needs us as partner in some areas; in others it will inevitably be our rival and vice versa.

As two great hydrocarbon producers with interests and engagements that touch or overlap — such as concerns about terrorism, desires that the Afghan curse not cause both of them further troubles in Southwest Asia and the need to influence the rise of new kids on the block (China and India) — the US and Russia have lots to talk about.

But Obama and Putin wining and dining one another has little to do with it.