



MIDDLE EAST

Obama Weighing Talks With Putin on Syrian Crisis

By **PETER BAKER** and **ANDREW E. KRAMER** SEPT. 15, 2015

WASHINGTON — For more than a year, President Obama has resisted meeting one on one with President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia and only reluctantly taken a phone call, freezing out the Kremlin leader over his intervention in Ukraine in their own personal cold war.

But this month, the two leaders will be in the same city at the same time amid rising tension in Syria, and the White House is divided by a debate over whether they should meet to try to work out their differences before the tumult in the Middle East escalates even further.

The recent deployment of Russian weapons and equipment to Syria has brought to a head a conflict that has dominated the Obama administration since Mr. Putin's return to the presidency, the choice between engaging with Russia and trying to isolate it. If Ukraine and Syria are the world's two most significant conflict zones, then some officials argue that the solutions to both problems ultimately go through Moscow, making it necessary to talk. Others, however, worry that agreeing to meet would only play into Mr. Putin's hands and reward an international bully.

Mr. Obama's own instincts tend toward talking rather than not, as he has shown with both Iran and Cuba, longtime foes of the United States. But he has

a chilly relationship with Mr. Putin and has been frustrated that past interactions have either proved fruitless or been exploited later by the Russians or both. And given the supercharged environment over his nuclear agreement with Iran, the idea of renewed diplomacy with another anti-American leader could prove volatile at home.

The move by Russia to bolster the government of President Bashar al-Assad, who has resisted Mr. Obama's demand to step down for years, underscored the conflicting approaches to fighting the Islamic State terrorist organization. While Mr. Obama supports a rival rebel group to take on the Islamic State even as he opposes Mr. Assad, Russia contends that the government is the only force that can defeat the Islamic extremists.

Mr. Putin on Tuesday forcefully defended Russia's military assistance to Syria. "We are supporting the government of Syria in the fight against a terrorist aggression, and we are offering and will continue to offer it necessary military and technical assistance, and we call on other countries to join us," Mr. Putin said at a regional security conference in Dushanbe, the capital of Tajikistan.

"It's obvious," he added, "that without the Syrian authorities and the military playing an active role, without the Syrian Army fighting the Islamic State on the ground, it's impossible to drive terrorists from this country and from the region as a whole."

Mr. Putin urged other nations and moderate elements in the Syrian opposition to follow Russia's example by aligning with the government in Damascus against the Islamic State, saying Mr. Assad was ready for political compromise with "the healthy part of the opposition." Russian television plans to broadcast an interview with Mr. Assad on Wednesday, suggesting this proposal could be fleshed out.

The Obama administration was caught off guard by the Kremlin's move into Syria, and Secretary of State John Kerry spoke on Tuesday with Sergey V.

Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, for the third time in recent days to complain that it was unhelpful. But the Americans were still left trying to fathom Mr. Putin's intentions and wonder whether he could be pressed into being a more constructive player on Syria as they said he was during the Iran negotiations.

“This would not be the first situation in which President Putin's true motivations are rather hard to discern,” said Josh Earnest, the White House press secretary. “The decision-making process in that country is rather opaque.”

That is one reason proponents of engagement argue for a meeting with Mr. Putin when he and other world leaders gather this month in New York for the United Nations General Assembly. In a system with one genuine decision maker, they say, it is invaluable to meet with that person to divine his interests and goals.

“It's better to have a conversation to engage than not to do so just because the world is blowing up in so many places,” said Angela E. Stent, head of the Russia studies program at Georgetown University and a former national intelligence officer on Russia. “Not to meet with him would be sending a signal that we don't think there's anything to talk about in terms of cooperation on Syria.”

But it would be a turnaround of sorts for Mr. Obama, who has worked assiduously to isolate Mr. Putin for his violations of Ukrainian sovereignty. “Mr. Obama can expect nothing positive to come from seeing Mr. Putin,” said John Herbst, a former ambassador to Ukraine who is now at the Atlantic Council in Washington. “Meeting with the Russian strongman would only make the president look weak.”

In Moscow, analysts said Mr. Putin wants to use a speech he will deliver at the United Nations to shift away from the Ukraine crisis by pressing the case for an international coalition against the Islamic State that includes Mr.

Assad's government.

“The Kremlin has far-reaching goals for that speech,” Aleksandr Golts, a military analyst, wrote in *The Moscow Times*. “It hopes that the process of forming such a coalition would free Russia from its international isolation caused by its annexation of Crimea and the war in eastern and southern Ukraine and also make it a respected member of the world community again.”

Mr. Obama and Mr. Putin have never gotten along since their first tense meeting in 2009. Mr. Putin views Mr. Obama as weak, and Mr. Obama views Mr. Putin as a thug, according to advisers and analysts.

Mr. Obama canceled a summit meeting with Mr. Putin in 2013 after Russia gave shelter to Edward J. Snowden, the national security contractor who leaked classified documents. After Russia's annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine last year, Mr. Obama has made a point of staying away from the Russian leader.

The two have had only glancing encounters, talking in person for 15 minutes during a D-Day anniversary event in France in June 2014, for instance, and then having brief words on the sidelines of an economic summit meeting in Australia in November, but no formal sit-down session. They last talked by telephone in July after Russia joined the United States, China and three European powers in negotiating a nuclear accord with Iran.

But American officials still remember how a meeting in Sochi, Russia, between Mr. Kerry and Mr. Putin in May was taken as a sign of easing up on Russia. While Mr. Kerry is an advocate of engaging, some officials in the White House and the State Department worry that a meeting in New York would embolden Mr. Putin, in effect restoring his stature as a major world player on one of the biggest stages.

Since Russia has indicated it wants a meeting, American officials have said they may wait another week in order to leave Moscow hanging and to

watch its actions in Syria. But Mr. Earnest seemed to lean toward the possibility that Mr. Obama would meet with the Russian president. “They obviously disagree on most of the issues that they discuss,” he said, “but at least they can discuss them in a candid, pretty businesslike format or environment.”

Peter Baker reported from Washington, and Andrew E. Kramer from Moscow.

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