

While Obama Breaks the Reset, Putin Slouches

By [Alexander Golts](#)

August 18, 2013



It is well known that President Vladimir Putin has trouble forgiving an insult. He once said, "Whoever offends us will not live out the day."

This principle applies to both his domestic and foreign policies. That is why many political analysts expected Putin to answer U.S. President Barack Obama in kind after he canceled his scheduled summit in Moscow with Putin.

But nothing of the sort happened. On the contrary, Putin's foreign affairs adviser, Yury Ushakov, went out of his way to be conciliatory, saying there would be no break in cooperation between the two countries. "Russian-U.S. relations are too important," Ushakov said, "and it would be impossible to push them into a dead end." As Ushakov pointed out, the two countries continue to work together successfully on many fronts.

In fact, the 2+2 meeting between the Russian and U.S. foreign and defense ministers in Washington on Aug. 9 would have been the perfect opportunity for Russia to stick it to the

U.S. by accusing Washington of trying to undermine the strategic balance with its deployment of a European missile defense system and of pursuing treacherous plans for a military invasion of Syria. It was also an opportune moment to threaten to shut down the transit corridor to Afghanistan.

Yet Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov assured reporters that "there is no Cold War. On the contrary, we have the closest partnership ever and good potential for its further deepening."

His words were echoed by Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu who said he did not notice any change in the U.S. approach to bilateral military cooperation. "If something has changed, then it has more likely changed for the better. We don't see any threats," Shoigu said.

Yet the feelings were hardly mutual. While Shoigu and Lavrov were being conciliatory, Obama explained to reporters that Washington was taking a pause in the U.S.-Russian "reset" because of the Kremlin's increased anti-U.S. rhetoric and a lack of progress on issues that Washington considers important.

It turns out that the Russian and U.S. defense ministers agreed to introduce the practice of holding regular video conferences with each other. What's more, U.S. officials were invited to act as observers at the upcoming military exercises between Russia and Belarus. And forgetting that his own deputy recently declared that Russia is in no way obligated to invite foreign observers to its military exercises and "unannounced inspections," Shoigu promised to continue the practice into the future in order to expand confidence-building measures between the two countries.

Even the divisive issue of missile defense did not elicit any sharply worded comments. According to Lavrov, "The main thing that I saw and heard during today's talks is that there is awareness of the need to consider this issue in the context of all the other factors that, in one way or another, affect strategic stability." And it turns out that there are no serious differences on Syria, much less Iran and North Korea.

This is part of Russia's hurried effort to cast itself as a constructive and nonconfrontational partner with whom Obama has unfairly postponed a summit and said relations must be "recalibrated." The White House decision to "take a break" in relations with Russia has clearly caught Kremlin strategists by surprise.

The problem, however, is that the Kremlin has no foreign policy ideas of its own. Its only skill is the ability to brand every U.S. initiative as hypocritical foul play. If Washington proposes a reduction to nuclear arsenals, it is really trying to achieve superiority in conventional weapons. Washington's decision to cancel the fourth stage of its European missile defense system was a smoke screen for its desire to achieve nuclear superiority.

But all of those inflated complaints only have meaning in the context of continued dialogue with Washington. If that dialogue were to end, those accusations lose significance because nobody else will listen to them. The Chinese could care less about Putin's list of grievances with the U.S. Of course, Moscow could try responding to this imaginary threat from the U.S. with concrete actions such as deploying Iskander missiles to the Kaliningrad region. But this move would risk provoking corresponding retaliatory measures by the West, pushing Putin into a potential arms race. Putin would hardly want another Cold War, spending from 40

percent to 80 percent of Russia's gross domestic product on military expenditures as Soviet leaders did.

It appears that the Kremlin sensed danger, and it hastily began backtracking like any common street punk facing a rebuff. It will be interesting to see if Putin will be able to refrain from avenging Obama's recent dig, "I know the press likes to focus on body language, and he [Putin] has that kind of slouch, looking like the bored kid at the back of the classroom."

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