

Putin and Trump Stage-manage a Win-win Meeting

With a ceasefire in southwestern Syria in the works, meeting proves diplomacy beats demonization

By [Pepe Escobar](#)

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Featured image: US President Donald Trump meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin during the their bilateral meeting at the G20 summit in Hamburg, Germany July 7, 2017. (Source: Reuters/Carlos Barria)

From the start, the “positive chemistry” in the Mother of All Sit-Downs was a given. The format – with only the four principals, Vladimir Putin, Donald Trump, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and two translators – prevented any leaks. What was originally scheduled for 35 minutes went on for 2 hours and 16 minutes, and not even an impromptu appearance by First Lady Melania Trump – they were late for the Elbphilharmonie pomp and circumstance – managed to stop the flow.

They needed to deliver. They needed headlines. They got plenty. Including a possible first step at real cooperation; a ceasefire deal in southwestern Syria. Yet the real headline is that diplomacy beats demonization.

Still, from the toxic, overwhelmingly Russophobic Beltway point of view, that dystopia masquerading as a summit – the actual G-20 – was a mere backdrop; the only thing that mattered in this parallel G-2 was confirmation of an obsessive narrative; Russian interfered in the US elections.

Spin City gave us slightly conflicting views. Tillerson admitted “intractable” differences but stressed Trump was “rightly focused on how do we move forward”, while an uncharacteristically irritable Lavrov said Trump had accepted Putin’s denial, adding what is, in fact, the real clincher; Putin wants proof and evidence of Russian interference.

That won’t happen. The “Russian hacking” tsunami ebbs and flows, [always following the same pattern](#); accusations by some proverbial “anonymous official” or “expert”, usually debunked. If the acronym jungle of US intel had concrete, definitive evidence, that would have been splashed on every single front page long ago.

The real test for a possible reset will be the US-Russia ceasefire in southwestern Syria. Tillerson and Lavrov had been discussing it for weeks now. And it’s a Russian idea.

Essentially, that would [lead towards American/Jordanian peacekeeping forces near the Golan](#); Damascus allowing Iranian and Russian peacekeeping forces around the capital; Turkey ensconced between Jarablus and Al-Bab in the north with Russians around them; and

the Americans in the northeast all the way to Raqqa alongside the Kurdish YPG.

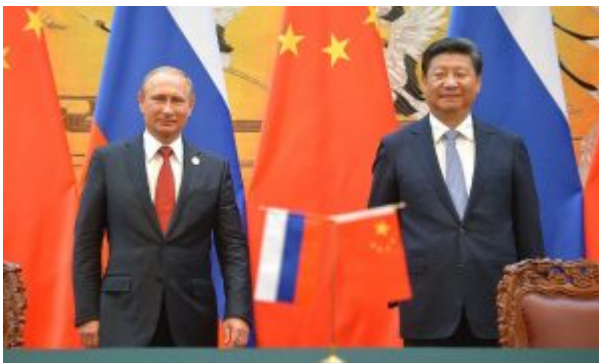
In a nutshell; a regional balance of power which, assuming it holds, might slowly lead towards a final all-Syria settlement.

Jordan – and Israel – are not warring parties in Syria, and yet the deal directly concerns them. It's not clear whether US forces will have to be back to Jordan. It's not clear how the ceasefire will complement the Astana negotiation – the actual top frontline decider – involving Russia, Iran and Turkey. It's not clear whether Daesh will be eradicated for good. It's not clear whether the Pentagon will stop sporadically attacking the Syrian Arab Army (SAA).

The real big story

And then, there's the big story of the G-20 in Hamburg, which actually started three days earlier in Moscow, in a full-fledged official summit between Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping.

Xi repeatedly extolled the “strategic alliance”, or “the fast-growing, pragmatic cooperation”, or even the [“special character” of China's ties with Russia](#).



Pres. Putin and Pres. Jinping (Source: Strategic Culture Foundation)

Putin once again pledged to [support the New Silk Roads](#), or One Belt, One Road initiative (Obor), “by all means”, which includes its interpenetration with the Eurasia Economic Union (EEU).

The Russian Direct Investment Fund and the China Development Bank established a joint \$10 billion investment fund.

Gazprom and China's CNPC signed a key agreement for the starting date of gas deliveries via the Power of Siberia pipeline; December 20, 2019, according to Gazprom CEO Alexey Miller. And that will be followed by the construction of Power of Siberia-2.

They kept discussing a military cooperation roadmap.

And at a closed Kremlin meeting the night before their official summit, in which they clinched yet another proverbial raft of deals worth billions of dollars, Putin and Xi developed a common North Korea strategy; “dialogue and negotiation”, coupled with firm opposition to the THAAD missile system being installed in South Korea.

Xi, in an interview to TASS, had already expounded on US missile defense – an absolute top priority for the Kremlin – “disrupting the strategic balance in the region”.

This was Putin and Xi’s third meeting in 2017 alone. At the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Astana, Putin had already hinted that this one, in Moscow, would be “a major event in bilateral relations.”

The giveaway: that’s where they not only deepened their joint strategy for Eurasia integration but also coordinated their common approach to Trump at the G-20. This is what a strategic partnership is all about.

How to restart a reset

Considering the toxicity levels in the Beltway, Putin and Lavrov went to the G-20 harboring no expectations that a package deal could be achieved between Russia and the US.

They knew this would be a strictly political meeting – and not economic; an easing of sanctions was out of the cards.

They also knew there’s not much Trump could offer to the Russian economy. This exhaustive [report](#) sets the record straight.

Even under sanctions, Russia should expect a “handsome recovery”, with an expected growth of 3% to 4% in 2017. There has been an “extraordinary decrease in the share of oil & gas revenue in Russia’s GDP.” Russia has “the lowest level of imports (as a share of the GDP) of all major countries.” And the clincher; Russia “must focus on China, the East, and the rest of the world.”

That’s already happening. At the BRICS meeting on the sidelines of the G-20, they called for a more open global economy and for a “rules-based, transparent, non-discriminatory, open and inclusive multilateral trading system.”

Putin and Lavrov faced Trump and Tillerson knowing full well that political factions in the US won’t waiver in their mission to keep the tension with “peer competitors” Russia and China at a very dangerous level.

At the same time, they knew Trump and Tillerson really aim for a reset – incipient as it may be at the start.

Syria is an ultra-complex case where the sphere of influence is mostly Iranian but the hard, cold facts on the ground and in the skies are mostly Russian. With this ceasefire deal, it’s as if Putin and Lavrov are inviting a losing Washington to be part of a solution that satisfies – sort of – all parties, including Israel and Turkey.

Trump did not make any substantial concessions in Hamburg, at least according to what both Tillerson and Lavrov volunteered to disclose. The Beltway is barking that Trump gave Putin a win. As usual, they’re wrong; Putin and Trump stage-managed a win-win.

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Articles by: [Pepe Escobar](#)

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