

DISPLACING THE RESET WITH RUSSIA

As you no doubt heard yesterday, Obama called off a planned meeting with Putin after the G20 next month in response to a number of things (including Russia's increasing persecution of gays), but largely triggered by Russia's offer of asylum to Edward Snowden.

In addition to this piece applauding that decision, Julia Ioffe wrote up all the things about our approach to Snowden in Russia that Lawrence O'Donnell deemed unfit for MSNBC last night, which echo what I said back in June. The key bullet points are:

- *You can't back Putin into a corner and leave him no options. If you are a world leader worth your salt, and have a good diplomatic team working for you, you would know that. You would also know that when dealing with thugs like Putin, you know that things like this are better handled quietly. Here's the thing: Putin responds to shows of strength, but only if he has room to maneuver. You can't publicly shame him into doing something, it's not going to get a good*

response. Just like it would not get a good response out of Obama.

- The Obama administration totally fucked this up. I mean, totally. Soup to nuts. Remember the spy exchange in the summer of 2010? Ten Russian sleeper agents—which is not what Snowden is—were uncovered by the FBI in the U.S. Instead of kicking up a massive, public stink over it, the Kremlin and the White House arranged for their silent transfer to Russia in exchange for four people accused in Russia of spying for the U.S. Two planes landed on the tarmac in Vienna, ten people went one way, four people went the other way, the planes flew off, and that was it. That's how this should have been done if the U.S. really wanted Snowden back.

You don't back ego-driven world leaders into corners – whether it is Putin or Obama – and

succeed in achieving your goals.

All that said, Reuters reported a far more interesting development than Obama blowing off the Putin meeting yesterday. The Saudis have offered to bribe Putin to back off his support of Bashar al-Assad.

Saudi Arabia has offered Russia economic incentives including a major arms deal and a pledge not to challenge Russian gas sales if Moscow scales back support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Middle East sources and Western diplomats said on Wednesday.

[snip]

Syrian opposition sources close to Saudi Arabia said Prince Bandar offered to buy up to \$15 billion of Russian weapons as well as ensuring that Gulf gas would not threaten Russia's position as a main gas supplier to Europe.

In return, Saudi Arabia wanted Moscow to ease its strong support of Assad and agree not to block any future Security Council Resolution on Syria, they said.

Finally, America's allies (and it's unclear how involved the US was in this deal, though Bandar usually plays nicely with us) are speaking to Putin in terms of Russia's interests, rather than insisting Assad's overthrow benefits everyone.

I'm especially interested in Bandar's promise to "ensur[e] that Gulf gas would not threaten Russia's position as a main gas supplier to Europe." That, frankly, is probably the biggest carrot on the table here. But I can imagine no way Bandar could guarantee it (did the Qataris buy in? can Bandar control fracking in Europe? and what happens if and when the Saudis succeed in getting us to overthrow the Iranians?).

It appears the Saudis are more impressed with the meeting than Putin.

One Lebanese politician close to Saudi Arabia said the meeting between Bandar and Putin lasted four hours. "The Saudis were elated about the outcome of the meeting," said the source, without elaborating.

[snip]

Putin's initial response to Bandar's offer was inconclusive, diplomats say. One Western diplomat in the Middle East said the Russian leader was unlikely to trade Moscow's recent high profile in the region for an arms deal, however substantial.

He said Russian officials also appeared skeptical that Saudi Arabia had a clear plan for stability in Syria if Assad fell.

But it at least appears to suggest that Putin would respond to discussions that acknowledged Russia's interests, for a change. Even if Bandar can't yet present a plan that seems plausible.

Does Putin really have to be the grown-up in the room who points out that Syria without Assad will not be stable anytime soon?

No matter what happens with Snowden, very few have acknowledged that, in addition to details of spying on Americans, he has also mapped out the backbone of our increasingly fragile hegemony over the world. We have responded only by ratcheting up pressure, rather than attempting persuasion.

It will be interesting to see, first, whether this Saudi initiative has any better effect. And if it does, whether we've been included in implementing it.

Update: Washington Institute's Simon Henderson says we weren't part of this scheme.

The Saudi diplomatic push shows Riyadh's determination to force the Assad

regime's collapse, which the kingdom hopes will be a strategic defeat for Iran, its regional rival in both diplomatic and religious terms. It also reflects Riyadh's belief, shared by its Gulf Arab allies, that U.S. diplomacy on Syria lacks the necessary imagination, commitment, and energy to succeed.

[snip]

Meanwhile, the United States is apparently standing on the sidelines – despite being Riyadh's close diplomatic partner for decades, principally in the hitherto successful policy of blocking Russia's influence in the Middle East. In 2008, Moscow agreed to sell tanks, attack helicopters, and other equipment to the kingdom, but the deal never went through. Instead, in 2010, Washington and Riyadh negotiated a huge \$60 billion defense deal (including attack helicopters), the details of which are still being finalized. The events of the past week suggest that the U.S.-Saudi partnership – which covers regional diplomacy, the Middle East peace process, the global economy, and weapons sales – is, at best, being tested. It would be optimistic to believe that the Moscow meeting will significantly reduce Russian support for the Assad regime. But meanwhile Putin will have pried open a gap between Riyadh and Washington. The results of the latest U.S.-Russian spat will be watched closely, particularly in Saudi Arabia.