

Russia and the G7: Coming Back in From the Cold?

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Media Centre – G7 Ise Shima Summit. The expulsion of Russia from the G8 in March 2014 was designed to send a clear and unambiguous message to President Putin. Namely, the forceful annexation of Crimea, breaching the Budapest Memorandum that was signed at the end of the Cold War and which guaranteed Ukraine's sovereignty, was an unacceptable state of affairs.

Following the downing of [Malaysia Airways Flight 17](#) over eastern Ukraine, almost certainly an act of pro-Russian rebels armed with Russian made anti-aircraft weaponry, sanctions were imposed on Russia and the leaders of the remaining seven countries returned to the pre-1998 format by holding a G7 Summit in Brussels, Belgium in 2014 and Schloss Elmau, Germany in 2015.

The communiqués that came out of these summits were condemnatory in their language towards Russia and Putin's actions in Ukraine. However, whilst the rhetoric was high, the action on the ground was low. The exclusion of Russia from the summit table created a situation where the remaining leaders were able to grandstand in their vilification of their former member, but were unable to deploy any effective policy to influence Putin's actions.

This policy failure was only further highlighted by the fact that the civil war in Syria had been bubbling along in the background of the global summits' agendas since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011. However it was Russia's overt [military intervention](#) in the conflict, in support of the Assad regime, in September 2015 that again brought it back

into the spotlight of international meetings.

Unlike the ineffective condemnatory statements of the 2015 G7, the G20 in Antalya in November 2015 took a dramatically different tack. Following an impromptu side [meeting](#) between Presidents Obama and Putin, the beginnings of an agreement to deal with the rising threat of Daesh in Syria and the cessation of hostilities in certain areas of the country were laid out. The symbolism of a sit-down between the two leaders, and the resulting agreement, overlaid the fact that this was only possible due to Russia's inclusion at the G20 summit.

Since its inception in 1975, the G7 has provided world leaders with an informal environment to build interpersonal relationships with each other to allow them to come to common solutions to the world's problems. The ejection of Russia's membership of the G7 has put paid to this vital bridge building environment.

Ukraine and the spectre of the Cold War

From the Russian perspective, the annexation of the Crimea region of Ukraine made both political and tactical sense. The political movements within Ukraine following the [Euromaidan street protests](#) that culminated in the removal of President Yankovych posed a direct threat to Russia's sphere of influence in the country. That the Crimea region contained the naval base of the Black Sea Fleet is of particular strategic and military importance to Russia as it provides them with one of their only warm water naval ports, which also allows it vital access to the Mediterranean.

Putin's decision to back the pro-Russian rebels in the eastern parts of Ukraine however, were also premised on a strategic as well as domestic requirement. Putin's narrative was that the large ethnic Russian population in the Donbas region needed to be saved from the more pro-European western half of the country, which Russian news media portrayed as fascist in nature. The involvement of '[little green men](#)' who bore no Russian insignia, yet carried and used Russian military equipment was a key pillar in Putin's

narrative toward his domestic audience. A narrative that portrayed the West as threatening Russia's interests by attempting to impose its favoured political leaders upon a much maligned ethnic Russian population in the east of Ukraine. The sanctions imposed by the US and EU have further added to this domestic narrative of western powers attempting to prevent Russia from once again becoming a great power.

The perception of a rising threat from Russia has been stoked in the West by the resurgence of Russian military activity along the borders of the EU and NATO member states. From long-range [Russian bombers flying close to UK airspace](#), to suspected Russian submarines penetrating Swedish waters.

This confrontational narrative has not been stoked purely from the Russian side however. The recent [publication of a book](#) by the former deputy commander of NATO forces in Europe argued that the rising Russian aggression on the borders of Europe would lead to Russia annexing the Baltic states next year. Yet academics on

both sides of the Atlantic, with experience of Russian affairs, do perceive the situation to be one that will rapidly deteriorate. The assertion that there will inevitably be US combat fatalities amongst the military personnel that are training the Ukrainian armed forces, which would draw the US further into the conflict, creates a nightmare scenario for those who lived through the Cold War.

Although a huge amount of speculation surrounding Putin's intentions and Western responses remain, Russia's exclusion from the most pre-eminent gathering of world leaders means that there remains a great deal of room for error and miscalculation on both sides.

Assad and Daesh: The vortex of violence that is Syria and the Middle East

This miscalculation of action is personified by Russia's direct military intervention in the conflict in Syria, which was not purely designed as a bulwark against the fall of the Assad regime. Instead, as in Ukraine, it was a tactical decision by Putin to preserve and expand Russia's influence in the

Middle East, as the focus of the United States shifted eastwards. Most immediately, Russia's aim was to preserve and protect the vital military installations that Russia has at its naval facilities in Tartus, by buttressing the Assad regime against further rebel advances.

Putin's government has portrayed Russia's ongoing bombing of rebel forces within Syria, both domestically and abroad, as a campaign against terrorism. But the targeting primarily of anti-Assad forces that are not associated with Daesh nor Jabhat al-Nusra has been designed to allow the loyalist regime forces to gain breathing space, and to retake strategically important areas of the country. In addition to re-enforcing its one remaining ally in the region, the Russian military campaign has resulted in expansion of the Russian airbase in Latakia. This provides the Russians with an extensive military reach in the Middle East that was previously the unique provision of the United States.

The US air war campaign in Syria, alongside G7 members France and the UK, has been designed to degrade and destroy the

organisation known as Daesh, rather than diminishing the Assad regime. Whilst Putin has made clear that Russia will not tolerate a direct targeting of the Syrian government forces by Western air power, the two-stream air war being waged inside Syria has already led to some risky [near misses](#) between American and Russian planes. This is a situation that has the potential for further escalation without a coordinated response between the leaderships of both countries.

Putin's recent proclamations that Russian combat operations within Syria have successfully defeated the terrorists, and are therefore coming to an end, disguise the entrenchment of Russian military forces within the region. Whilst Russian airstrikes have decreased in the last months, in part due to the ceasefire agreement in certain areas of the country, the Russian military has been embedding itself further by bringing in military equipment such as attack helicopters that are designed to protect its recently built military infrastructure in the region, such as the [airbase in Latakia](#).

The failure of the G7 to bring Putin back to the table and talk has in some ways been mitigated by Russia's inclusion at the G20. But in the context of providing a long-term solution to the ongoing civil war in Syria, there seems more chance of an agreement being reached in a setting such as Ise-Shima that does not include countries such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, who are intimately involved with the conflict, and oppose rapprochement with Russia and the Assad regime.

It is clear that just as in Crimea, Russia is in Syria to stay. On this basis, the continued shunning of Putin from the G7 meetings only compounds the failures of policy makers to coherently deal with these pressing international crises. Instead Putin's continued exclusion reinforces his own domestic narrative of the West versus Russia, playing directly into his hands.

Abe and his agenda

In a rejection of the us versus them narrative, the host of this year's summit, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has built a personal relationship with Vladimir Putin

with hopes of showcasing his status as an international statesman. This relationship will be especially important from the domestic political viewpoint, as the Japanese leader wishes to find a resolution to the ongoing territorial dispute between Russia and Japan over the [Kuril islands](#). However in the context of the international diplomatic setting, and primarily the G7, it is the possibility of Abe moving to try and bring Russia back in from the cold that takes centre stage. In contrast to the other six leaders' condemnation of Putin, Abe rebuffed the American recommendation to stay away and [attended the Sochi Winter Olympics](#). Because of this and other personal interactions with Putin he is now in a unique position to use his relationship with the Russian leader as a potential lever in order to find some common ground for solving some of the world's most intransigent conflicts such as Syria and Ukraine.

For Abe the domestic audience also plays a key role in the international brokerage that he will attempt regarding Russia's role in global governance. The message coming out of the G7 Summit sidelines has been

that the conflict in Syria must be stopped and that Prime Minister Abe is in a unique position to influence this. The Syrian Peace Network, an NGO umbrella group of over twenty-five Japanese organisations has attempted to place domestic pressure upon Abe during the summit to use his relationship with Putin to pursue a peaceful settlement in Syria. But the overriding impression amongst this NGO group is that the G7 in its current format is not strong enough to achieve this without Russia.

This agenda, however, is conditional on the deliberations of the other leaders at the summit who for the most part are reluctant to welcome Russia back in to the fold so easily. President Obama has shown a willingness to sit down with Putin at international summits, in addition Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Secretary of State John Kerry have a good working relationship. However the domestic American environment will, just as in Russia, come to play a part in these relations. Obama will be unwilling to be seen to be opening the G7 club back up to the Russians so easily in a presidential

election year when any concessions would be seen as weakness on the part of the president, and by association the Democratic nominee in the upcoming presidential elections.

The UK meanwhile maintains a position of indignation at increasing Russian military aggression. The restarting of long-range Russian bomber patrols that [skim UK airspace](#) has unsettled the military establishment in Whitehall at a time of severe spending restraints. This has been combined with a rising rhetoric amongst NATO officials, retired and active, who have been arguing that Russia will begin a more active campaign of subversion and intervention in EU and NATO states, beginning in the Baltics. Although these concerns are not widely shared, the perceived potential of a rising threat nevertheless will have an impact on the UK's willingness to welcome Russia back in from the cold at the G7.

Putin enjoys the cold

The question of Abe and the potential for the G7 to begin to move towards

welcoming Putin back to the table cannot be considered simply as a one-track approach, rather it has to also take in to account the domestic Russian context. For Putin has built a dominant narrative within Russia: that the West lies at the root cause of all of Russia's problems. From Western [sanctions](#) hurting the Russian economy and lowering living standards, to the crackdowns on domestic free speech because of subversive Western organisations, this has allowed him to establish an image of himself as the strongman of his country, protecting the Russian people by resisting the outsiders.

If the G7 were to begin to offer Russia the olive branch in this context, there is no guarantee that Putin would accept. By retaking his seat at the G7 Summit he would be undermining his own well-established domestic narrative at a time when he cannot risk destabilising his domestic support due to the negative economic impact that sanctions are having. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's [statement](#) at the time of Russia's expulsion was indicative of the way that Russia would be able to continue to shrug

off the potential option of returning from the cold as another high point of Russian resistance to Western aggression.

Abe's continued overtures towards Russia in relation to the dispute over the Kuril islands allows Putin to perpetuate his domestic narrative that despite its exclusion from the G7 summitry, Russia can still play a great power role. This is the theme that runs through all aspects of Russian action in the Middle East and Ukraine. A theme that articulates the view that Russia once again not only deserves a place in the world as a [great power](#), but that if other world leaders attempt to inhibit this then Putin will make this point with force if necessary, even if he is excluded from the top table.

Obama's third way

The moral quandary that exists for President Obama at this G7 was not purely about what to say when he visited Hiroshima. Instead he had to consider the ramifications of attempting to enhance his working relationship with Putin on the

back of their meeting at the G20 in November last year.

The American led international efforts to degrade and destroy Daesh across Syria and Iraq continue to pose a problem for Obama's dealings with Putin. While the Russian statements that they are also bombing terrorists in Syria draws calls of incredulity from the international community due to their overwhelming targeting of anti-Assad forces that are not linked to Daesh or Jabhat al-Nusra, it remains clear that some of the Russian military efforts to support the Assad regime have led to advances against Daesh, such as in the desert city of Palmyra. With continued political [instability in Iraq](#), the Obama administration will be reluctant to forgo completely the destructive effects that Russian and Syrian government military action has had on Daesh.

Obama's approach to foreign policy, designed around his administration's premise of not doing '[stupid shit](#)', has led him to make domestically controversial decisions. The drawn-out negotiations

with Iran over its nuclear programme, normalisation of relations with Cuba, and the state visit to Myanmar are the highlights of an approach that Obama has developed in dealing with countries and leaders that act in potentially morally repugnant ways.

And yet, even if the Obama administration is willing to begin to bring Putin back in from the cold it will be stymied by the views of America's European allies. The continuing provocative Russian military action on the borders of Europe will force Obama to take European calls for a firmer line against Russia into its calculations, thereby keeping a strong condemnatory policy towards Russia, even if in the last months of his term in office he would potentially have some freedom to act otherwise.

The frosted window of the G7

The speculation surrounding the impact that Prime Minister Abe's close personal relationship with Vladimir Putin would have on the outcomes of the summit have been left wanting with the release of the

[final communiqué](#), and the leaders' press conferences. There has been no indication of any movement amongst the seven leaders towards a form of reconciliation with Putin, nor a change in tack in the punishment of Russia's actions by the international community.

Instead, Shinzo Abe made clear that a continuing dialogue was vital to dealings with Russia in order to make sure that they honoured their previous commitments. Prime Minister Cameron, on the other hand, held a far more aggressive tone at his press conference, insisting that the sanctions currently being imposed on Russia would roll over again after their June expiry deadline and continue until the Minsk Agreement on Ukraine had been fully implemented.

The differing tones of the two leaders, as well as the silence on the subject from the others, is indicative of a lack of consensus behind the scenes at the summit on how to effectively deal with Russia. Although President Hollande indicated that the recent [prisoner swap](#) between Ukraine and Russia was the result of back channel

negotiations between himself, Merkel and Putin, this has not translated into an overt acceptance that engaging with Russia and Putin can provide tangible results.

President Obama in his historic visit to Hiroshima made it abundantly clear that we must look into the eye of history in order to not repeat the mistakes of the past. This policy applies just as succinctly to the G7's dealings with Russia. If Russia continues to be excluded from the summit table, removing this opportunity for world leaders to build relationships and attempt to find common ground, the shadow of the Cold War will continue to loom a little larger.

The G7 Summit in Ise-Shima has followed the same path as the G7 Summit in Schloss Elmau last year in its dealings with its former member. Having condemned in the strongest terms the continuation of hostilities in Syria and the de-facto annexation of Crimea, the leaders of the G7 countries have issued the world with their collaborative policy on Russia, a policy of rhetoric instead of substance.



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By calling on Russia to obey the international rules of the game and abide by its commitments, the G7 leaders provide good sound-bites at the press conferences, but they do not establish a cohesive policy prescription for solving the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine. Until the G7 leaders accept that dealing effectively with these conflicts requires bringing Russia back in from the cold, they will be left with the tantalising view of Putin looking in

through the frosted window at the circles that they seem to be perpetually going in.

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