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## Obama's Monica moment

By M K Bhadrakumar

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The United States may have administered one of the biggest-ever snubs to the Kremlin in the post-Cold War era with the White House announcement on Thursday that it will provide military support to the Syrian rebels.

The announcement in Washington said:

Following a deliberative review, our [US] intelligence community assesses that the [Bashar al-] Assad regime has used chemical weapons ... Following on the credible evidence that the regime has used chemical weapons against the Syrian people, the President has augmented the provision of non-lethal assistance to the civilian opposition, and also authorized the expansion of our assistance to the Supreme Military Council (SMC) ...

The United States and the international community have a number of other legal, financial, diplomatic, and military responses available. We are prepared for all contingencies, and we will make decisions on our own timeline. Any future action we take will be consistent with our national interest, and must advance our objectives.

### Russia House in disrepair

The US President Barack Obama is scheduled to meet Russian President Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of the Group of Eight summit scheduled to begin in Northern Ireland this coming

Monday. This was to have been the first meeting for the two presidents after their respective re-election to the high office.

As a token courtesy to Putin at a personal and public level, Obama should have deferred the announcement until after meeting Putin. Syria was expected to figure on top of their agenda and Obama and Putin have been closely in touch over Syria.

Geneva 2, the proposed conference on Syria, is a joint Russian-American initiative. By delaying the announcement to next week, the US wouldn't have "lost" Syria. Quite obviously, Obama has made a cool assessment that Putin's friendship is expendable. After all, the discord over missile defense sticks out like a sore thumb in the US-Russia relations and there is no remedy in view.

A senior state department official, Frank Rose, deputy assistant secretary in the Bureau of Arms Control, gave the bottom line on Wednesday that Obama has nothing to offer Putin on missile defense. Rose said,

United States and NATO cannot agree to Russian proposals for "sectoral" or "joint" missile defense architectures. ... Russia continues to request legal guarantees that could create limitations on our ability to develop and deploy future missile defense systems. ... We have made clear we cannot and will not accept limitations on our ability to defend ourselves, our allies, and our partners, including where we deploy our BMD [ballistic missile defense] capable Aegis ships. ... the United States must have the flexibility, without legal limitations, to respond to evolving missile threats.

On the other hand, the Syrian opposition's morale has touched rock bottom after the crushing military defeat in Qusayr. The government forces are now preparing for their "liberation" of Aleppo. If the fall of Qusayr meant that the clandestine arms flow from Lebanon would taper off, a defeat in Aleppo could disrupt the opposition's supply lines from Turkey.

Meanwhile, the proposed Geneva 2 is becoming a non-starter, too. The Syrian opposition is far too divided and fragmented to nominate a unified delegation. The US' regional allies - Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar - are up in arms that the US is selling the regime-change project down the drain. Also, back at home in Washington, congressmen, media and the think tankers, many of whom come under the influence of the Israeli Lobby, are clamoring for some "action" on Syria.

### **Sour grapes, California wine**

But, most important, the White House decision could be a brainwave that occurred to Obama as he travelled back home in Air Force One from the summit meeting in California with Chinese President Xi Jinping, from which he emerged second best amid the shattering disclosures by the secrets whistleblower Edward Snowden, formerly of the CIA.

All in all, Obama's momentous decision on military intervention in Syria, which could well launch a new Cold War, is a desperate diversionary move when his administration is caught up deep in the cesspool over the Snowden controversy.

The entire moral edifice on which Obama built up his presidency and the values he espoused at the core of his "audacity of hope" when he began his long march to the White House five years

ago - transparency, accountability, legitimacy, multilateralism, consensus - lie exposed today as a pack of lies.

The heart of the matter is that Obama is on the horns of the same dilemma as Bill Clinton found himself when, in a desperate ploy to deflect world attention from his strong libido, he fired cruise missiles at Kandahar in August 1998.

Obama, too, badly needs a diversion because these are early days and China's government-owned media has already begun commenting on Snowden. In a report titled "Surveillance program a test of Sino-US ties", China Daily on Thursday broke its silence and taunted the Obama administration by proposing that cyber-security could indeed be a "new realm of cooperation" between Beijing and Washington. China Daily pondered,

How the case is handled could pose a challenge to the burgeoning goodwill between Beijing and Washington given that Snowden is in Chinese territory [Hong Kong] and the Sino-US relationship is constantly soured on cyber-security.

Interestingly, the report noted that Snowden is "staying in Hong Kong away from Washington pursuit" and went on to highlight that Moscow is offering asylum to the fugitive. It ended by quoting a well-known Chinese scholar:

The successful handling of the case would be referred to as an influential precedent between the two countries, since there has been a lack of international regulations in the areas of global internet security.

On Friday, Global Times hit out with the editorial that "China deserves explanation" from the Obama administration. Excerpts:

Snowden's revelation about US cyber attacks on Hong Kong and mainland networks is closely related to Chinese national interests. The Chinese government should acquire more solid information from Snowden if he has it, and use it as evidence to negotiate with the US. ... Public opinion will turn against China's central government and the Hong Kong SAR government if they choose to send him back. ... Snowden is a "card" that China never expected.

### **Impacting the power dynamic**

China Daily and People's Daily carried yet another report today demanding that the US "owes China an explanation about its hacking activities and should show more sincerity in the future when engaging in cyber-security cooperation." The report estimates, "Washington is now in an awkward position regarding its cyber-security dispute with Beijing."

The tongue-in-cheek observations make it clear that Beijing has the upper hand - and Beijing knows Washington knows it does have the upper hand - any whichever way the Snowden saga unfolds through coming months (or years).

Bill Clinton's diversionary tactic in August 1998 had disastrous consequences, triggering a sequence of events culminating in the 9/11 attacks and the US intervention in Afghanistan (which, ironically, Obama is struggling hard to wind up.)

Now, what train of events Obama's fateful decision on June 13, 2013, to push for regime change

in Syria would have on Middle Eastern politics and history - and on the post-Cold War era itself - lies in the womb of time.

Former US defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld would have said, there is the "unknown unknown". First and foremost, how will Putin react? He is already reeling under the pressure from the US administration pushing for a regime change in Russia. Putin lamented on Wednesday,

Our [Russian] diplomatic service is not cooperating with the Occupy Wall Street movement, but your [US] diplomatic service is and directly supports the [Russian] opposition. To my mind, it is wrong because diplomatic services are designed to build relations between states but not to meddle with internal political affairs.

Certainly, throwing in the towel at this point on Syria becomes a ticklish decision for Moscow to take. What are the options? The best minds in the Kremlin will be debating.

In the Middle East itself, the White House decision dramatically impacts the power dynamic. Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan is at loggerheads with the Obama administration over his authoritarian tendencies. Yet, the White House decision catapults Turkey as a "frontline state". On the other hand, Turkish opinion militates against intervention in Syria.

Saudi Arabia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Iran, Hezbollah, Israel, Iraq, Lebanon - they are all involved in the Syrian question one way or another. Shepherding them, sequestering them, serenading them toward an agreeable end result is going to be virtually impossible. That is, assuming Syria survives as an entity on the Middle Eastern map.