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Vlad the Hammer vs Obama the Wimp

By Pepe Escobar

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This is getting ridiculous. The President of the United States (POTUS) screamed and shouted because he wanted his spy (Edward Snowden) back. Snowden, following Russian laws, was granted temporary asylum. The White House was "disappointed".

Then POTUS snubbed the bilateral summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow coinciding with the Group of 20 in St Petersburg in early September. The Kremlin was equally "disappointed".

Putin sent a telegram to George "Dubya" Bush - wishing him a quick recovery from heart surgery. [1] POTUS went to a US talk show and said Russia tended to "slip back into Cold War thinking and a Cold War mentality."

Brechtian distancing tells us that "ridiculous" does not even begin to describe it. The Cold War mentality is actually impregnated in the Beltway genes - from Capitol Hill to the Pentagon. As for POTUS, he acted like a diplomatic dilettante at best. "Yes, We Can" has morphed into "Yes, We Scan"; and now it's "Yes, We Scorn". This may apply to assorted poodles of European breeding, but it won't stick to Vlad the Hammer.

The White House justified its decision by "lack of progress" on everything including missile defense, arms control, trade and commercial relations, global security issues, human rights and

civil society. Nonsense; this was all about an impotent POTUS prevented from prosecuting his war against whistleblowers. Putin's foreign affairs adviser, Yury Ushakov, was closer to the truth when he said, "The US is not ready to build relations on an equal basis."

Vlad the Hammer can sense a wimp of Carter-esque proportions like a polar bear hunting a seal. He quickly evaluated how the Obama administration turned its already shaky credibility to ashes on two simultaneous fronts; because of the scale of the Orwellian/Panopticon complex detailed by Snowden's leaks, and because of the way he was being mercilessly hunted.

Adding a few more nails in the coffin of mainstream media, the New York Times posted an editorial - arguably "suggested" by the White House - justifying the cancelation of the summit, saying, "Mr Putin is a repressive and arrogant leader who treats his people with contempt." [2] Right; and Snow White lives in the White House.

All aboard the Trans-Siberian

POTUS's adolescent tantrum has nothing to do with Cold War. For starters, the US and Russia are mutually dependent on a vast array of issues. At least in theory, some adults will be discussing them in Washington this weekend, as Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu meet with US Secretary of State John Kerry and Pentagon head Chuck Hagel.

Vlad just needs to say the word to turn the already humiliating US/NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan - as in having their asses kicked by a bunch of Pashtuns with fake Kalashnikovs - into a cataclysmic disaster.

Vlad can subtly calibrate Russia's support for Bashar al-Assad in Syria - especially after Saudi intelligence chief Prince Bandar "Bush" bin Sultan paid him a visit in Moscow and allegedly offered to buy loads of Russian weapons as long as Russia backed off. [3] Putin was not impressed. Still, Bandar would not have done that without "consulting" with his US masters.

Vlad can offer plenty of extra diplomatic support for the new Rouhani presidency in Iran - including, crucially, new weapons sales, and solidify Tehran's position in possible negotiations with Washington.

In the Caucasus, Vlad is on a roll. Georgia is way less antagonistic towards Moscow. And in Pipelineistan, Russia influenced Azerbaijan's decision to privilege the Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TAP) over the perennially doomed Nabucco West, and immediately moved to solidify energy cooperation between Azerbaijan's SOCAR and Russia's Rosneft. Both Georgia and Azerbaijan are considered as proverbial "staunch" US allies.

In Europe, every cruise ship pilot on the Rhine knows about Russia's strategic partnership with Germany. On negotiations on natural gas deals with Italy, France or Poland, for instance, the name of the Russian game is to secure long-term contracts with plenty of price breaks and tax schemes.

In Central and Eastern Europe Vlad is also - what else - on a roll, with Russia buying scores of strategic manufacturing, chemical and transport assets.

Then there's the crucial Trans-Siberian gambit. I did the Trans-Siberian twice, in winter, in the early 1990s and then in the late 1990s; it's one hell of a trip. At the time it was mostly about impoverished Russians buying everything in sight in China and wily Chinese selling everything they could in Russia. Nowadays it's all about heavy cargo. The Trans-Siberian moves no less than 120 million tons of cargo a year - and counting; that's at least 13% of container trade between Europe and Asia. Russia is investing in a US\$17 billion expansion and adding 55 million extra tons of cargo capacity.

Add to it tripling the capacity of Russia's Pacific coast terminals by 2020; the expansion of St Petersburg's port; Siemens supplying 675 extra cargo electric locomotives as part of a \$3.2 billion deal.

The name of the game here is Russia increasing its export of raw commodities by all means available. At least 250,000 barrels of oil a day - and counting - move from Russia to Asia. The upgraded Trans-Siberian will do wonders for Europe-Asia trade. Via the Trans-Siberian, Asian products reach Europe in 10 days; by sea, from South Korea or Japan, it's at least 28 days to Germany. No wonder Japan and South Korea are huge Trans-Siberian fans. And from a European point of view, nothing beats the cheaper, faster Trans-Siberian way to Asia.

Ain't got a clue

Cold War? That's part of the nostalgia business. With a comatose Europe; multiple frictions between Europe and the US; Beijing looking inward trying to solve the puzzle of tweaking its development model; and a paralyzed Obama administration, Moscow has identified the perfect opening and has embarked in no holds-barred, strategic commercial expansion.

The cluelessness of the Obama administration - not to mention US Think Tankland - cannot be overemphasized. Nobody in the Beltway has articulated a sound Russian policy - apart from demonizing Putin. That suits Vlad the Hammer fine; he's busy carefully constructing a new strategic reality not only in Europe's periphery but at the core as well. Russia is back - with a bang.

In this larger scheme of things, drifting towards a post-Post Cold War environment, the Snowden affair is just a piece of the puzzle. And here's where the personal perfectly mirrors the political. Vlad the Hammer knows exactly what he's doing - while Obama the wimp looks like a deer caught in a Trans-Siberian locomotive's headlights.

Notes:

1. In wishing Bush well, Putin has message for Obama, Reuters, August 8, 2013.
2. What's the Point of a Summit?, The New York Times, August 7, 2013.
3. Saudi offers Russia deal to scale back Assad support - sources, Reuters, August 7, 2013.