

Obama's overture to Putin has paid off

By M. K. BHADRAKUMAR

There is no reason to doubt the disclosure by the unnamed senior State Department official who briefed the media even as U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry was heading for Sochi, Russia, to meet President Vladimir Putin on Tuesday, to the effect that the "Secretary and (Russian Foreign Minister Sergey) Lavrov have been talking for some time about when the conditions might be ripe, and we (the U.S.) obviously wanted to make sure that if he (Kerry) was going to make the trip (to Russia), he'd get a chance to talk to the main decision maker (read Putin)."

Indeed, there was an inevitability about yesterday's meeting at Sochi and what happened is in the best traditions of the denouement of Russian-American tensions, historically speaking. The partisans on both sides who fought the media war through past year probably thought that the "New Cold War" was for real or that they were witnessing were the birth pangs of a new world order. They must be feeling let down.

Of course, the humility in the tone of the senior State Department Official is striking. The Russians have shown that they could hunker down like nobody's business when it comes to defending their core interests, and the Obama administration has understood that.

More importantly, the U.S. also understands that from now on the law of diminishing returns will be at work.

Simply put, the Chinese have made their appearance on the strategic landscape of Eurasia for the first time in history, and the U.S. badly needs Russia's cooperation in the Middle East, more than at any time since the Cold War ended.

On the other hand, for all their bravado, the Russian elites also have understood that the future scenario for their economy remains grim if the western embargo on finance, investment and trade continue relentlessly. They realize too that at this rate they may eventually have to settle for a role as China's junior partner. The world at large may sympathize with Russia's plight and isolation, but life moves on, leaving the elites in Moscow to cope with the deepening economic recession as best as they could on their own faltering steam.

In retrospect, the Russians placed unrealistically high hopes on the independent foreign policies toward Russia on the part of the U.S.' European allies. Even Greece caved in, finally.

Finally, was it really worthwhile to humiliate the U.S. and complicate its ties with close allies through the Edward Snowden saga? Moscow could have easily foreseen, as Beijing indeed did, that the Empire would certainly strike back viciously. There are no easy answers here.

On balance, therefore, it is improper to assess the outcome of Kerry's parleys in Sochi in terms of "breakthroughs." None was expected, either. But, the main purpose of his mission has been achieved – the ice has been broken in the Russian-American

relations. Also, the two talks in Sochi totaling over eight hours did cover a fair amount of ground.

In the media briefing, both Kerry and Lavrov downplayed the differences over Ukraine and instead noticeably played up the shared interest in finding a “comprehensive” solution. The talks in Sochi seem to have led to an understanding that neither side will do anything to precipitate fresh tensions. This would have a salutary effect on the “hawks” in Kiev as well.

The U.S. and Russia have agreed to launch a joint effort to kick-start intra-Syrian peace talks. Kerry seems to have succeeded in extracting an assurance that Moscow will not do anything to upset the apple cart of the nuclear negotiations with Iran. Quite possibly, the transfer of S-300 missiles to Iran will be kept in abeyance for several months.

Kerry disclosed that the U.S.’s summit meeting with GCC leaders in Washington and Camp David figured in the discussions. Both Kerry and Lavrov stressed strong commonality of interests in fighting the Islamic State and Al-Nusra Front. For sure, Saudi Arabia and Turkey will get the message that the Obama administration will not back their game plan on Syria. The Saudis will also feel uneasy that the U.S. and Russia intend to jointly pursue the path of UN mediation in Yemen, which makes the military campaign untenable.

Very little has been divulged as to what really transpired at the Sochi talks regarding the NATO’s plans to return to the Libyan theatre. The Russians were blocking a UN Security Council mandate being made available to the NATO to (re)launch the military intervention.

But the tenor of Lavrov’s remarks about fighting terrorism within the ambit of international law would suggest a mellowing of the Russian threat to block any UN Security Council resolution on Libya. Kerry flew from Sochi to Turkey to attend the NATO foreign ministers meeting where the alliance’s impending intervention in Libya is listed as a key agenda item.

Doesn’t this add up as sufficient enough outcome to make Kerry’s mission every bit worthwhile? Most certainly, yes. Obama’s overture to Putin has been very timely. The U.S. will be in a far better position in the period ahead to tackle the burning issues in the Middle East.

Equally, the sigh of relief in Moscow is almost audible. From the Russian viewpoint, the West’s boycott of Moscow has ended. We may expect European statesmen to travel to Moscow as before. Indeed, as the U.S.-Russia collaboration on regional conflicts advances, it will have positive fallout on the bilateral relations between the two big powers. (Last week, Washington had signaled willingness to engage Moscow in talks relating to the U.S.’ missile defence program.)

Both Washington and Moscow are in a chastened mood today, as the media briefings in Sochi strongly suggest. They peered into the abyss and didn’t like what they saw.

In the final analysis, Obama took a high risk by making the overture to Russia. His critics and detractors are bound to pounce on him, as they would only see his overture to Putin as yet another U-turn on a crucial foreign policy front.

But then, what distinguishes President Obama is the high level of intellectuality that he brings to bear on America's foreign policies. He is infinitely proud of the American Dream and yet he knows that he is presiding over the concluding phase of the American Century in world politics. Presiding over the winding up of America's "unipolar moment" was never going to be easy. He is doing it as calmly, as gracefully, as methodically as he possibly can.

Evidently, he is outstripping America's political class, large sections of the intelligentsia and the media – and, of course, annoying friends and allies in Central Europe who clamor for a hard line on Russia – Poland and the Baltic states, in particular.

Obama made three cardinal errors of judgment on Russia. One, he allowed the U.S. interference in Russia's domestic politics to continue with the objective of changing the political calculus in the Kremlin in a direction that would serve America's global interests. True, the U.S. had gotten used to stringing the Russian elites and once even had arranged Boris Yeltsin's re-election as president (1996).

But Obama could have sized up that the times had changed. At the end of the day, by any yardstick, Putin won a legitimate mandate and he is an extraordinarily popular politician. The U.S. could have left it at that when Putin got returned to the Kremlin as president in 2012. Indeed, the appointment of Robert McFaul, the famous expert on color revolution, as ambassador to Russia, was a disastrous error of judgment and a needless provocation.

Second, Obama underestimated Russia's resolve to maintain a buffer on its western borders, which has been the traditional invasion route from Europe. Washington literally forced Putin's hands on Crimea and eastern Ukraine. What happened was not Putin's choice. In the obsessive drive to demonize Putin, it is often overlooked that he desires a partnership with the West, but on equal terms. The Russian "hyper sensitivity" is not difficult to comprehend.

Third, Obama has been obstinate in his refusal to acknowledge Russia's legitimate aspirations as a global power. He went one step ahead of his immediate predecessors – Clinton and George W. Bush – and assumed that the U.S. could even do without the "selective engagement" of Russia to address global issues and regional conflicts that are of critical importance to the U.S. interests.

How could such an erudite mind and profound intellect have got it all so very wrong? Of course, Obama's familiarity with Russian politics has been limited and he has allowed himself to be led by the seasoned "Russia hands" in the U.S. foreign-policy establishment who are weaned on Cold War era politics. The result has been that he ended up pursuing the very same containment strategy toward Russia that was ushered in by the Bill Clinton administration in the early nineties.

It has proved to be a road to nowhere, because the Russia that Bill Clinton in turn hoodwinked, bullied and pushed around no longer exists today. The lingering

question today is whether Obama is intending a clean break with all that happened leading to the breakdown in relations with Russia. Significantly, Kerry's entourage to Sochi had a notable absentee – Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland, the mastermind behind the “regime change” in Kiev in February last year.