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The Morning Line

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ANALYSIS AIR DATE: Aug. 1, 2013

Despite Tension Over Snowden, U.S. and Russia Seem Reluctant to Upset Diplomacy

SUMMARY

Russia's offer of asylum to NSA leaker Edward Snowden has U.S. officials weighing whether to cancel President Barack Obama's upcoming summit with President Vladimir Putin. Will it affect long-term diplomacy between the two nations? Jeffrey Brown gets an update on the Snowden story from Paul Sonne of The Wall Street Journal.

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Transcript

A short time ago, I spoke to Paul Sonne of The Wall Street Journal in Moscow.

Paul, thanks for joining us.

So, how much of a surprise was this in Moscow?

PAUL SONNE, The Wall Street Journal: I think that it wasn't a particular surprise.

I think there was a lot of writing on the wall here that the Kremlin was going to make this decision. And the real question is why was the Kremlin predisposed to granting Edward Snowden asylum? I think there's probably a number of factors at play there.

One of those is that Russia is sort of -- it's very conscious of double standards here. It feels like the West and the U.S. wouldn't necessarily be predisposed to expel a Russian asylum seeker, so they shouldn't necessarily expel a U.S. asylum seeker. And I think there's an element that this would sort of play well among the more nationalist elements of Vladimir Putin's constituency.

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And then finally I think there's an element here of just who's boss. This is an ability of one of those moments where Vladimir Putin can show that he has the upper hand and that can play well among his constituency.

JEFFREY BROWN: An aide to President Putin played down the potential for any impact on U.S./Russia relations. What do you make of that?

PAUL SONNE: Yes, I think what you see is both the U.S. and Russia trying to do sort of two things at once here.

One is to say, you know, we really want this guy or we're not handing this guy over, and then the thing that's underlining that is comments coming from both sides saying, we don't want this to affect our relations. So what Russia is sort of saying is, we can't give him back to you, we're going to keep him here. And the White House is saying, you have to hand him over. But on the other hand, we want to deal with things like Syria and disarmament in other -- North Korea, Iran. We don't want that to upset the diplomacy that we have been working on in the last couple of months.

JEFFREY BROWN: Well, on the American side, how much anger are you picking up in Washington and also there in Moscow from the embassy or other Americans?

PAUL SONNE: Yes. So I think what's actually interesting is that Jay Carney today, the White House spokesman, didn't say anything that much stronger than he's been saying throughout the entire Snowden affair since Snowden arrived here in late June.

He said the White House is extremely disappointed but they don't want to cut off relations with Russia. He did say that this may call into question the summit that has been planned in Moscow in early September between Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama. But in terms of any other retribution or response, you know, we aren't seeing an escalated level of rhetoric from the White House, though we have seen some of that from Congress, especially from Republican senators.

JEFFREY BROWN: But your sense from Russian officials is that they're not particularly worried about the summit or G20 meeting being impacted?

PAUL SONNE: I think there is a real possibility that Barack Obama is not going to come to the summit in early September that he was planning on attending with Vladimir Putin, which is ahead of the G20 summit in St. Petersburg.

And I think you have to look at two reasons for that. One is if he comes here and he appears to be shaking hands with President Putin and Edward Snowden is nearby somewhere else, that doesn't necessarily make him look good to the American public. But the other thing that I think a lot of people are missing here is that it's possible that there are just not going to be any results from that summit and it doesn't behoove President Obama to come here and then have yet another awkward meeting or an awkward press conference with President Putin like he had in Northern Ireland a month ago, where he doesn't have any results to show.

It doesn't seem like the U.S. and Russia are making any progress on Syria. They don't really have anything to show for disarmament. The speech that Barack Obama made in Berlin a couple of weeks ago was met with a very tepid response here in Moscow. So I think part of this is also a calculation on the White House's part that not only is this going to look bad if Snowden is in Barack Obama's airspace while he's here. It's also that they just might not have anything to show for that summit.

JEFFREY BROWN: And, finally, what happens next for Snowden? Is there an expectation there that this one-year grant of asylum really means something that could stretch on without limit?

PAUL SONNE: Yes, I wouldn't necessarily take the one-year limit of this -- quote, unquote -- "temporary asylum" to be the amount of time that Snowden is going to spend in Russia. That is a renewable period.

He could be here indefinitely. And from what his lawyer is saying, it certainly seems like he's going to be here for the foreseeable future. In terms of what he's doing here, where he is, all those questions remain unanswered. His lawyer has been very coy about where he's planning to live, where he actually went today after he got in the taxi outside of the airport.

And, you know, he's saying that we don't want to give out that information because this is obviously a wanted alleged U.S. criminal, and he has serious safety concerns so we're going to not disclose where he is going to be staying here in Moscow.

So it remains to be seen what he's going to end up doing here. The head of one of Russia's biggest social networks came out today and offered him a job as a programmer. But one of the main things that we know is that the requirement for giving him asylum, President Putin came out very clearly and said he needed to stop his political activities. He couldn't continue to sort of be a thorn in the side of the U.S. government while claiming asylum and staying here in Russia.

So whatever he does, it's probably not necessarily going to be a public role.

JEFFREY BROWN: Paul Sonne of The Wall Street Journal in Moscow, thanks so much.

PAUL SONNE: Thanks.



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William Stollar • 16 hours ago

Having Russia give asylum to Snowden is the best thing that the citizens of America could hope for. For all intents and purposes, Snowden is in a frigid and dank prison run by a dictatorial regime. His aspects for a good life are nil, he will be spied on continuously, and his every move will be monitored.

If he were to be brought back to the United States and prosecuted, the trial would cost American citizens millions of dollars and completely divide the people, plus his eventual conviction would cost more millions of dollars over the course of his appeals and incarceration.

Let the Russkies have him. Das vedonya, Ivan!!!

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Domingo Trassens → William Stollar • 4 hours ago

I agree that Edward Snowden will not be a free man in Russia.

There will see him every minute, also when he sleeps or in the bathroom.