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Snowden "on a Leash": The High-Stakes Game in Russia

Posted By [Ariel Cohen](#) On July 22, 2013 @ 10:49 am In [American Leadership](#) | [No Comments](#)



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Guardian/Glenn Greenwald/Laura Poitras/EPA/Newscom

President Obama is considering [cancellation](#) [2] of his summit with Russian president Vladimir Putin at the September G-20 confab over Russia's harboring of the American fugitive Edward Snowden. This would be the first time since the end of the Cold War that the U.S. cancels a previously scheduled summit.

Snowden gave a [press conference](#) [3] in the transit area of Sheremetyevo Moscow airport Friday July 12. Human rights activists and Russian foreign propagandists, such as Andranik Migranyan, served as props. Snowden asked Russia for a temporary political asylum.

Last week, there were also reports of the defector applying for Russian citizenship. This high-stakes move deeply harms Russian-American relations.

White House spokesman [Jay Carney](#) [4] said that Washington does not want the situation to harm relations with Russia but added that the White House considers it wrong for the Kremlin to grant Snowden a "propaganda platform."

Snowden may have [given](#) [5] Russia a down payment for [asylum and protection](#) [6]: all or parts of his highly classified treasure trove of documents stolen from his employer, the U.S. government.

As there is no serious U.S.-Russian strategic partnership, and relations are already strained, any destabilizing factor such as this becomes a serious problem. While pragmatists believe that the White House and the Kremlin value their relations with each other too much to risk them over an escaped systems administrator, the damage to bilateral ties has been done—and is still escalating.

The current U.S.-Russian relations are based on past achievements and failures. But they are increasingly

poisoned by a domestic crackdown, exemplified by Thursday's sentencing of the Yale-educated anti-corruption whistleblower Alexei [Navalny to five years in prison](#) ^[7] on fabricated charges by the Lenin district court in the city of Kirov. This is a part of the ideological rejection of the West and its values of freedom by the Russian ruling elite.

It is significant how quickly the Russian state media trumpeted Snowden's accusations and revelations. Moscow is using both the intelligence windfall and the public relations boon from Snowden's defection. Russia is reverting to its Cold War posture, refusing to return Snowden to America without losing points.

If the Snowden standstill is not resolved by September, it is likely to spoil the next summit between Obama and Putin at the G20 meeting in St. Petersburg. Other irritants, especially Russia's position on Syria and its domestic crackdown, have added to Washington's growing unhappiness with Moscow.

Sooner or later, the United States might react asymmetrically, either by expanding the Magnitsky List, increasing deliveries of liquefied shale gas to Europe (thereby reducing the market share of Russian-owned Gazprom), or freezing investments in joint Arctic energy projects.

If the White House and the Kremlin don't find a compromise, Obama's Russian [reset](#) ^[8] policy will be in a deeper freeze than it is in today, and the damage to U.S.–Russian relations will be great—and long-term.

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[1] Image: <http://blog.heritage.org/wp-content/uploads/Snowden130619.jpg>

[2] cancellation: http://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/19/world/europe/moscow-trip-for-obama-may-be-off-as-snowden-tensions-build.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

[3] press conference: <http://world.time.com/2013/07/16/ria-novosti-snowden-submits-asylum-request/>

[4] Jay Carney: <http://www.timesnow.tv/Russia-US-ties-more-important-than-Snowden-scandal/articleshow/4432241.cms>

[5] given: <http://world.time.com/2013/07/10/snowden-in-moscow-what-are-russian-authorities-doing-with-the-nsa-whistleblower/>

[6] asylum and protection: <http://blog.heritage.org/2013/07/01/snowden-asylum-request-another-nail-in-the-coffin-of-obama-russia-reset-policy/>

[7] Navalny to five years in prison: <http://en.rian.ru/politics/20130718/182299516/Russian-Opposition-Leader-Navalny-Found-Guilty--Court.html>

[8] reset: <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/08/reset-regret-heritage-foundation-recommendations>

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