Obama v. Putin - A Tale of a Posturing President

Less than two weeks ago President Obama, sitting for an interview with The Economist magazine, basically went ‘old school’ on President Putin, dismissing his Presidency, his country, and the future of both. While his words were certainly blatant and blunt, what might be even more revealing is the subtle subtext hidden inside his cavalier attitude: apparently even Presidents are not above being petulant.

There can be little debate about President Obama’s intent to insult and offend, declaring that ‘it was important to keep things in perspective. Russia doesn’t make anything…Immigrants aren’t rushing to Moscow in search of opportunity. The life expectancy of the Russian male is around 60 years old. The population is shrinking.’ Judging by these rather truculent comments, it is a wonder Russia is not presently a ghost town, full of nothing but garment-rending females desperately in search of goods from empty shelves. The reality behind these comments is far more interesting, however: Russia is the world’s third-largest oil producer and second-largest natural gas producer. It is true Russia’s domestic goods production is no doubt not where Putin would like, but last time anyone checked the President of the United States was not criticizing Saudi Arabia for failing to manufacture more klotschkys for WalMarts all over America. To be more completely honest, the United States doesn’t do all that great a job of manufacturing things either, given Americans have been complaining about the exporting of such jobs to Asia for the last three decades. So while America leans on other countries by pure force of political will and diplomatic power, Russia could technically shut off its natural resource spigots, if it wanted to be just as petulant and truculent as Obama’s interview, and pretty much send all of Europe into a total energy panic and crisis. So yes, Mr. President, it might be a good idea indeed to keep things in perspective: like not taking cheap pot-shots at a country that actually has real political power and admittedly has a rich cultural history of doing things that might be construed as politically rash at times.

Obama went on to describe Putin’s presidency as an office causing ‘short-term trouble for political gain that will cause long-term trouble for Russia.’ There is a bit of incredulity when examining this simple provocative statement. In the past I have called this ‘Wonka Vision’ politics, from the famous movie ‘Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory.’ Wonka Vision politics is when a country basically ignores facts on the ground and reality in diplomacy in order to focus exclusively on the talking points, on the political vision it wishes to force onto the global stage. There is a strong element of this when looking at how the United States is characterizing Russia over the Eastern Ukraine crisis. Today in Washington DC you will find more people who think Russia has already openly invaded Eastern Ukraine and is trying to steal the rest of the country for itself, causing mayhem and destruction along the way, rather than find people who understand that a convoy of 250 humanitarian aid trucks are driving in to the region to donate aid and assistance, even allowing Ukrainian authorities to inspect the trucks before they reach their final destinations.

Keep in mind, Obama is giving an interview to a respected international news magazine. He is crafting an image of Russia that is not in fact in line with actual Russian maneuvers on the ground but is in line instead with the talking points America wants the world to believe. This diplomatic massaging is not just cavalier: it is dangerous because it inspires like-minded recalcitrance from the Russian side, breaks down opportunities for open discussion and negotiation, and signals to outside actors and third parties to choose sides, thus exacerbating the crisis rather than
defusing it. All of this because of poor words chosen on purpose by the ‘leader of the free world.’ So far this of course ignores the true point and purpose behind this war of words: President Obama is quite frankly flummoxed that President Putin has dismissively laughed off his positions, his entreaties, and his sanctions. This in real terms is nothing more than a schoolyard standoff, with the two popular boys standing opposite one another firing taunts back and forth. The rest of the school is on the playground, watching, fascinated, intrigued to see how it actually plays out. Will it go beyond simple taunting? How bad will the insults get? With punches be thrown? Who will be the first to blink? Oh, the hyperbole and hype when schoolyard drama becomes a giant metaphor for the global stage.

What is disappointing is that this drama, this war of fake words and childish insults, is originating from the United States, not Russia. Even worse, the world is subconsciously relying on Russia to be the one to show restraint and diplomatic maturity! And even though the world is particularly slow to recognize this fact, truth be told, Russia has risen to the challenge and has shown restraint. Let us hope that in this particular schoolyard media showdown some of this will actually start to rub off on President Obama. For if it does, then real discussions and negotiations can begin anew and American-Russian relations can once more get serious and move beyond these lame attempts to conjure a neo-Cold War that is in the interests and objectives of no one. Well, at least, not in the interests and objectives of anyone who desires peace and tranquility between two old rivals. This playground certainly IS big enough for the two of them. Someone might just want to whisper that fact into the ear of Obama.

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