
EU DIVIDED AND SIDELINED, AGAIN, ON RUSSIA

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Syrian crisis hijacks this weeks Brussels summit debate on keeping in place sanctions against Moscow.

EU leaders had planned to use their autumn summit this week in Brussels to clarify their approach to Russia.

Scratch that.

The fast-worsening relationship with Moscow looks to be increasingly out of Europes control □ driven by events on the ground in Syria and by the United States, which now, as much as ever, is speaking for the West.

Any chance that Thursdays scheduled dinner-time discussion would set a path toward easing sanctions against Russia over Ukraine has been erased by the outrage over Russias bombing of Aleppo. And while some EU leaders are expected to push for new sanctions over Syria, officials concede it will be virtually impossible to reach consensus on new punitive action.

Instead, the 28 leaders will be left to ponder if they want Europe to continue to play a supporting role to America. That, in turn, is leading Moscow to point the finger of blame back at Europe for the recent deterioration in relations.

The lack of European independence is one of the most pervasive subjects of complaints in the Russian foreign policy, said Maxim Samorukov, an analyst at the Carnegie Moscow Center. Russia constantly claims that the Europeans, under pressure of Cold War inertia, continue to excessively rely on U.S. patronage, that they do not formulate, let alone defend, their own national interests.

Lavrov-Kerry show

This weekend offered the latest example of an EU sidelined on Russia and left to follow the U.S. lead.

On Saturday, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry met in Lausanne, Switzerland, with the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, after announcing on October 3 that the United States had broken off bilateral talks with Russia because of the carnage in Aleppo. Officials from Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Turkey also attended.

European powers, however, were excluded. EU officials conceded that any hope for a breakthrough in Syria meant relying on Kerry. We have to trust the judgment, one EU diplomat said. Because we have got nothing else.

We would wish the European Union to be strong, united, and more independent in its decision-making.

Kerry flew to London on Sunday to brief his counterparts from the U.K., France and Germany. There, Kerry and the British foreign secretary, Boris Johnson, raised the possibility of sanctions against Russia over Syria, insisting all options are on the table.

The divisions within the EU and the lack of support on either side of the Atlantic for any expanded, coordinated military intervention in Syria made the threat sound hollow.

Sanctions rethink

Thursdays dinner conversation in Brussels was scheduled after repeated demands by some EU leaders, principally Italys Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, for a proper debate on longer-term Russia policy. These more dovish voices on Russia in the EU wanted to avoid another quick renewal of

sanctions and at least set the stage to ease them, if not this week then at some point down the road.

Last month, U.S. Vice President Joe Biden said that there were at least five European countries eager to end the economic sanctions imposed after Russia annexed Ukraines Crimean peninsula in 2014. Biden didnt name names, but Austria, Cyprus, Italy, Greece, Hungary and Slovakia are among the countries that have expressed opposition to the sanctions.

Officials planning the summit say the conversation will almost certainly turn to recent events, including the bombing of Aleppo, Russias provocative military maneuvers in Europe and concerns about the Kremlins support for far-right political parties in the EU. The sanctions discussion has been pushed further down the agenda by Syria.

Kaynak/Source: