

Snubbed by Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin charms other players at G20 Summit

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Russia's President Vladimir Putin is seen during the G20 summit in Buenos Aires, Argentina November 30, 2018. REUTERS/Marcos Brindicci

Buenos Aires (Argentina): Russia is putting on a brave face after US President Donald Trump abruptly junked a summit with Russian President Vladimir Putin. It's all about internal US politics and "anti-Russian hysteria," Russian officials shrug.

But Trump's snub was a clear kick to Putin just as he arrived at a Group of 20 summit where Western leaders banded together to denounce Russia's actions in Ukraine.

So Putin turned elsewhere for attention.

He snubbed Turkey's president for the time slot he had reserved for Trump, and sought to strengthen his alliance with China and other non-Western economies. And he cozied up at Friday's round-table talks to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, somewhat of a fellow outcast at the G-20 over his suspected role in the killing of a dissident Saudi journalist.

Putin and Trump "said hi to each other," according to the Russian leader's spokesman "but didn't shake hands or otherwise interchange, even during the "family photo" when leaders rub elbows as they get into place and usually exchange small talk.

Putin himself hasn't publicly addressed Trump's rejection, but hinted at the potential fallout if the leaders of the world's two biggest nuclear powers can't talk to each other: Putin said in Buenos Aires that the US intention to opt out of a Cold War-era nuclear pact "creates risks of an uncontrollable arms race."

As the summit opened, European leaders lined up to criticize what one called Russia's "aggression" on Ukraine "the weekend seizure of Ukrainian ships and crew members near Crimea. The Group of 7 foreign ministers issued a statement demanding the seamen's release.

The standoff was the official reason that Trump cancelled his meeting with Putin, calling what's happening in Ukraine "every bad."

The Russian interpretation of the cancellation, however, echoed that of some of Trump's critics at home, who noted the move came amid new challenges for Trump in the probe into Russia's alleged role in his 2016 election campaign.

"If the domestic situation and the pressure from Russophobes like Ukraine and its sponsors prevents the US president from developing normal ties with the Russian president 'we will wait for another chance," Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, adding "love can't be forced."

Prominent Russian lawmaker Leonid Slutsky called Trump's cancellation "announced unexpectedly on Twitter

just hours before the G-20 kicked off â€œa show.â€• He said Trump probably fears that if he meets with Putin, his domestic rivals â€œwill call him a Russian agent.â€•

Isolated by Western democracies, Putin pushed instead to inject new strength into the so-called BRICS grouping of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa.

â€œThe five can, for a good reason, play a more significant role in the global financial system, strive to continue the reform of the IMF and strengthen our influence in the Fund,â€• Putin said at a BRICS meeting.

He wasnâ€™t avoiding Western critics, though. Putin met Franceâ€™s president Friday â€œcarefully drawing a map of Ukraineâ€™s coastline to explain Russiaâ€™s claims that its seizures of the Ukrainian ships was justified â€œand will see Germanyâ€™s chancellor Saturday.

Still, what Putin really wants is to make a deal with Trump.

The Russian leader, who views global politics as a cynical power play, sees himself as a consummate negotiator who can advance Moscowâ€™s interests through strong personal contacts with foreign leaders.

He repeatedly voiced a belief that Trump sincerely wants to improve ties with Russia but has been prevented from doing so by his political foes.

â€œPlaying the Russian card has become a convenient tool for solving internal political problems,â€• Putin said recently. â€œI hope it will end someday. Maybe it will happen in 2020 when the next U.S. presidential election is held and he will no longer have to constantly look back at those who engage in anti-Russian rhetoric.â€•

Putinâ€™s wish list is topped by a desire to see an end to crippling anti-Russian sanctions imposed by the US and its allies for Russiaâ€™s annexation of Ukraineâ€™s Crimean Peninsula, its support for separatist insurgents in eastern Ukraine and other actions by Moscow.

Putin also wants to talk to Trump about his intention to opt out of the 1987 Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty over alleged Russian violations. Putin strongly denied any Russian breaches of the pact.

The Russian leader has warned that if the United States deploys intermediate-range missiles that are currently banned under the treaty to Europe, Russia will have to target the nations that would host them.

Such weapons are seen as extremely destabilizing as they take just a few minutes to reach targets, leaving virtually no time for decision-makers and dramatically increasing the possibility of a nuclear conflict over a false attack warning or technical glitch.

There was a risk that the Trump-Putin meeting could have worked out badly for both of them.

After the summit with Putin in July, Trump was widely criticized for failing to publicly denounce Russiaâ€™s interference in the 2016 US election and appearing to accept Putinâ€™s denials of such activity. More anti-Russian sanctions followed and relations soured further.

- AP