

Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin grappling for peace in Syria



A double-chested shirt-fronting: Vladimir Putin and Barack Obama before holding talks on the sidelines of the G20 summit in Hangzhou last night.
AP, The Australian, 12:00AM September 6, 2016

Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin last night failed to force a breakthrough in negotiations over a ceasefire for Syria, but agreed to keep looking for a path to provide humanitarian relief to thousands of besieged civilians in the war-ravaged country. After a 90-minute huddle on the sidelines of the G20 summit in the Chinese city of Hangzhou, the US and Russian presidents directed their top diplomats to return to talks quickly, likely later this week

Mr Obama acknowledged the leaders were challenged by “gaps of trust” between the rival powers.

Significant sticking points remain in the negotiations over a creation of an unlikely US--Russian military partnership focusing firepower on “common enemies” in Syria, he said “Given the gaps of trust that exist, that’s a tough negotiation,” Mr Obama told a press conference closing the Group of 20 summit. “We haven’t yet closed the gaps.”

Mr Obama didn’t detail the trouble spots, although he suggested the US has concerns about Russia holding up its end of the bargain and enforcing the terms. Any deal would depend on Moscow using its influence with Bashar al-Assad to persuade the Syrian dictator to ground

planes and stop the assault on rebels. Mr Barack said the aim was to reach “meaningful, serious, verifiable cessations of hostilities in Syria”.

A US official said Washington was eager to find an agreement on Syria quickly, mindful of the deteriorating conditions around the besieged city of Aleppo.

The conversation came hours after US and Russian negotiators acknowledged a recent round of intense talk had come up short. Secretary of State John Kerry and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov have for weeks been trying to broker a deal that would curb the violence between the forces of Assad and moderate rebels backed by the US. The deal depends on the two sides agreeing to closer militarily co-ordination against extremist groups operating in Syria, something the Russians have long sought and the US has resisted.

Mr Obama’s meeting with Mr Putin comes as the Russia leader is playing a prominent role in the US presidential campaign. US officials blame Russian intelligence for a hack on the Democratic National Committee that resulted in a leak of emails damaging to its presidential nominee, Hillary Clinton. Mr Putin has denied the Kremlin was involved, but cheered the release of the information. The official said Mr Obama raised concerns about cybersecurity with Mr Putin.

Mr Obama and Mr Putin also discussed the conflict in Ukraine, where Russian-backed separatists have been fighting the government, and the implementation of the agreement to stop the violence, the official said.

Mr Obama met earlier with French President Francois Hollande and German Chancellor Angela Merkel on the same issue. Talks between Mr Obama and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan laid bare the two NATO allies’ diverging interests in Syria, with Mr Erdogan challenging Mr Obama on US support for Kurds fighting Islamic State. The Kurds are the most effective US-backed anti-ISIS force, but the Turks consider them terrorists.

In a show of force for the G20 leaders, North Korea yesterday test-fired three ballistic missiles into the Sea of Japan. They were fired from the North’s Hwangju county at about 12pm (1pm AEST), a spokesman for Seoul’s defence ministry said.

The sabre-rattling follows the North’s submarine-launched ballistic missile test two weeks ago. “They are speculated to be Rodong missiles with a range of 1000km and were fired without navigational warning to Japan,” the spokesman said. “North Korea’s ballistic missile launch is a direct violation of UN Security Council resolutions, aimed at showing off its nuclear and missile capabilities during the G20 summit.”

The defence ministry in Tokyo said the missiles were estimated to have fallen into Japan’s maritime exclusive economic zone. “The ministry expresses serious concern over the missile launches as they pose a grave threat to Japan’s national security,” a ministry statement said. The North’s latest tests sparked strong protests from senior Japanese and US officials.

The launches “are a grave security provocation and can never be permitted”, Japanese Foreign Minister Fumio Kishida said in Tokyo. “We have lodged a strong protest to North Korea.” A senior US administration official in Hangzhou also condemned the launches as a

threat to its allies and to civilian air travel, and vowed diplomatic action against the Pyongyang regime.

AP, AFP