

Obama's Russia Policy: The Wages and Pitfalls of the Reset¹

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Among the foreign policy priorities with which President Obama came to office was to set US-Russia relations on a qualitatively post-Cold War footing – to achieve what Vice President Biden first famously called a “reset” in the relationship.² There was a clear logic in this objective. The Obama administration's early push to build partnerships in support of US multilateral re-engagement could ill afford the anti-US rhetoric and default spoiler settings that had come to characterise Russian foreign policy under Putin's presidency. While Bill Clinton had incorrectly assumed that Russia would be democratised and George W. Bush that an authoritarian Russia could be ignored, Obama has instead pragmatically focused on identifying areas in which Russia might be persuaded that its interests and those of the United States overlap.

The wages...

This approach has so far paid off. Giving Russia more win-win options – more, perhaps, than its long lapsed superpower status might otherwise justify – has led to constructive engagement on key US foreign and security policy priorities, notably, on arms control, Iran and Afghanistan. Whether intentionally or not, the reset metaphor has also usefully allowed Russian leaders to assume an implicit US admission of fault for past mismanagement of the relationship. Senior US officials have, for instance, publicly conceded past mistakes on both sides,³ while Obama denied – in his speech at Moscow's New Economic School in July 2009 – that any one nation could claim credit for ending the Cold War.⁴ This has helped to deconstruct the Putinist narrative of grievance, as well as stem anti-US sentiment in Russia. US officials are fond of citing polls that now have over 50% of Russians with a positive view of the United States, compared to less than 30% at the end of 2008.

For his part, Obama has learnt from the mistakes of his predecessor by not personalising the basis of US-Russia cooperation. The top-down nature of Kremlin decision-making has, however, required his frequent intervention – including several substantive phone conversations with Medvedev – to advance New START negotiations and P5+1

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² Speech by US Vice President Joe Biden, International Security Conference, Munich, 7 February 2009.

³ Speech by US Under Secretary of State Bill Burns, Center for American Progress, Washington, 14 April 2010.

⁴ Speech by US President Barack Obama, New Economic School, Moscow, 7 July 2009.

coordination on Iran. This, coupled with Putin's distaste for dealing with the United States, has helped to push the Obama-Medvedev relationship to the fore. For their part, Obama's chief Russia policy architects, Under Secretary of State Burns and National Security Council Senior Director McFaul, have been assiduous in their efforts to broaden contacts at all levels, as well as to be sensitive to uncertainties relating to a possible realignment of Russia's ruling tandem after the 2012 election. Their mantra remains to pitch substance over atmospherics and to make clear the administration's preference not to strike bargains with Russia on unrelated issues.

In the wake of their second summit meeting, in Washington in June 2010, and more than a dozen face-to-face encounters, Obama and Medvedev can boast an impressive list of achievements, most notably: conclusion of the first major nuclear arms reduction treaty, with comprehensive verification provisions, in almost 20 years; effective cooperation on Iran, including obtaining a forward-leaning fourth UN Security Council resolution, as well as Russia's decision to cancel the S-300 surface-to-air missile deal with Iran; and agreement on a northern transit route to Afghanistan, which has resulted in substantial savings on transportation costs for the NATO-led ISAF mission.

The Bilateral Commission, established at the July 2009 Moscow Summit, has enjoyed rather more mixed success, owing largely to the diversity of its working groups and the necessarily bureaucratic nature of its structure and organisation – as well as, possibly, a Russian predilection for process rather than results in some areas. Lessons learned from its predecessor, the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, have nonetheless allowed this new exercise dramatically to increase and intensify people-to-people contacts, including with influential Putin acolytes. The State Department's mistranslation of *reset* as *peregruzka*, or overload, may well have been a Freudian slip, given that the United States appears to have overwhelmed the Russian bureaucracy and its neo-Tsarist power structure with the sheer volume of its initiatives for advancing a more broadly based relationship.

...and the pitfalls

The accumulation of bilateral successes risks, however, overstating the durability of individual accomplishments, as well as understating the magnitude of challenges ahead. New START is a case in point. By codifying what would in any case be natural attrition in Russian strategic forces, the treaty imposes few concessions on Russia – a fact which Republicans repeatedly drew attention to in US Senate debate on the treaty. At the same time, New START concedes residual superpower trappings to Russia by maintaining the importance of strategic parity, which, coupled with Russia's at least rhetorical identification of NATO as its principal military threat, does little to acknowledge post-Cold War realities. Additionally, the vexed issues of missile defence cooperation, US prompt global strike and Russian tactical nuclear weapons promise protracted and difficult negotiations ahead. Heated Senate debate on the treaty, the marginal vote count in favour of ratification and the post-mid-term shift in power in Congress do not bode well for maintaining a forward-leaning US approach in line with Obama's ambitions in this area.

Further afield, Russia's cooperation on Iran will likely continue to be constrained by its aversion to any future rapprochement between Iran and the West, while its schizophrenic wish to see ISAF succeed as a mission but NATO fail as an alliance has made for uneven support on Afghanistan outside areas that impact on Moscow's interests in Central Asia.

Critics have suggested that gains from US-Russia cooperation depend on Obama's unwillingness to take Russia to task over Georgia and human rights, as well as his perceived lukewarm support for Central European allies. Such accusations have perhaps more to do with the Bush administration's over-servicing of former Warsaw Pact countries than Obama's pursuit of a Russia-first policy. Certainly, his administration has been a less ardent advocate of NATO enlargement and more critical of Georgia's leadership. Yet, since voicing concerns in an open letter to Obama on 16 July 2009, past and present Central European leaders have largely come around to the advantages of a better functioning US-Russia relationship.

There have been fewer dividends in relation to Georgia and Ukraine. While the United States has made no secret of its differences with Russia over Georgia's territorial integrity, it has not overtly exerted pressure on Russia to comply with its OSCE-brokered commitments. With an elected pro-Russia government, Ukraine has presented a different dilemma: the United States simply does not have the resources, connections or, possibly, inclination to compete with Russia in cutting deals with President Yanukovich. Belarus, for its part, has reverted to a hopelessly lost cause for Western engagement in the wake of the recent presidential election.

Next steps

As a measure of their optimism, US officials like to point – cautiously – to a discernible shift in Russian foreign policy towards a more pragmatic, cooperative approach. Whether or not the Obama administration can claim credit for this, the United States has at least shown Russia the dividends which could flow from enhanced cooperation. This is most palpably reflected in the Russian foreign policy paper leaked in May 2010, which identifies a “need to strengthen relations of mutual interdependence with the leading world powers, such as the European Union and the US,”⁵ as well as, more indirectly, in Medvedev's modernisation agenda. The fact that Russia has sought, in the tragic circumstances attending commemoration ceremonies at Katyn, rapprochement with Poland and moved to demarcate its border with Norway, in addition to partnering with the US on arms control, Iran and Afghanistan, suggests to US policy-makers that a rethink, however tenuous, is underway. Noteworthy also is the fact that Russia, gladdened by the emergence of more compliant leaders in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, has been remarkably restrained of late in its dealings closer to home, not having waged any major gas wars, threatened leaders, or incited civil war.

How Russia engages on looming challenges – which McFaul has prioritised as cooperation on missile defence, Russia's WTO accession, future European security

⁵ “Western-friendly foreign policy report leaked,” *The ISCIP Analyst* (Russian Federation), Vol XVI (13), 27 May 2010.

architecture and Medvedev's modernisation agenda⁶ – will demonstrate the extent of its willingness to comply with the Obama administration's preferred modus operandi of identifying shared interests as a means of pursuing US national interests. There will be temptation on Russia's part to push the United States to entertain grand bargains in certain areas, especially - and however unrealistically - on its perceived privileged interests in former Soviet states. Both sides, however, have demonstrated a relatively high level of comfort with agreeing to disagree, and there is now an increasingly even mix of interests on both sides. Immediate impediments that will need to be worked through include reluctance by the Pentagon to share sensitive military technology in relation to missile defence and Russia's slowness to create favourable conditions for foreign investment.

Perhaps the greatest risk to US-Russia cooperation relates to the possibility of Russia misreading the prerogatives that the Obama administration is willing to cede it and overstepping the mark in its 'near abroad' (which, tellingly, does not appear to be the subject of reconstructed thinking in the leaked foreign policy memo). However, Moscow's cautious approach to the outbreak of violence in southern Kyrgyzstan in April and close behind-the-scenes consultation with the US, coupled with its increasingly sophisticated soft(ish) power in Ukraine and elsewhere in the former Soviet periphery, suggests that there is no appetite for a return to the recriminations of August 2008. Indeed, some have suggested that Kyrgyzstan presents an opportunity for making competing stakes complementary ones.⁷ After a slow start, US engagement, including high-level visits to Kyrgyzstan, shows that the Obama administration is seizing this opportunity. Russia will nonetheless continue to push the envelope elsewhere, including in obtaining major concessions on, if not control over, gas pipelines on Ukrainian territory.

US officials have occasionally stated that Obama would be willing to disengage, should his administration's overtures to Russia not pay off.⁸ Such a situation is hard to imagine, given the importance of Russia – even if only in a passive way – to key US foreign and security priorities. Both sides, moreover, appear to be impatient to achieve 'normal' relations, with Russia being the far needier partner in light of the economic and demographic pressures it faces. To this end, US officials and think tankers are confident that the Obama administration has managed to impress the Russian leadership, including Putin, with its willingness to put words into action. Well aware that its prerogatives to do so would be constrained by the US mid-term electoral cycle, the administration submitted the US-Russia nuclear cooperation agreement to Congress and worked hard to push through Senate ratification of the New START, both of which managed to limp through Congressional scrutiny.

⁶ Address by Senior Director for Russia, National Security Council, Dr Michael McFaul, to the Peterson Institute for International Economic, Washington, 10 June 2010.

⁷ US Assistant Secretary of State, Robert Blake, noted at a seminar at Carnegie in Washington on 30 July 2010 that the "crisis has brought Russia and United States together in a region where so many people often suggest that we are rivals. President Medvedev and President Obama have even issued a joint statement on Kyrgyzstan at their last meeting, so we think that's a good and promising basis to build on."

⁸ Address by Senior Director for Russia, National Security Council, Dr Michael McFaul, to the Peterson Institute for International Economic, Washington, 10 June 2010.

To conclude, in response to calls by US conservatives for more accountability for Russia's actions in exchange for what they perceive as strategic concessions by the United States, the Obama administration will continue to hold to the advantages of an unsentimental but respectful marriage of convenience with Russia. To what extent this will remain possible in a Republican-dominated House and in the lead-up to the next presidential election remains to be seen. Ongoing success of the reset will, in any event, depend on clear evidence of the administration reaping dividends from the reset for US national interests – and on Russia not overplaying the very good hand that it has been dealt.