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Obama nation?: US foreign policy one year on: simply press the button?: the reality of resetting with Russia

Report

Original citation:

Kalinovsky, Artemy (2010) *Obama nation?: US foreign policy one year on: simply press the button?: the reality of resetting with Russia*. IDEAS reports - special reports, Kitchen, Nicholas (ed.) SR003. LSE IDEAS, London School of Economics and Political Science, London, UK.

This version available at: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/43584/>

Originally available from [LSE IDEAS](#)

Available in LSE Research Online: May 2012

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Simply Press the Button?

The Reality of Resetting with Russia

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By the end of the Bush era, Russian-American relations had reached a nadir unprecedented in the post Cold-War era. The millennium had started out well enough for the two old foes: Vladimir Putin was the first world leader to call Bush on 9/11, he threw his support behind the US-led effort in Afghanistan, and Bush looked into the former KGB man's eyes and saw his soul. From there, though, it was all downhill; the US and Russia found themselves on opposite sides of many of the biggest foreign policy issues of the decade: the war in Iraq, the Orange revolution in the Ukraine, and Iran's nuclear capability; on other issues, such as North Korea or the Israeli action in Lebanon, there was quieter, but significant disagreement. Russians swallowed Bush's withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty, but refused to accept a plan for a defensive missile shield placed in the Czech Republic and Poland. And then came the war in Georgia...

Russia did not feature as prominently in candidate Obama's speeches as other foreign policy issues seen to have been mismanaged by the Bush administration, like the confrontation with Iran or the war in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, President Obama came to office with a clear desire to overhaul the relationship and put it on different footing. This was a sensible instinct: Russia would be an important player in the areas the new administration planned to focus most: Afghanistan, where Russia could directly provide logistical support and influence its Central Asian neighbors to do the same; and Iran, where Russia had influence and would need to be included either for a successful sanctions regime or for a broader settlement of the nuclear issue.

A year later the relationship has made progress but remains stuck in the mud. On Afghanistan, Russia's agreement to provide transport for NATO supplies has meant a crucial alternative to the potentially perilous "southern" route through Pakistan. On Iran, Moscow's participation was crucial in the near-agreement reached in October 2009 that would have seen spent fuel from Iranian reactors going to Russia, which would ship it back in a form suitable only for civilian purposes. Additionally, President Medvedev has signaled a willingness to reconsider additional sanctions if other options fail. And the tone of the relationship has changed as well. Russia welcomed the abandonment of the missile shield the Bush administration had planned to place in the Czech Republic and Poland, and in return Moscow dropped its threat to place Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad, which would have seemed menacing to the eastern Europeans.

More problems remain unsolved than not, however. A new missile treaty seems close, but still not signed, with negotiators stuck (as often in arms control negotiations) on issues of verification. On Iran, Medvedev's suggestion that sanctions might be at some point inevitable were offset by comments from Foreign Minister Lavrov that sanctions would be "counterproductive." More broadly, there seems to be a disconnect arising from different expectations of what a reset means.

The reality is that the problems in the relationship are more profound than most US officials are willing to admit. The splits that took place during the Bush era coincided with a reevaluation (and to a large extent, a rejection) of everything associated with the 1990s, including the relationship with the United States. If US officials still look on this period as one where their countrymen went east to help the transition to capitalism and democracy while their leaders formed an unprecedented partnership, to Russians this was a period where American meddling helped bring their once great country to its knees, while on the global arena the US (and its western allies) took advantage of the situation to surround Russia with bases and deny it its rightful place in the world. The expansion of NATO, in particular, is widely seen as a betrayal of promises made at the end of the Cold War, and western support of the Rose and Orange revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine respectively, as unacceptable meddling in Russia's rightful sphere of interest.

Perhaps this picture is not completely accurate, but it is popular and still dominant. It can be overcome, but the Russians are proving to be tough customers. They like some of the things they see from the new administration (the scrapping of the missile plan), are troubled by others, and in any case intent on giving only as much as they receive. Part of the problem may be the administration's perceived inconsistency when it comes to relations with Russia. At the centre of this is Vice President Joseph Biden, who seems to have been tasked with calming the nerves of jittery East Europeans as the administration tries to reshape the US-Russian relationship. Biden has gone above and beyond the call of duty in this respect, making comments about Russian weakness and pledging support to Georgia and Ukraine in a way that deeply rankles sensitivities in Moscow across most of the political spectrum.

Biden's gaffes, which in this case reflect a genuine attachment to Eastern European countries and what seems to be a deep mistrust of Russian intentions, have also been followed by moves intended to further allay East European fears. The decision to deliver Patriot missiles to Poland, accompanied by US servicemen, is one example. The missiles were originally promised under the Bush administration, but Obama's decision served as proof to those who believe the administration's approach to Russia is case of new bottles for old wine. Russian defence officials insist that the missiles will do nothing to protect Poland from Iranian missiles, but do represent a threat to Russia.

Hurt feelings, historical wrongs, and perceptions aside, there are a number of key areas where Russian and US interests diverge, and these may pose a much bigger longer-term problem for the Obama administration than any sense of historical grievance.

Take Iran, for instance. US officials are very keen to get Russian cooperation, either as a member of the sanctions regime or as a facilitator of a nuclear deal. In the recent agreement worked out by negotiators, but ultimately rejected by Iran, Russia was to buy spent nuclear fuel and return it later in a processed form unusable for weapons. Russia is quite happy to play this part, but it balks at most efforts at tightening the sanction regime. Iran is a significant Russian trading partner (exports to Iran amounted to \$3.3 billion in 2008). Moreover, it is Russia's southern neighbour, and, despite being a revolutionary Islamic power, it has never taken advantage of Russia's problem in its own Muslim regions, such as Chechnya, or in former Soviet Republics like Tajikistan, where the population shares linguistic and cultural ties. From Moscow's point of view, undermining this relationship, cultivated over centuries between regimes of different stripes in both Tehran and Moscow, makes little sense.

Similar things can be said about the Middle East more broadly. The Russian-Israeli relationship is infinitely better than it was during the Cold War (Israelis and Russians can visit each other's countries without visas now) but Russia is still a patron of countries hostile to Jerusalem. Besides Iran, Russia supplies weapons to Syria and fighter planes to Lebanon. While it cooperates in international mediation of Arab-Israeli peace talks, it does so decidedly on the Arab side.

In this light, the Russian decision to start cooperating on Afghanistan looks more like a case of matching interests rather than a response to overtures from the Obama administration. Indeed, Afghanistan may prove one of the more durable areas of cooperation. For all of the Russian rhetoric about the US led effort being amateurish compared to the Soviet one (and one can hear this quite often), there is also a recognition that Russia needs stability there as much as, if not more than, the US. Afghanistan is a source for the heroin that destroys the lives of so many of Russia's young people, and there is a realization that chaos there will inevitably affect Moscow's Central

Asian allies and, indirectly, Russia itself. As economist and Kremlin adviser Igor Yurgens said at an event in London this autumn, "If the Taliban win, we have radical Islamists with nuclear arms. Do you think this is a birthday present for Russia?"

The point is not that broader cooperation is impossible, but that, from the Russian point of view, it will take much more than a change in tone. Medvedev, in particular, is said to prefer a closer relationship with the U.S. and seems to genuinely like Obama. But officials hoping to take advantage of a Medvedev/Putin split should think again: even if it exists, no Russian leader will make significant concessions to the US, particularly those that go against Russian interests, without some serious concessions in return. For now, Russia is playing coy; like a once spurned lover, it demands proof that it will not be hurt again. In the long term, US leaders will have to get used to treating Russia on its own terms, not lecturing it on human rights (as some Russian activists and many western ones would like) and accepting its dominant influence in countries like Georgia and Ukraine. They will also have to work much harder to convince Russians that their interests match those of the US, and be prepared to horse-trade where they do not, such as Iran. If they do not, they will find that for Russian politicians, anti-American rhetoric and an anti-western stance play well and is thus tempting not to deploy, especially when times are tough. ■