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Obama and Medvedev – Improving US-Russian Relations

LSE Ideas

By Artemy Kalinovsky

After Dmitry Medvedev delivered his message to the Federation Council here last week, news outlets in the U.S. and Britain jumped on the Russian president's seemingly hostile rhetoric regarding the planned missile defense system to be placed in Poland and the Czech Republic. Russia, Medvedev said, would respond by planting a system in Kaliningrad, on the Baltic Sea. The New York Times, which accompanied its [coverage](#) with a photo of troops on parade in Red Square, focused on his harsh words as well as the fact that that he did not congratulate Barack Obama on his election victory.

Yet these reports miss a number of essential points. Indeed, people I've spoken to here, some of them experienced watchers of Kremlin politics as well as US-Russian relations, thought the speech could prove to be an important marker in terms of a change in direction of domestic and foreign policy and the emergence of a distinct "Medvedev" policy that has not been evident since his inauguration in May.

Undeniably, the most notable elements of Medvedev's speech had to do with domestic, not foreign, policy. He spoke about the importance of individual rights, battling with corruption, and economic freedom. His predecessors paid lip service to these principles, but what was striking was Medvedev's tone and the fact that his words seemed to be directed at his own mentor and many of his supporters. (You can read the text for yourself [here](#) – try to ignore the slightly awkward translation).

What about Medvedev's foreign policy?

Medvedev began the speech with a number of references to the summer's events in Georgia and its two breakaway regions, Southern Ossetia and Abkhazia. He did not shy away from blaming Georgia for the conflict and insisting that NATO had overstepped its bounds. Most of the speech, however, avoided foreign policy. The message was "our priority is getting our own house in order." And while critical of US policy in Georgia and on the missile-defense issue, it clearly left the door open for an improvement in relations: "I would stress that we have no issue with the American people, we do not have inherent anti-Americanism. And we hope that our partners, the new administration of the United States of America, will make a choice in favor of full-fledged relations with Russia."

What would it take for the new administration to create a long standing, stable relationship with Russia?

First and foremost, it means being willing to accept limits. This includes limits on NATO expansion, and it may include abandoning the missile shield the Bush administration has worked to place in the Czech Republic and Poland. Why? Because Russia may come to terms with not being a global superpower, but it certainly will not abandon its status as a regional power. It demands respect and will lash out when its sphere of interest is violated. Contrary to the thinking of the outgoing administration and its intellectual supporters at AEI and the [Project for a New American Century](#), not every region is equally important to the U.S. (Not surprisingly, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister called Obama's staff last Friday and said that Russia would not [go ahead with the Kaliningrad deployment if the U.S. refrains from its plans in Poland](#). Apparently Mr. Obama has already signalled the door is open for discussion on this question, which I view as a positive development and [John Bolton does not](#).)

Second, the Obama administration should do what both Clinton and George W. Bush failed to do – treat Russia as a partner not only in words but deeds. The word partner is now only seen between quotation marks in Russia, because it is associated with a campaign, almost two decades old, to weaken Russia at the expense of its formal rivals. Making someone accept a reality they are powerless to change, which was the case with expansion of NATO in the 1990s, is not the same as partnership. Similarly, it was disappointing that US officials did not even seriously consider the Russian counterproposal to the missile shield. The Obama administration needs to involve Moscow in a real dialog on all such security issues, and be willing to cede ground at least some of the time.

Third, the administration needs to have a frank conversation with its counterparts about what each others' limits are. It may not like everything it hears, but Moscow is much more likely to cooperate on issues important to the US – including Iran,

Afghanistan, and Iraq, if it sees the US as willing to respect its influence in other areas, like Ukraine or Georgia. This may sound naïve, but it is these sort of conversations that have made cooperation between great powers (including the US and USSR) possible historically.

Finally, the new administration could take a number of steps to ease the mutual climate of suspicion, including permanently removing Russia from the [Jackson-Vanik Amendment](#) and easing travel restrictions for Russians traveling to the US. Both the amendment, which links trade with Russia to freedom of emigration, and the costly and difficult visa process are seen as demeaning by many people here. Citizen's from America's other partners, like the EU states, don't need a visa at all. Russia's economic migrants are much more likely to head for Moscow or St. Petersburg rather than for the distant US; while a full visa-waiver program may be premature, the current regulations need to be relaxed. (US citizens who travel to Russia will also appreciate the reciprocal easing of the process that would follow on Moscow's part.)

Would any or all of these measures create the kind of stable, peaceful relationship the US and Russia need? It is impossible to say for certain – Medvedev is still weaker internally than Putin, and the global economic crisis has left many things up in the air. Nevertheless, if Mr. Obama is serious about changing the way the US is seen in the world, Russia would be a perfect place to start.

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