

Kyiv and Tbilisi: No Longer Washington's Favorites?

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Since Barack Obama has come to power, the United States has not fundamentally distanced itself from Ukraine and Georgia or, as some critics would have it, abandoned them to their fates. Joint projects are ongoing, and new initiatives have also been launched. There has been talk, for instance, of Ukraine being a part of the anti-missile defense system that the United States plans to install in the region; Washington and Kyiv have resumed an initiative to reconstruct a high-level bilateral body, the Strategic Partnership Committee. Many strong ties also remain between Washington and Tbilisi; the United States is committed to support Georgia in its transformation.

At the same time, there have been signs that Washington has been unhappy and even impatient with leaders in Kyiv and Tbilisi. The administration has been reviewing the U.S. relationship with Ukraine and Georgia and, to a certain extent, been uneasy in dealing with certain politicians and political forces.

Before we get to personalities, however, it is important to recognize how the changing context of U.S. foreign policy has set the stage for a change in relations. Several factors are relevant. Some involve a broader reconsideration of the conceptual background for U.S. foreign policy and geopolitics that has taken place in the United States since Obama came to power. Others involve Washington's reassessment of both its priorities in the international arena and the best ways to achieve its goals.

Let us first begin with conceptual and strategic considerations. One could argue that there has been considerable continuity in U.S. foreign policy since President Obama took office. At the same time, the new administration has definitely taken a fresh look at the conceptual foundations, ideology, and methods of U.S. foreign policy. We have been witnessing a return to a kind of "traditionalism" based not on attempts to achieve hegemony but on a renewal of American leadership.

Obama has also promised more multilateralism, which he is working to deliver. After eight years of often arrogant unilateralism, the attempt to achieve greater multilateralism is mostly welcome. The administration is not explicitly trying to align U.S. policies with those of the European Union or with particular European capitals, but it is trying to listen to and take into consideration the words and arguments of traditional allies in, say, Berlin or Paris. With regard to Ukraine and Georgia, Europeans have been very much disappointed in recent years. This European negativism has influenced what Washington thinks about its relations with the two states.

At the same time, both extreme views on the subject of U.S. hegemony are incorrect. No such hegemony exists, but the United States is also not broke or impotent. The reality is in-between – the United States still has considerable power and potential to lead, but its ability to commit itself globally and to support its worldwide endeavors has limits. While there is still much talk of globalism in Washington, the United States realizes that it need not be present in every corner of the world. We thus see a return to selective commitment, more characteristic of a moderate conservative approach (in many respects, the Obama administration finds itself closer to moderate conservatives than to traditional liberals). The logic of selective commitment implies that the United States needs to choose carefully what and where are its priorities.

This brings us to a second point: that Ukraine and Georgia have never been very high on the list of U.S. priorities and probably never will be. They will always fall within the ambit of broader regional policies, whether these are directed toward Greater Eastern Europe or the Wider Black Sea Area (WBSA), or even the more vaguely defined Eurasia. Contrary to some expectations, the WBSA, or the so-called Black-Caspian Sea region, has not become a priority for the United States. There has been no clear vision of U.S. interests in the region, and Washington is not really strengthening its presence in the area in a way that one might expect. Take U.S. bases in Romania and Bulgaria – they have nothing to do with the region itself but with contingencies beyond its borders. For a time, there was an opportunity for the WBSA and certain regional states to be high on the list of U.S. priorities, but this opportunity greatly diminished after the events of 2001. The subsequent reorientation of U.S. policy had dramatic consequences for the WBSA, including Ukraine and Georgia, who have slipped down the list of U.S. priorities.

The core of U.S. interests today lies between the Eastern Mediterranean and the western borders of India (and, perhaps, even further to the east to encompass India and China). Afghanistan has increased in importance for this administration, and the war there is often characterized as “Obama’s war.” It is an urgent priority and challenge, and it has become a prism through which Washington sees everything else. The first thing the administration does when talking to its allies is try to assess how they can help with efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. This has automatically reduced the relevance of countries like Ukraine and Georgia to core U.S. interests and is reminiscent of the days when, after September 11, the Bush administration dispatched requests to U.S. embassies worldwide to find out what their host states could do to assist the United States in its “war on terror.”

Third, as mentioned, the Obama administration appears to have a different understanding of what it means to be a liberal in foreign policy and to conduct liberal foreign policies. Obama is certainly a liberal, as are many in his inner circle.

However, they appear to represent a “new breed” of liberals, which we might consider pragmatic or “realist” liberals. They focus less on human rights, for instance. When this administration talks to Russia, the issue of human rights surfaces (if ever) at the very end of the conversation. There are always other more concrete and pressing issues to discuss. The same can be said for Obama’s relations with China and other authoritarian states. Indeed, being too principled on human rights is seen as a major obstacle to opening up a dialogue with the “bad guys,” a dialogue Obama promised to have during his presidential campaign and which he has tried to undertake since becoming president. There is an appreciation of the fact that it is close to impossible to successfully talk to such “bad guys” while harshly criticizing them for violations of human rights.

Generally, U.S. democracy promotion has experienced a strange fate in recent decades. The Clinton administration sought to expand the community of democratic and pro-market states through humanitarian interventions and financial assistance. The Bush administration had a different idea of how to install democracy, often resorting to means of “democratic imperialism” and, in certain countries, “bombing in” democracy. The Obama administration has not shelved the slogan of democracy promotion, but it holds a different view of liberalism and democracy. With respect to Ukraine and Georgia, for instance, there is lesser appreciation for the extent to which democracy has taken hold. It is not of inherent value for the administration that Ukraine and Georgia have a free media or reasonably fair elections, for example. Having free press and pluralistic elections is fine, but it is not enough (and, indeed, there is a fair point to this).

Fourth, the perpetual “Russia factor” needs to be taken into account. While relations with Moscow are also not a priority for the Obama administration, the latter still sees Russia as a more important partner than Kyiv or Tbilisi with regard to the foreign policy issues that really matter to the United States. The logic of the U.S. “reset” with Russia is based on at least four major arguments. First, Washington needs Moscow to deal with issues like Afghanistan, Iran, and North Korea. Second, there is a need to have Russia involved in nuclear nonproliferation efforts and strategic arms control. Third, Russia is not as authoritarian as is usually portrayed; there may be problems with democracy, but the emphasis should be on Russia’s stability and predictability (so unlike that of some other post-Soviet states which have engaged in democratic experimentation). Fourth, if the United States were to soften its approach toward Russia, this would lead to Russia softening its policy toward its post-Soviet neighbors.

This last argument has become a basis for the Obama administration’s repudiation of a regional “balance of power” approach toward Russia. Calls to contain or counterbalance Russia, and to use countries like Ukraine and Georgia as vital elements in this, are rejected by Washington’s policymakers. Such an approach has never really been dominant, though it was well liked by some in the previous administration. It might also have been a more fashionable approach if the 2008 U.S. presidential election had turned out differently. With the Obama administration, however, this regional balancing approach has been set aside.

Arguments for the Russian “reset” have their shortcomings, but only time will prove their validity or lack thereof. The “reset” is certainly serious, but it is far from the strategic rapprochement taking place between, for instance, Berlin and Moscow (whether the “reset” turns out to be a strategic move or more of a tactical maneuver

remains to be seen). In the meantime, a new wave of "Russophile" and "Russocentrist" sentiments have surfaced in Washington.

Finally, the so-called "color revolutions" have been discredited in the eyes of many in the current administration, both in theory and in implementation. They have certainly produced muted results in all the places where they occurred, and the momentum these "revolutions" initially built up has been squandered to one degree or another. Also, most people in the administration, including Obama himself, tend to strongly dislike politicians who are ideologues, "revolutionaries," or populists. Instead, they favor credibility, effectiveness, and persistence. The "leaders" of the "color revolutions" in both Georgia and Ukraine look rather pale in this regard.

Moreover, one way the Obama administration has attempted to set itself apart from the Bush legacy is related to personalities. An informal term in Washington – "Bushies" – refers to people who were in the Bush administration or who actively supported it. One might argue that there are not only domestic "Bushies" but international ones as well, foreign political leaders who enjoyed great support from the Bush administration. Both former Ukrainian president Viktor Yushchenko and Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili fall into this category. Trying to distance itself from the Bush legacy, the Obama administration also distances itself from Kyiv and Tbilisi.

In the case of Ukraine, now that the Yushchenko era is over, much will depend on the policies of those who have succeeded him. Washington had no preferences or personal stakes in this. Viktor Yanukovich in Ukraine and the next set of leaders in Georgia will be judged by their actions. The United States has learned its lesson: it will not personalize its policies in Ukraine or Georgia, or anywhere else for that matter. The preferred option is to be supportive of certain dynamics and trends in these countries instead of extending support to particular individuals.

This is a credible approach. However, it also poses a certain risk that while U.S. decisionmakers wait for new Ukrainian (or Georgian) leaders to deliver much-needed reforms, bilateral relations will suffer. The level of engagement may decrease, and these countries (not only their leaders) could become neglected or kept at a distance, exactly at the time when continued U.S. support is so important.

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