

The U.S.–Russia Reset

A SKEPTICAL VIEW

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It has been more than two years since the Barack Obama administration initiated its so-called “reset” in the United States’ relations with the Russian Federation. Some might argue that it is too early to judge the outcomes of the reset. This view makes some sense, as the long-term effects of the reset have yet to materialize, but this should not prevent us from making a preliminary assessment. Well into the second half of President Obama’s term, and fast approaching the 2012 presidential election, the time is ripe to remind ourselves what the reset is based on and what it has brought about.

What Lies Behind the Reset

The major conceptual considerations behind Washington’s reset are well known. First, the United States needs a dialogue with Moscow on strategic issues involving matters like arms control and nuclear non-proliferation. This dimension has always been an imperative for U.S. decisionmakers and a clear priority for any administration.

Second, there is an understanding that Washington needs Moscow to deal with particular countries of concern like Afghanistan, Iran, and North Korea. It presumably helps to have Russia on the United States’ side when addressing the thorny issues raised by these states. This understanding is based on an assumption that Russia is or can become a willing and capable partner in dealing with these problems.

Third, the reset reflects an underlying commitment to the notion that Russia can be a viable and trustworthy partner to the United States regardless of the state of Russia’s domestic affairs. Proponents of this view vary in their analysis, with some saying that Russia is already a democracy while others picture it as an imperfect or peculiar type of democracy. Others admit that it is not a democracy but question a logic that insists Russia must be one to qualify as a reliable partner. Many also suggest focusing on Russia’s stability and predictability, especially in comparison to other post-Soviet states where risky political experiments have anyhow led to only fragile and messy quasi-democracies at best. Overall, “Russocentrism” has never quite fully

disappeared from Washington through all these post-bipolar years. Its adherents have now received a rallying call, a reason to mobilize themselves under the banner of the reset.

A final assumption behind the reset is that if Washington were to soften its approach toward Russia, this could lead to eventual and sizeable changes in Moscow's international posturing, turning it into a more responsible player in world affairs, in particular with regard to its neighbors.

Has the Reset Been a Success?

Let us now compare the fruits of the reset in its two-plus years with these justifications for its introduction. While some rationales may make some sense, others strike us as outright naïve, while still others appear to be based on deliberate (or subconscious) distortions of reality.

The dialogue on strategic arms and the New START treaty are often cited as the reset's most visible achievement. Let us leave aside discussion of the new treaty's merits (U.S. observers have debated whether the treaty was the right way forward, how well it serves U.S. interests, and whether it gives "an advantage" to Russia). For the purpose of this memo, there is a more important question: was it really the "reset" – the new outlook and approach of the Obama administration – that enhanced dialogue and led to the signing of the treaty? Indeed, the U.S.-Russia strategic arms dialogue was going on before the reset, even under the previous administration (if with lots of difficulties and interruptions along the way) and even during the Cold War. Significant preparatory work for a follow-up START treaty was done well before 2009. Thus, it seems fair to suggest that even without the reset or even under a different U.S. administration, there is a good chance that New START would still have come to pass. As well, NEW Start is supposed to be good for Russia too, but have we seen Moscow make any concessions or give up any of its interests to sign the treaty, reciprocating Washington's reset intentions? It remains to be seen whether Moscow can truly emerge as a partner for Washington in the complex process of strategic arms limitations and reductions.

To what extent, then, has the reset led Russia to help the United States in dealing with such difficult issues as dialogue with the paranoiac regime in Pyongyang, halting Iran's program for nuclear weapons development, and ongoing military operations in Afghanistan? The North Korea issue is far from being resolved and has even begun to slip under the radar of attention among the world's leading powers. In any case, Russian influence in North Korea is minuscule; even China has difficulties communicating with its neighbor and onetime loyal satellite.

With regard to Iran, the position of Russia is more ambivalent. Moscow sees threats emanating from Iran but also maintains long-standing ties to the country in different spheres. It is possible that Russia is not that interested in weakening Iran, in light of its own relations with the neighboring South Caucasus and Turkey, and nearby Syria, as well the unclear future of Afghanistan and Pakistan. One could even speculate that Moscow would not mind a stronger Iran, which would prevent the United States from becoming a more successful player in the broader Middle East. Overall, Moscow's

position has fluctuated between highly reluctant support of Washington's tough tone and blocking or sabotaging harsher Western sanctions against Tehran.

When it comes to Afghanistan, it is said that Russia has been helpful in providing some intelligence to the United States. However, such intelligence sharing began long before the "reset." Furthermore, the nature of this subject makes it difficult for scholars to come to any definitive conclusion as to the scope and utility of information sharing.

More significantly, Russia has also given the United States permission to transport nonlethal military supplies to Afghanistan on the Northern Distribution Network passing through its territory. However, did the reset really facilitate this? Assuming for a moment that there was no reset and Americans still asked Russia for permission, it is possible that Russia would have accepted their appeal. Isn't the U.S. presence in Afghanistan inherently good for Russia? After all, it is American blood (and that of their allies) being shed in Afghanistan, and their military operations are preventing Islamic radicals (at least for the time being) from moving in massive numbers further north, perhaps all the way to the North Caucasus, one of Moscow's worst nightmares. In the meantime, both Russian elites and the public at large (not to mention the military) watch appreciatively as the United States figuratively "bleeds" in Afghanistan. They remain very suspicious of the campaign, as with other U.S. interventions, and surely hope it will weaken the United States. Finally, the supposed merit of using Russian territory to transfer supplies is of limited duration – there is no future strategic benefit to the United States, as Washington contemplates ways to wind down its presence in Afghanistan.

Third, even if the reset reflects an Obama administration preference for practical results over ideological posturing, the burden is still on "Russocentrists" to prove that Russia can really be a stable and reliable partner given the current state of its domestic politics – and that an undemocratic but "stable" Russia is a better choice for the United States than democratic but fragile and imperfect partners. It is difficult to imagine that a regime in Russia that takes all the benefits of the reset with no incentive to change its domestic behavior is a more reliable partner for the United States. It is certainly not one that serves the interests of its people. The recent uprisings in the Arab world confirm this in a way. In the end, the striving to enlarge the community of democratic and market-based countries around the world, a slogan of U.S. foreign policy through most of the 1990s, should remain a priority. It is better for the United States to "swim" not with the authoritarian "sharks" but with those whose behavior is based on principles and values similar to those of the United States.

Finally, it is difficult to say that the reset has led Russia to ameliorate its behavior in the post-Soviet "near abroad." Indeed, Washington may not think it has given Russia a mandate to restore its sphere of influence, but what is important is that Moscow thinks this is exactly what has happened. To Russia, Washington's position lies somewhere between outright support for its policy in post-Soviet Eurasia to turning a blind eye. The Kremlin also thinks that in any case there is very little Washington can do to modify its course of action. Outside Russia, many in the region usually fail to grasp all the details of the reset's complex reasoning. Instead, they see a return to

“Russocentrism” in the United States and an acceptance of regional blocs. They feel they are left alone with a no less aggressive Russia, with no objection from Washington.

In conclusion, the reset has not been responsible for any viable or positive outcomes in Russia policy. In general, it has remained mostly an American endeavor; most Russians (public and elites) continue to view the United States with deep suspicion and mistrust. It has not advanced U.S. strategic or international interests, promoted a stable and reliable Russian partner, or advanced the security or freedom of the other states in post-Soviet Eurasia.