

Extending the “Reset” in U.S.-Russian Relations

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Was the ratification of the New START treaty the one and only sign of the reset between the United States and Russia? What is the direction for their new relationship?

Moscow and Washington seem to be moving toward a relationship that embodies pragmatic cooperation, albeit one colored by competition and mutual irritation. In moving forward, the next phase of the reset agenda should shift course from “hard” to “soft,” keeping in mind that forthcoming elections in both countries will place greater attention on their own domestic issues.

The challenges of the 21st century are making the United States and Russia more rather than less dependent on each other. The United States’ ability to achieve its top foreign policy objectives – ending military operations in Afghanistan and promoting the spread of freedom and democracy (especially in North Africa and the Middle East) – increasingly requires the support of a strong and politically cohesive Russia. Russia’s ability to achieve its own current primary goal of developing an innovative economy requires U.S. participation and support. The shared global challenges and pressing domestic needs of both states are the basis for the next phase of U.S.-Russian cooperation – a framework that might be called “Reset 2.0.”

Recently, U.S.-Russia relations have been developing along the lines of a more traditional type of relationship between two states, with both countries focused on security concerns like nonproliferation, regional conflicts, terrorism, and missile defense. Indeed, the reset was based on a traditional agenda. The United States and Russia shared a wide range of critical interests, from preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and combating international terrorism to addressing global energy concerns. Both countries have reached some pragmatically oriented agreements. The real sign of their “hard security” pragmatism was the achievement of the New START agreement.

At the same time, both presidents, Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev, have demonstrated an increasing preoccupation with their domestic agenda, including enhancing security at home, economic recovery and development (both countries are trying to reshape their federal budgets), and effective management of national concerns and emergencies. Over the next 18 months, both leaders will be

paying attention to their election campaigns. Their domestic-oriented agenda can help create a basis for fruitful cooperation based on mutual understanding.

The first step to refreshing the reset is for both sides to enhance mutual confidence and trust. Call it the “new philosophy” of the “new” reset. Agreements reached in July 2011 during Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s visit to Washington, DC helped to improve bilateral ties and outlined some basics of the new outlook. The two governments signed an agreement on child adoption laws and held discussions to ease visa problems – both crucial issues for the Russian public. Russia and the United States did not sign a visa agreement, but Lavrov promised that a travel arrangement would come into force by the end of the year. During the meetings, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said that the United States was interested in liberalizing bilateral ties, and that businesspeople were to be provided with 36-month working visas while students and government officials could receive multi-year visas. The whole program of the meetings was not very typical. The Russian minister even met President Obama in the White House and had a meeting with U.S. Senators. Lavrov also visited a Russian broadcaster, Voice of Russia that is starting to broadcast programs in Washington in English. He also met Russian Americans, who, according to the Voice of Russia, have many interesting projects aimed at promoting closer cooperation. These and other developments indicate that US-Russian cooperation is reaching a new plateau.

When dealing with Russia’s security and foreign policy, experts in the West are often misled by a lack of attention to cultural angles. Many still filter U.S.-Russian relations through the prism of the Cold War, while some still use the imagery of “Yalta.” It would be wrong to say that the conservatively-minded Russian authorities are no longer obsessed by Western threats (NATO first of all), but in contemporary Russia’s doctrinal thinking one can discern a growing preoccupation with a more Eurasian list of priorities: China’s nuclear and conventional capabilities; Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan; and Russia-Japan quarrels over the Kurile Islands (Northern Territories).

The Russian Far East has recently attracted the attention of all high-ranking Russian politicians, including Medvedev, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, and Minister of Defense Anatoly Serdyukov. Today’s challenges are being played out within a Eurasian rather than a European framework. This trend creates a new environment for U.S.-Russian relations, one free of a traditional, historical, Europe-centric rivalry. This new environment requires new diplomacy and institutions.

At the same time, Moscow also has misguided expectations. First, no clear understanding exists of how U.S. foreign policy is made, particularly the role of rhetoric and certain recent aspects of decision-making processes in Washington (including the rising importance of Congress). Some Russian experts naively hope that Washington will emphasize the importance of the NATO-Russia Council and convince European allies to invite Russia to participate fully in a collective security strategy. Russia also expected cooperative missile defense system – agreed upon at the NATO-Russia Lisbon summit in November 2010 – to be based on a joint system, while NATO insisted there should be two independent systems that only exchange information.

Reading official documents outlining the basics of Russian foreign and security policy, one still gets the impression, as Richard Pipes [remarked](#) at a 2007 Hudson Institute Symposium, “Russians don’t quite know what their place in the world is and should be. They are very bewildered.” The American scholar is right in arguing that Russia denies being Western, but denies being Eastern even more emphatically. Eurasianism is an ideology that in a way solves the problem, but it is restricted to a small group of intellectuals. In general, ideology is absent in contemporary Russian foreign policy.

In Washington, Russia has been downgraded as a foreign policy priority due to the diminution of Russian power and the emergence of new threats. This is a great advantage that top Russian diplomats do not use wisely. Since Russia is no longer at the center of U.S. foreign policy concerns, there is a good chance that future policies will be free of the ideological baggage that influences various debates over Russia’s membership in the World Trade Organization, missile defense, human rights, and other sensitive bilateral issues. U.S.-Russian relations can be seen in both capitals as just one set among many. The United States and Russia need each other, but U.S.-Russia relations need not form the backbone of the international security agenda.

As always, the main obstacle for U.S.-Russian relations is NATO. Some NATO members (mainly new members) still see their primary mission as countering Russia. Many influential U.S. politicians sympathize with this view. U.S. and Russian leaders both failed to use the “spirit of Prague” to take the next steps for convincing skeptics in both capitals of an improved course. Both countries have to redefine common threats, while strengthening the institutional mechanisms for preventing, managing, and resolving conflicts. If Moscow and Washington are to continue deriving benefits from their expanded ties, they need to move forward on the reset.

First, they must continue to build trust. A “hard” security agenda, as the most controversial topic, should be given a reprieve. It was clear that Russia’s proposal to build a joint missile defense system in Europe was not going to get a reception in Washington. Might it not be worth taking missile defense off the priority agenda? Let us hear the voices of missile defense opponents, who say that the program is wasteful, ineffective, provocative, destabilizing, morally wrong, weaponizing space, and giving one country too much unilateral power.

Second, Russia and the United States should intensify dialogue on issues of mutual concern in sensitive regions around Russia (e.g., Central Asia, Nagorno-Karabakh, Belarus, and Moldova). Russia has to protect its “special interests” in these regions, but as Lavrov [said](#) in July concerning Libya: “We have fewer misunderstandings with the United States than with some European countries. We are unanimous that we have to start a political process as soon as possible.”

Third, and probably most difficult, both countries should minimize or avoid criticizing the other based on different understandings of democracy and liberal values. Let us all be more pragmatic.

A Value-Added Button

There are three reasons why the reset policy should continue. First, the United States has a core interest in the Eurasia region remaining peaceful and secure. One can

imagine what the world would be like if Washington was confronted (in addition to problems in North Africa and the Middle East) with turmoil in the post-Soviet space. Concerning Central Asia in particular, experts have observed that it is the strategic backyard of every major Eurasian power, including Russia, the United States, China, and even India. Second, both leaders need foreign policy successes. Progress in developing dialogue on a “new” agenda (such as climate change, visa issues, and energy) could be a substitute for failures in “hard” security realms. Finally, Medvedev needs a personal success, and the United States can play a crucial role helping him reach his goal of developing an innovative economy in Russia. In Russia as in the United States, a “hard” security agenda is simply less attractive from an electoral point of view.

Energy (especially nuclear energy considering the tragedy in Japan), technology and knowledge transfer, visa regulations, and space exploration are possible fields of cooperation. Other areas include interdicting drug trafficking from Afghanistan and Central Asia, anti-terrorism cooperation related to the North Caucasus, and dealing collectively with Belarus. Representatives of both countries (experts, politicians, diplomats, scholars, and ordinary people) should also increase their dialogue on a wide range of issues, which would help overcome the resistance to change by conservatives and skeptics. Both states should reach out to each other through a comprehensive public diplomacy strategy via the Internet, international broadcasters, visitor programs, and exchanges to debunk the myth that the United States is hostile to Russia and vice versa. Unfortunately, perceived differences in values continually prevent Russia and the United States from greater integration. This is partly the fault of Moscow for failing to capitalize on opportunities, but Washington also needs to provide clearer justification for expanding Western security institutions without properly addressing Russia’s security concerns.

In short: How can both states contribute to the formation of a new partnership, a “new” reset policy? The immediate answer is to boost a diverse and multi-venue dialogue between American and Russian politicians, professionals, academics, and citizenry on the benefits of a “soft” security agenda, one that would become ever more supple as the 21st century advances.