

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Pressing the Reset Button in U.S.-Russia Relations

Andrew C. Kuchins

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Q1: Can the Obama administration really “press the reset button” in relations with Russia?

A1: The analogy that Vice President Joseph Biden used a month ago at the Munich security conference is not perfect because there is so much toxic waste under the bridge of U.S.-Russia relations that cannot be cleaned up overnight. But the sentiment it implies, that there is a real opportunity for the Obama administration to improve relations with Russia, is one with which I very much agree. A good part of the rationale is simply that relations had reached such a low point, lower than any point in at least two decades, in the wake of the Georgia war last year, that there was virtually only one direction the relationship could go before igniting a new Cold War or worse. I also sensed in the fall/winter the development of a solid consensus in the center of the U.S. political spectrum that it was imperative for the incoming Obama administration to develop a more constructive relationship with Moscow to be able to address more effectively a number of pressing security challenges including Afghanistan, the Iranian nuclear program, and nuclear security more broadly, among other issues.

Secondly, the global situation has drastically changed in two ways that probably have altered the calculations in the Kremlin. Russia had been on an extraordinary economic roll for the past decade that saw its GDP grow by more than eight times. Simultaneously, Russia perceived U.S. power ebbing as it became mired in Iraq and Afghanistan and its economy began to lag with the sub-prime problems, foreshadowing the global financial crisis. Probably, Russia overestimated its strength as well as U.S. weakness. Russian economic hubris has been blown out of the water as the crisis has hit them extremely hard, revealing their vulnerabilities as well as deep integration with the global economy. For the first time in years, I think that there is a greater sense in Moscow that Russia needs better relations with the United States and the West more broadly.

The other big change for the Kremlin is that it is not dealing with a lame-duck administration in Washington that is unpopular at home and abroad. While the Obama administration must beware of excessively high expectations about change in tone and content in U.S. policies from partners and allies around the world, at least for now, it will be more difficult for the Russians to leverage unhappiness, especially in Europe, with Washington as they could during the Bush administration.

Q2: Is there really a deal in the offing to back off missile defense deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic for greater Russian pressure on Iran?

A2: With Presidents Dmitri Medvedev and Barack Obama both denying the reported outlines of a deal, it feels a bit like, to paraphrase Shakespeare, “He doth protest too much.” Not working in the White House or the Kremlin, I certainly cannot know for sure, but this is how it looks to me. American and foreign leaders do not really like to talk about “deals,” but I think there is an opportunity to again reexamine how Moscow and Washington might be able to better accommodate the interests of the other. First, the most important policy change that the Obama administration can attempt is to open direct discussions with the Iranians themselves, and this has been widely discussed. But there is no question that the Russians can be more helpful than they have been in recent years, and they are quite frustrated with Tehran as well. They have clearly signaled this by withholding deliveries of the A-300 anti-air missile system that could bolster Iran’s capacity to resist air strikes on nuclear facilities. Iran’s foreign minister was recently in Moscow to press this issue, and he was rebuffed. This suggests that the Kremlin wants to first see what the Obama administration has in the offing before taking this quite precipitous step. Moscow wants to know what “pressing the reset button” actually means.

That the Obama administration may not be as gung ho on the missile defense deployments as its predecessor certainly would not be a surprise. Missile defense was the Bush administration’s number one security priority when it came to power eight years ago. Also, like NATO enlargement, in the past year the Bush administration was pushing especially hard to lock in the missile defense agreements to some extent because it was playing against the clock and wanted this as part of its legacy. Obama does not face that time pressure, but the urgency of getting Iran to back off its program grows everyday

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as it enriches more uranium. Given new cost constraints and persistent questions about effectiveness of the technology, the Obama administration might not be giving that much away by agreeing to delay deployments pending a new assessment of the threat. Of course, it also may not actually be getting that much from the Russians given their very limited leverage over Iran. But the perception of an accommodation between Washington and Moscow would go a long way in mending the rotten political atmosphere surrounding the relationship in both capitals.

Q3: What else is driving the Obama administration to mend ties with Moscow?

A3: A number of factors are behind the impulse to “press the restart button.” First, given the higher priority that the Obama administration has attached to success in Afghanistan and the increasing threats to U.S. supplies to the effort through Pakistan, the United States needs to expand access to the northern transit corridor, and this heightens cooperation again with Moscow. Kyrgyzstan’s decision to close down the U.S. base in Manas coupled with Russia’s bailout loan to Bishkek was a hardly subtle signal to Washington that it must negotiate greater northern access principally with the Russians.

Also, Obama has long made it clear that as part of his efforts to promote nuclear security, he is more inclined to return to aspects of a bilateral arms control agenda as well as part of diplomatic efforts to resuscitate the nonproliferation regime. There is an imminent deadline with the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) expiring in December of this year, and the Obama administration would like to replace that treaty with simpler monitoring and verification measures as well as resume momentum in deeper cuts in offensive arms.

Finally, the Georgia war tragically illustrated broader deficiencies in U.S. policies toward Russia and Eurasia as well as Moscow’s stance toward its neighbors. Nearly 20 years after the end of the Cold War, there are still outstanding and dangerous challenges to European security, and in order to address them, we somehow must reach a better understanding not only with Moscow but also with and among our allies. When all of us face tremendous domestic challenges and international threats, differences over European security must be resolved so that we can more effectively engage collectively to resolve our most pressing global problems.

Andrew C. Kuchins is director of the Russia and Eurasia Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

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