

## **The Obama Administration's Policy toward Russia: a Moscow Perspective**

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### From Resetting to a New Stage

The Obama Administration came to the White House in January 2009 with a clear interest in "resetting" the U.S.-Russian relations. This was deemed necessary not so much because of the importance of Russia to the United States: most people in Washington probably believed at the time that Russia was continuing on a declining path. Rather, Russia was seen as instrumental in helping Barack Obama to deal with the two wars he intended to end, in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to prevent another one that he was loath to launch: against Iran. Reviving nuclear arms control with Russia should have also helped advancing Barack Obama's long-term goal of elimination of nuclear weapons. Moscow, which had been left out in the cold by the George W. Bush Administration, and then irritated by U.S. support for NATO enlargement to include Ukraine and Georgia, was viewed by Obama's people as a resource to be used to advance of the new President's agenda. (For a candid account of the Russia policies of the Bush 43 and Obama Administrations, see Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, N.Y.: Alfred Knopf, 2014, P. 153-171)

Five years later, Obama's Russia policy looks very different. The "reset" of 2009-2011, which was supported by the Russians, did produce some valuable results, such as the New START Treaty, and Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization, but it stumbled on the issue of U.S. missile defense, which the Russians saw as undermining their security. The simultaneous presidential election campaigns in both the United States and Russia led to a

technical pause from 2011, but, after the 2012 elections, the "reset" was never resumed. Vladimir Putin's formal return to the Kremlin as president after a four-year break was greeted with profound skepticism by many in the U.S. policy community. After the wave of protests in Russia against flawed parliamentary elections a hope was rekindled again in the United States of a democratic "post-Putin" Russia. These hopes, however, were soon dispelled. (Angela E. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century*, Princeton University Press, 2014)

In 2013, President Obama cancelled an already scheduled summit meeting in Moscow – the first time such a step was made after Nikita Khrushchev walking out on a 1960 Paris summit with Dwight Eisenhower. In 2014, Obama also declined President Putin's invitation to come to the opening of the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi. The word "reset" itself has become diplomatic history. While U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov collaborate on Syria and Iran, the general environment of U.S.-Russian relations has changed. Commentaries on Russia's state-run TV and in U.S. mainstream media liberally use the language of the Cold War when referring to the other country, still officially called "partner". Tellingly and sadly, Michael McFaul, the architect of the U.S. "reset" policy in Barack Obama's first administration, has had a tough time as U.S. ambassador to Moscow (2011-2014). (Dmitri Trenin, "The Mcfaul Experience," *Eurasia Outlook*, February 5, 2014, [www.carnegie.ru](http://www.carnegie.ru)).

#### Coexistence of Cooperation and Competition

U.S.-Russian relations have come to represent a mix of islands of targeted and productive cooperation against the background of profound negativism in both countries' media and deep mistrust at government level. Successful cooperation and angry rhetoric exist side by

side: the United States and Russia, at last, have learned, in Bill Clinton's memorable phrase, to "walk and chew gum at the same time". In other words, they can agree on some issues even as they continue to argue about others. This, however, is a suboptimal achievement. It is in the interest of both Moscow and Washington to reclaim new areas of collaboration and to more effectively navigate their differences. To do that, those Americans and Russians who believe, correctly, that their country's national interests will be better served by closer interaction with the other party need to put their heads together to aid their governments. (Dmitri Trenin and Andrew S. Weiss, "Dealing with the New Normal in US-Russian Relations," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, December 2013, [www.ceip.org](http://www.ceip.org)).

For those used to the familiar Cold War pattern of peaks of tension separated by valleys of détente, the current U.S.-Russian relationship is new.

There is a vast asymmetry in power and in the attention given by one country to the other. Russia prides itself in having become the world's 5<sup>th</sup> largest economy, in PPP terms, but it is a far cry from that of the United States. Russian labor productivity is a mere quarter of the US level. Even as the United States has begun pulling itself out of the recession, Russia's economy has stagnated. Moscow is currently rebuilding its military, but its conventional forces are just beginning to recover from two decades of neglect. The Kremlin has become much more active internationally, including in the Middle East, but its influence is still small outside the former Soviet Union. Russia's soft power is admittedly weak. The Russians are wrong to see the United States behind many problems that they encounter, but the Americans are equally wrong to virtually neglect or ignore Russia.

The relationship is both competitive and cooperative at the same time, with an emphasis on competition. This competition spans the entire spectrum from the fundamentals of the global order – see Syria - to social values, such as gay rights, and norms of domestic politics. In February 2014, the long-festering internal crisis in Ukraine led to a revolution in Kiev,

supported by the West, ousting the government of President Viktor Yanukovich. Fearing this regime change in a neighboring country and concerned about Ukrainian ultra-nationalists' influence in the new Ukrainian government, President Putin sought, and received, powers from the Russian parliament to deploy Russian military forces to Ukraine. By early March 2014, local pro-Russian forces, with Russian support, secured control of the Crimean peninsula. This led to the most serious crisis in Russia's relations with the United States and the European Union since the end of the Cold War. A return to the cold war, oft-predicted but unrealistic until then, suddenly became possible, even likely.

#### Intrusion of Domestic Politics into Foreign Policy

Domestic politics in both countries are invading and occupying territory formerly belonging only to foreign policy. The Kremlin is wary of the link that it sees between the domestic liberal critics and those in the United States, in particular in U.S. Congress, who openly sympathize with these critics. Vladimir Putin called some of the protestors who came out in the streets of Moscow in 2011-2012 a fifth column in the pay of the U.S. Department of State. After he won the 2012 presidential elections, Putin moved against foreign-financed NGOs who meddled in politics, putting them on notice as "foreign agents". This, of course, produced a strong backlash from the U.S. policy community and the media, accusing the Kremlin of a clampdown on Russia's civil society.

On Capitol Hill in Washington, standing up against Russian authoritarianism and its representatives has become good bipartisan politics which carries almost no penalty, in comparison with relations with China. The Magnitsky Act adopted in 2012, which sanctioned several Russian officials for human rights abuses, became a symbol of direct action by parliament impacting on foreign policy. In the run-up to the Sochi Olympics, the issue of

banning "gay propaganda" to minors in Russia aroused the vocal LGBT community against Russian "official homophobia". Neither the Magnitsky Act nor the LGBT criticisms were initiated by the U.S. Government, but the Obama Administration felt no need to challenge or mitigate these actions.

### Emergence of Co-equal Cooperation

Yet, despite this rather gloomy background, vibrant contacts exist and continue to expand between the two countries at the societal level, with the Russian government relentlessly pressing for a relaxation of the visa regime even as political relations remain difficult. This is perhaps the most fundamental difference between the current situation in U.S.-Russian relations and the times of the Cold War, when the governments were the only players, and the relationship was marked by severe ideological antagonism and massive military confrontation.

Government-to-government relations have also registered some progress. When in May 2013 Secretary of State Kerry came to Moscow and was received by President Putin, the United States hoped to induce Russia to help ease Bashar al-Assad from power in Damascus. The two countries agreed to cooperate on bringing an end to the Syrian war. This agreement was reaffirmed the following month during the brief encounter between Presidents Obama and Putin on the fringes of the G8 summit in Northern Ireland.

By the end of the summer of 2013, the U.S. had become so frustrated with Russia that it used the Snowden affair as a pretext to cancel the formal summit. Instead, President Obama, in response to the use of chemical weapons near Damascus, made it clear that he would strike Syria. At that point, however, Vladimir Putin came up with an alternative proposal, in the form of Syrian chemical disarmament, with Damascus's consent, jointly overseen by the U.S. and Russia. Obama cautiously took the offer, and Putin successfully delivered Assad. The

diplomatic and logistical operation of Syria's chemical disarmament – in the midst of a civil war – became the first case of co-equal cooperation between Moscow and Washington since the end of the Cold War. By January 2014, Russia and the United States also succeeded in bringing the parties to the Syrian conflict to the negotiating table in Geneva, even though the end of hostilities is still not in sight.

In 2013, Russia also supported the U.S. opening to Iran. Moscow had long encouraged Washington to begin engaging the Iranians directly, outside of the formal mechanism of the P-5+1 talks with Tehran. Contrary to the views of many observers who believed that bad relations between the U.S. and Iran best served the Kremlin's interests, the Russians evidently think that neither a nuclear-armed Iran nor a U.S.-Israeli attack against it is a good thing for Russia. Hence, Moscow's support for the interim agreement with Iran and its efforts toward a final solution to the Iranian nuclear issue.

#### Still Competitive Elements

There have been disappointments, too. Nuclear arms control, one of the Obama Administration's policy priorities, has been marking time since the conclusion in 2010 of the New START treaty. The Russians made it clear that they would not agree to deeper cuts in their strategic nuclear forces in the absence of an agreement on missile defenses. Later, Moscow also became concerned about the U.S. Conventional Prompt Global Strike concept which is seen as another potential threat to the Russian nuclear deterrent. For their part, the Russians showed no interest in the U.S. ideas about controlling tactical nuclear weapons and resuming the conventional arms control regime in Europe. Thus, arms control, for decades the backbone of relations between Washington and Moscow and the centerpiece of the "reset", has become stalled.

U.S.-Russian cooperation on counter-terrorism, thought in the aftermath of 9/11 to be the new prime area of security ties between the two countries, has demonstrated its limitations. When in 2013 two terrorists from the North Caucasus region of Russia carried out a bomb attack at the Boston Marathon, it became known that practical cooperation between U.S. and Russian security services on the issue of terrorism is anything but close, with mutual mistrust playing a major role. The United States offered its assistance to Russia before the 2014 Sochi Olympics, but the presence of U.S. security officers in Russia for the games was smaller than at the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The Russian security services not only believe they are not inferior to their U.S. colleagues, but also suspect the U.S. of sympathies to separatists and militants in the North Caucasus.

The Obama Administration played a positive role in the final stages of Russia's long quest for WTO membership. The infamous Jackson-Vanik amendment which for four decades had curtailed U.S.-Soviet and later U.S.-Russian trade, was finally repealed in 2012. Yet, the economic exchanges between the two countries have remained at a very low level. The Obama Administration attributes this to the inhospitable business climate prevailing in Russia. The Russians, for their part, look for major deals with U.S. companies, but find very few candidates. The 2010 ExxonMobil-Rosneft deal is a rare exception. The U.S. recent recovery and Russia's stagnation complicate things still further.

The recent turn in U.S.-Russian relations has produced mixed results. Real and palpable U.S.-Russian achievements on Syria's civil war and Iran's nuclear program contrast with quarrels about government-secret-leaker Edward Snowden, the Magnitsky Act, gay rights, and Ukraine's future. Russia's views on the global order and its own foreign policy course are at odds with those of the United States, prompting political figures and opinion leaders in both countries to become more vocal in criticizing their former Cold War adversary, often in quite familiar terms.

### Cultivating Cooperation—conditions for cooperation

Yet, the recent record of cooperation suggests that the relationship retains great potential. Actors in Moscow and Washington would benefit from tapping into that potential under the right set of circumstances and conditions.

Based on the relationship's track record, cooperation between Russia and the United States can only ensue where the two countries' interests meet and at an opportune moment. Take the issue of Syria's chemical weapons.

Continued to use chemical weapons in Syria's ongoing civil war, the U.S. government's credibility would have been called into question because of Washington's vocal stance against the weapons. And it would have made a mockery of the international regimes governing the weapons of mass destruction.

But if the U.S. military had launched a strike against Syria in retaliation for the use of chemical weapons in a Damascus suburb, the action would have reversed the trends of U.S. military disengagement from the Muslim world and of Washington's restraint in the use of military force—both seen as positive by the Kremlin.

In this case, the needs of the White House and the Kremlin happened to coincide and allowed cooperation. The Obama Administration wanted to stay out of the Syrian conflict, but it could not ignore the violation of its own "red line" regarding the use of chemical weapons in Syria. The Kremlin wanted to keep the U.S. out of the Syrian war, and was both able and ready to press Damascus for chemical disarmament. The Assad government was willing to give up its chemical weapons arsenal in exchange for cancellation of U.S. military strikes and a measure of international recognition in the process of chemical disarmament. So, the interests of the parties, otherwise very far apart, intersected on the point of non-use of chemical weapons and non-intervention.



Similarly, collaboration between Washington and Moscow in preparing a conference on Syria's domestic political settlement, which started in Switzerland in January 2014, was based on both capitals' concern about the rise of jihadist elements in the ranks of Syrian rebels. Would-be terrorists who see both the United States and Russia as their enemies and thus targets of future attacks are already finding their feet in Syria. The fact that the Boston Marathon bombers hailed from Russia's North Caucasus illustrates the connections between the two powers and the fluid nature of present-day terrorism.

U.S.-Russian differences on approach should not preclude cooperation where the lives of their own citizens are at stake.

It is also clear that U.S.-Russian cooperation can only be effective if it is co-equal in substance as well as in form.

In Syria, initially, the United States essentially wanted Russia to help it with its agenda for Syria in exchange for some kind of a commission fee, such as keeping the rather modest naval facility in Syria's Tartus. In practice, this meant that Washington wanted Moscow to stop supporting Bashar al-Assad politically and militarily and to help to ease him out of power in Damascus.

This approach did not work because Moscow saw its engagement with Washington differently—it saw two leading powers bringing Syrian factions together, in the style of the Dayton accords that in 1995 ended the war in Bosnia, without prejudging an outcome to the intra-Syrian dialogue. (Dmitri Trenin, "The Mythical Alliance: Russia's Syria Policy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, February 2013). A few months later, such cooperation became possible, for virtually the first time both because the situation on the ground in Syria changed and because of Russia's new willingness and capacity to step up to a more active international role.

This more equal approach was fruitful. Moscow delivered Damascus's agreement on Syria's chemical disarmament and saw to it that the process of disarmament went forward without undue obstacles. Russian diplomats and experts worked closely with their U.S. counterparts on developing procedures for disarmament. Russia provided special trucks for transporting chemical agents to ships as well as a naval escort for their journey to the liquidation facility. As a co-convenor of the conference on the political future of Syria, Moscow had to engage with all Syrian parties, minus the extremist groups, and present itself as a peace broker.

#### Co-equality and Common Ground

Co-equality is a very demanding thing for those seeking that status, but once it becomes a reality, it can satisfy all parties involved. Russia should be encouraged to produce more and better-quality international public goods.

Common ground does exist between U.S. and Russian national interests in a number of areas. The two powers should seek out these overlapping areas of interest and build their cooperation on this basis.

For instance, as Moscow is becoming more focused on the Korean Peninsula, it can play at least as useful a role on the North Korean nuclear issue as it is playing on Iran, where Russia has been acting as a supporter and facilitator of diplomatic contacts between Tehran and Washington.

Historically, Washington has relied on Beijing, a North Korean ally, to help deal with Pyongyang. Moscow can be another partner in stabilizing the Korean situation. Economically, it can make a contribution to stability in Korea through energy and infrastructure projects linking the South and the North. A transit pipeline and a rail road running through North Korea would give the DPRK a chance to legally earn some money, even though both projects would be

politically risky and vulnerable to blackmail. And also, Moscow is formally responsible for promoting security cooperation in the framework of the Six-Power Talks. As Russia develops its Korea policy further, it can emerge as an independent player with a modicum of credibility in Seoul, Pyongyang, Beijing, and Tokyo. As such, it can be a useful partner for Washington too.

The functional areas where there is sufficient overlap of U.S.-Russian interests range from cybersecurity to counterterrorism to climate change and beyond. They include such key economic areas as energy and global finance. Of particular importance is cooperation in education, science, and technology, areas crucial for development in the twenty-first century. One megaproject that brings together many of these strands is cooperation in the North Pacific—the part of the world where the U.S. and Russian territory is separated by just three miles of water.

Russian-American cooperation in these areas will not eliminate their competition, but both parties need to manage their competitive tendencies better.

The legacy of the Cold War is only slowly fading away. Russian authoritarianism, conservatism, strategic independence, corruption, and human rights abuses will continue to irritate U.S. politicians, various vested interests, and the general public. By the same token, U.S. omnipresence, a penchant for interventionism, promotion of democracy and various special causes, and “American exceptionalism” will provide ammunition for Russian anti-Americanism. In addition to these specific areas of friction, there will always be the reality of geopolitical competition, substantial differences on the issues of the world order and global governance, and a partial clash of values.

To more effectively manage these differences, they should be put in perspective. Washington and Moscow should seek to strike a better balance between competition and cooperation, not allowing the former to dominate the relationship completely.

Restoring a measure of mutual respect and basic civility in the relationship would be a useful first step, particularly for both countries' politicians and media figures. At present, they are no longer restrained by the threat of a nuclear conflict, and they feel there is nothing particularly valuable to lose if the relationship sours. Thriving on the bad relationship is less advantageous than exploiting a vibrant relationship.

### Toward Cooperation through Economic Interdependence

To help stabilize the relationship, Washington and Moscow should develop an economic "cushion." The task is primarily Russia's responsibility.

In many other instances in which the United States successfully manages relations with a country very different from itself, such as China, major economic interests guarantee a degree of respect and basic civility. The very low level of U.S.-Russian economic interaction is rightly named as the reason why the bilateral political relationship lacks a stabilizing force.

There have been attempts to correct that, as exemplified by the recent deal between the U.S. energy firm ExxonMobil and Russian state-owned oil company Rosneft. Yet, there are only so many opportunities for economic cooperation on that scale.

Russia and the United States should promote investments in the other country, but doing so requires more than just favorable attitudes on the part of the two federal governments.

For Russia to become attractive for U.S. investors, it needs to improve its business climate, which it has begun doing. The responsibility of the Russian government here is paramount.

First and foremost the administrative and bureaucratic red tape that accompanies operating in Russia needs to be reduced. The government also needs to upgrade the role and quality of its courts system, upholding and expanding the elements of the rule of law.

Meanwhile, Russian investors seeking entry to the U.S. market need technical assistance and guidance from the U.S. side as they consider their moves.

At the regional level, Russian plans of relaunching development of the Far Eastern and Siberian territories open an opportunity for large-scale economic, technological, and scientific collaboration with the states along the U.S. Pacific seaboard.

### Conclusion

To make the U.S.-Russian relationship more productive, Russian and U.S. decision makers need to be persuaded that each country's national interests are better served by U.S.-Russian collaboration.

Russia's overriding national goal of modernization requires stable relations with the United States. This is particularly true of the country's two vast and strategically important regions, the Arctic and the Far East and Siberia. It also relates to Russia's plans to develop its knowledge industry, from education to scientific research and development, where the United States is the global leader.

By the same token, U.S. foreign policy, as recent developments have demonstrated, can be more effective if Moscow is an active and co-equal partner rather than a spoiler.

The Russian and U.S. governments are less focused on each other's country than at any time in the last seventy-five years. In part, this is because the Cold War has ended. However, it

is also the result of the failure to balance inevitable U.S.-Russian competition with productive cooperation.

Well-connected Russians and Americans who believe that their own countries' wider national interests can be better served by reaching out to the other partner should join forces and bring their informed ideas and specific proposals to the attention of the two governments. These actors can also serve as an informal public committee to oversee progress in the U.S.-Russian relationship.

Despite their ups and downs since the end of the Cold War, Russian-American relations have demonstrated remarkable resilience. The government-to-government dialogue is occasionally frosty, but always serious. Behind the colorful public rhetoric, there is often a thinly-veiled hope that the other party will eventually see the light and change its ways. This hope is probably futile. However, draining the lingering mistrust and reclaiming more common ground makes sense and is worth an effort on both sides.

The Obama Administration is almost three-quarters through its total lifetime. Its policy toward Russia is no longer the outstanding achievement it looked after the signature of the New START Treaty and the WTO agreement. Russia is not coming closer to the United States; if anything, the relationship is becoming more competitive. However, the administration has managed to deal with Moscow pragmatically and achieve useful results. Syria and, to some extent, Iran are two examples. In U.S. domestic political terms, the administration has also managed to protect itself from the accusations of "being soft" on Mr. Putin. This pattern of a largely transactional and progressively more distant relationship is likely to continue through 2016 – unless there is some crisis which will put Washington and Moscow closer together or, more likely, set them farther apart. For anyone interested in getting more out of the troubled relationship, however, some of the ideas expressed in this article may be of some use.