

## Thinking Through the “Reset”

*Timothy J. Colton*

On the eve of the summit between Presidents Medvedev and Obama, the opportunity for a significant improvement in relations should not be underestimated. But neither should the challenges that stand before us.

It is never easy to forge agreement between big and demanding members of the international system, who in the nature of things will tend to differ on many issues. Russian-American cooperation is further hampered by the burden of history, by divergences in political regime, and, not least, by the lack of consensus within, as well as between, the players. There is no shared vision in either nation, at the elite or the mass level, of what the relationship should be and how we should get there. The terms bandied about in the media—“vital interests,” “shared values,” “realism,” and the like—defy simple definition and are often used at cross-purposes.

A prerequisite for moving onto a more productive track is to ease the mutual mistrust that has accumulated since 2002. But how? In the United States, teenagers being taught to build teamwork skills are sometimes handed a concrete action assignment in an outdoors setting, on the assumption that accomplishing a common task will knit them together. For America and Russia, it is tempting to search for a bilateral project, almost *any* project, and to use progress on it to help restore trust. Arms control and nonproliferation seem an obvious place to begin, with START expiring in December and enormous expertise having been accumulated in this field over the years.

This understandable temptation ought to be curbed. Given the baggage, it is more important to get any reset right than to get to it done quickly, and speed is likely to work against quality.

A key difficulty with the American-Russian relationship that emerged after 1991 was that it was dictated by the tide of events and by extraneous factors. Its many dimensions and consequences were not thought through by either side, let alone agreed between the two.

Today, a quick fix on arms control makes no sense unless it addresses fundamental questions about the strategic balance and about the purposes to which our weapons systems can be put. These would take some while to sort out under the most benign of circumstances. And even if the negotiators can move forward in timely fashion on that piece of the agenda, there are so many other thorny issues lurking behind the headlines.

Of these, I would single out one painful dilemma, namely, that of the principles governing ethnic minorities' right to self-determination. For Russia, especially in the aftermath of the war with Georgia and with its southwestern frontier as volatile as ever, there is no fixed boundary between international and internal security. The United States may see fewer domestic ramifications, but is anything but exempt from the foreign-policy ramifications. To the familiar cases from the Balkans and the Caucasus, there will soon be added another territory in which the U.S. is viscerally involved—Kurdistan, which is certain to seek independence from Baghdad once the withdrawal of American combat forces from Iraq is complete. A searching Russian-American conversation about this general terrain is long overdue. Both countries have taken contradictory and self-serving positions on the question and both are in desperate need of a general framework for managing it, without which their bilateral relationship will continue to be fraught.

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## **Do not waste an opportunity to seize an opportunity**

*Robert Legvold*

After nearly a decade's deterioration, U.S.-Russian relations stand at the edge of a major turnaround. But at this point the prospect is only potential, not yet real, and decidedly fragile. For this reason how the July 6-8 presidential summit turns out will be of utmost importance. Given the ambitious agenda Presidents Medvedev and Obama agreed upon during the London G-20 meeting in April, the progress the two leaders can (or, alternatively, fail to) report in Moscow week after next will heavily, perhaps fatefully shape the outcome over the remaining three years of their presidential terms.

President Obama has set very ambitious goals for U.S. policy toward Russia—far more ambitious than many in Russia and, for that matter, in the United States as well appreciate. He is deeply invested in the relationship, spends a good deal of time thinking about it, and has assigned it a priority exceeded only by the urgent challenges posed by Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran. He is surrounded by a team of policy advisors, who believe as he does that Russia matters to U.S. foreign policy—indeed, as William Burns, the Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs has said, no country matters more across a broader range of issues; that more unites the two countries than divides them; and that the two countries can and should be able to forge a cooperative approach to everything from nuclear arms control and nuclear non-proliferation to climate change, from energy security to mitigating regional conflicts.

But time is not on his side. It is not, as many of his well-wishers in Europe and North America fear, that if he has little to show for his effort to re-engage Russia coming out the summit, the opposition in the United States will be able to claim his policy has failed. Rather, given the scale of the problems that he faces at home and abroad, the president will himself inevitably divert his attention from Russia to other areas where he hopes to make more progress. Hence, how fully Russian leaders and policymakers grasp the opportunity that lies before them has a significance that extends much beyond the coming summit.

Russian hopes for better U.S.-Russian relations are not questioned by most on the U.S. side, including key members of the policymaking community. But a sense exists that too many on the Russian side fail to see the importance of this moment and the need to move quickly to make the most of it. Russian counterparts, both in government and the expert community, are viewed as too skeptical about the prospects for real change, too fearful their expectations will again be disappointed, and too convinced the United States must make most of the concessions permitting real progress on the issues that divide the two countries. Thus, when American experts soon meet with their Russian counterparts, the task is not only to explore where, at some basic level, the two countries' interests overlap and diverge and how the relationship might be recast to maximize cooperation. They must also help put the crucial event about to occur—Medvedev and Obama's first full-scale summit—in proper perspective.

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## **The Moscow Summit and Improving the U.S.-Russian Relationship**

Steven Pifer

Vice President Biden announced Washington's intention to "reset" relations with Russia during his Munich speech in February. Underlying the Obama administration's policy toward Russia is a recognition that, by the end of 2008, U.S.-Russian relations had fallen to their lowest point since 1991. The administration believes a more positive relationship is in the U.S. interest, including by creating the possibility to secure Russia's help on key international challenges.

The White House understands that, in order change the substance and tone of the relationship, the United States has to move on some issues of interest to Moscow. It thus has offered to negotiate a legally-binding successor to the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) that will reduce missiles and bombers as well as warheads, a major shift from the Bush administration's approach. It has indicated flexibility on missile defense, another major departure from the previous administration. And it announced support for Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization (though Moscow's decision to enter in a customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan will complicate the accession process).

More broadly, the Obama administration's embrace of multilateral approaches to tackle key transnational threats, such as nuclear proliferation, pandemic disease and climate change, opens new areas for U.S.-Russian cooperation. By cutting their strategic arms, the United States and Russia can lead in strengthening the nuclear non-proliferation regime. Likewise, the countries share an interest in combating pandemic disease, which does not respect international borders, and in dealing with climate change, which threatens dire consequences on a global scale.

Moscow appears interested in improving relations, and by all accounts the April Obama-Medvedev meeting went well. U.S. and Russian officials are now busily preparing for President Obama's July 6-8 visit to Moscow. The summit will offer a key indicator of the prospects for putting the U.S.-Russia relationship on a more solid footing.

We should look to the summit for three outcomes. First, both sides attach priority to the successor to START; the presidents will review the negotiators' work and hopefully be able to approve the key elements for a new treaty. Second, the summit agenda includes a wide range of issues; the presidents may be able to identify questions where U.S. and Russian interests converge and greater attention would yield mutually beneficial cooperation. Finally, it would be useful if the presidents could agree on a structure to manage the broad and complex U.S.-Russian agenda.

The presidents will not change the relationship overnight. They likely will differ sharply on a few issues, such as relations with other post-Soviet states. But if Presidents Obama and Medvedev make progress on some areas, they can begin to move the relationship in a more positive direction. That will be good for both countries and will make it easier to manage the questions on which they disagree.

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## **What Does Reset Mean for Moscow and Washington?**

*Angela Stent*

Since the Obama administration came into office, Russia has become a major foreign policy priority both because of issues on the bilateral agenda and because of Russia's key role in a number of other American foreign policy challenges, particularly Iran and Afghanistan. The July summit will cover a broad range of topics and the U.S. is committed to seeking a more productive form of engagement with Russia. Yet "reset" means something different for the two sides, and these definitions remind us that the process of repairing the US-Russian relationship will demand ongoing and sustained attention.

For the Obama administration, reset involves a revival of arms control negotiations and commitment to conclude a follow on agreement to START. This will be the major focus of the summit. However, there will be continuities with the Bush administration's policies. After all, the agenda that Presidents Obama and Medvedev agreed to pursue during the April London summit resembles that which President Bush discussed last year at Sochi with then President Putin and his successor.

Beyond these bilateral questions, however, there are two elements of reset that, from Washington's perspective, require Russian cooperation—securing continued access to Afghanistan and a multilateral effort to ensure that Iran does not acquire a nuclear weapons capability. Although Russia and the United States have different stakes in Afghanistan, neither side wants to see the Taliban back in power. Iran is a more difficult issue. Both sides have different interests in Iran and do not see eye to eye on the urgency of taking punitive measures.

Russia's definition of reset overlaps with that of the United States on arms control issues. Beyond that, however, Russia's goals involve the United States acknowledging that Russia's legitimate interests in the resolution of major global political and economic problems must be taken into account. This includes Russia's privileged interests in its neighborhood, as President Medvedev has termed them, and a US agreement to eschew both further NATO enlargement to the post-Soviet space and missile defense component deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic. While further enlargement is unlikely in the foreseeable future because of divisions within NATO on this issue, the future of relations between Russia, its neighbors, Europe and the United States remains a major challenge in the bilateral relationship.

So what can we expect from the July summit? Improved bilateral atmospherics and movement toward a new arms control agreement. The inauguration of a new Binational Commission headed by the two Presidents, with meetings of business and civil society groups. Discussions on a wide range of issues that will include agreements and disagreements. The possibility that there could be spillover effects from one area—arms control—to others and that new venues for dialogue can be opened. The real challenge as both sides go forward is to create a new group of stakeholders in the relationship, one that will continue to promote bilateral engagement consistently over the coming years .

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