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## The Russia File

### How to Move Toward a Strategic Partnership

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Reversing the collapse of U.S.-Russian relations is one of the great tests facing the Obama administration. Among the major powers, Russia is the hard case. And the stakes involved in getting U.S.-Russian relations right are high -- much higher than the leadership of either country has acknowledged or perhaps even realized so far. If the Obama administration can guide the relationship onto a more productive path, as it is trying to do, it will not only open the way for progress on the day's critical issues -- from nuclear security and energy security to climate change and peaceful change in the post-Soviet area -- but also be taking on a truly historic task. One of the blessings of the post-Cold War era has been the absence of strategic rivalry among great powers, a core dynamic of the previous 300 years in the history of international relations. Should it return, some combination of tensions between the United States, Russia, and China would likely be at its core. Ensuring that this does not happen constitutes the less noticed but more fateful foreign policy challenge facing this U.S. president and the next.

Washington has scant chance of mustering the will or the energy to face this challenge, however, without a clearer sense of the scale of the stakes involved. Every tally of the ways in which Russia matters begins, and rightly so, with nuclear weapons. Because the United States and Russia possess 95 percent of the world's nuclear arsenal, they bear the responsibility for making their stocks safer by repairing the now-shattered strategic nuclear arms control regime. Their cooperation is also crucial if the gravely imperiled nuclear nonproliferation regime is to be saved. Then comes energy. Russia has 30 percent of the world's gas reserves and sits astride the transport grid by which energy flows from the entire post-Soviet zone to the rest of the world. More recently, tensions have arisen over the Arctic's hydrocarbon reserves -- which are said to amount to 13 - 20 percent of the world's total -- not least because of the aggressive way in which Russia has asserted its claims over a large share of them. If the United States and Russia compete, rather than cooperate, over energy in Eurasia and add a military dimension to their disputed claims in the Arctic, as they have begun to do, the effects will be negative for far more than the prices of oil and gas. There is also the struggle against global terrorism, which will be sure to flag without strong collaboration between Washington and Moscow. And it has

become clear that the help of Russia is needed if anything approaching stability is to have a chance in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Pakistan.

Other issues are also critical but not always recognized as such. Making real progress toward coping with climate change, including during negotiations at the 2009 UN Conference on Climate Change, will depend on whether the three countries that emit 45 percent of the world's greenhouse gases -- the United States, Russia, and China -- can cooperate. Any effort to mitigate trafficking in humans, small arms, drugs, endangered species, counterfeit goods, and laundered money must focus on Russia, since these often come from or through that country. Blocking cyberattacks, keeping space safe for commerce and communications, and averting the return of the kind of military air surveillance common during the Cold War will involve Russia, first and foremost. And attempts to reform international financial and security institutions will be optimized only if Russia is given a chance to contribute constructively.

If the United States' interests in a relationship with Russia are this many and this great and if, as Undersecretary of State William Burns said of Washington and Moscow in April, "more unites us than divides us," then the Obama administration will need to turn a page, and not simply tinker at the edges, as it redesigns U.S. policy toward Russia. Turning a page means setting far more ambitious goals for the relationship than is currently fashionable and then consciously devising a strategy to reach them. It also means integrating the well-intentioned symbolic gestures Washington has made toward Russia recently, as well as progress on concrete issues, such as arms control, Iran's nuclear program, and Afghanistan, into a larger design.

## READY, SET, RESET

Positive as President Barack Obama's opening moves toward Russia have been, it is not yet clear how far he and key U.S. policymakers are ready to go to mend relations with Moscow. In a joint communiqué issued on April 1, Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev promised to work together to reach a "legally binding" agreement to succeed the first Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), launch "a comprehensive dialogue on strengthening Euro-Atlantic and European security," boost the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, and find a "comprehensive diplomatic solution" to the Iran problem. But cataloging tasks or even setting out to address them does not mean having fully grasped the magnitude of the stakes involved in the United States' relationship with Russia. Until U.S. policymakers understand these stakes, there is a risk that Russia will slide off Obama's list of priorities when other urgent challenges intrude. Left to run-of-the-mill bureaucratic initiative, the momentum generated by the April statement will weaken. High-level meetings, such as the presidential summit scheduled for July, might momentarily revive it, but the relationship will otherwise fall prey to unexpected diversions and the buffeting of domestic politics in both countries.

So far, the Obama administration's steps toward a healthier relationship with Russia have been earnest but cautious, consistent with the president's deliberate approach to major policy choices. First, Obama altered the tone of the relationship: hence, Vice President Joe Biden's metaphor about hitting the reset button, the recasting of Washington's position on Iran's nuclear program and Washington's attempt to link the issue to its decision to place a ballistic

missile defense system in central Europe, an apparent readiness to repeal the Jackson-Vanik amendment (which still denies Russia most-favored-nation status because of Soviet-era restrictions on Jewish emigration, which were lifted long ago), and the businesslike bonhomie of Obama's first meeting with Medvedev. In short order, Washington then set about addressing concrete and urgent issues: drafting a successor agreement to START I, which expires in December; intensifying the dialogue between Washington and Moscow over the Iranian nuclear threat; and exploring closer cooperation on Afghanistan.

This is a good start. But it still leaves open the fundamental question of which of three basic strategies toward Moscow the Obama administration will adopt. Obama and his people clearly reject the first approach: the urge to "call things by their name," as the Russians say -- that is, the urge to see Russia as an authoritarian, bullying, and aggressive power and admit that a new Cold War is on and act accordingly. But it is less clear which of the other two approaches the Obama administration favors.

A second option assumes that despite some important areas of potential cooperation, various impediments make a genuine partnership an illusion. Russia's readiness to contest many aspects of U.S. foreign policy and its indifference to values that Americans consider important create a fundamental barrier. According to this view, the best strategy combines selective engagement with selective containment and calibrates the two in ways that enhance engagement while softening the edges of containment. U.S. policy has more or less evolved in this direction over the last several years, albeit without a well-formulated design, and much of the U.S. political establishment and the U.S. media seem to have endorsed it.

The third approach is more ambitious. A rush of recent commission reports, studies, and essays by Russia specialists -- Anders Åslund, Thomas Graham, Andrew Kuchins, and Steven Pifer, among others -- have argued that the relationship should be put on a distinctly different footing. They note that Russia is not the entity it was in the 1990s (no longer prostrate and struggling to be like the West, let alone part of it) and neither is the world (no longer dominated by a United States that could tackle scattered secondary security threats with just a little help from a few friends). Much of this work recognizes the difficulties of dealing with Russia's edgy and assertive leaders but maintains that the U.S.-Russian agenda is too important to be delayed until after Washington's doubts and frustrations have been eased. And it contends that engagement, even reconciliation, is possible with Moscow on a wide range of issues -- if with considerable effort.

However, moving in this direction, as Obama and his Russian policy team appear tempted to do, requires a strategic vision, and they have not yet begun to formulate one. Rather than simply tackle practical problems and hope that incremental progress on those will eventually produce a different kind of U.S.-Russian relationship, the administration needs to develop a clear and coherent image of where it wants the relationship to be four to six years from now -- not a rose-colored image but a set of plausible aspirations by which to orient and discipline day-to-day policy. And then it should think carefully about what is required to get there.

Such a vision needs an anchor, and the notion of building a "strategic partnership" provides that. The concept inspires few adherents these days, but this is largely because in the past it

was thought through too little and tossed about too lightly. Because of the concept's enormous potential benefits, its content should be contemplated far more seriously. There is no logical reason why the two countries with the lion's share of the world's nuclear weapons cannot create a tighter regime to shrink their own arsenals and pave the way toward arrangements that render safer the programs of other nuclear powers, why the world's largest energy producer and its largest energy consumer cannot fashion a genuine energy partnership, why they cannot work together to mitigate instability in and around the vast territory of the former Soviet Union, or why they cannot collaborate to ease the integration of rising powers such as China and India into a revamped international order. These goals may not be imminently attainable, but they suggest what could and should be the essence of a strategic partnership.

Such a working relationship can only come about step by step and if it is reinforced by the parties' behavior. Washington's wish list is long and so deserves to be designed with some sense of priority. Russia's investment in promoting progressive change in its neighborhood, as well as its openness to U.S. efforts that do the same, belong toward the top of it. So, presumably, does Washington's desire to see Moscow adopt a cooperative, perhaps even joint, approach to the rational exploitation of and the protection of the global commons, beginning with the Arctic and space. And it is important that Russia's leadership make its economic activity abroad more transparent and Russia itself more open to foreign investment.

Finally, just as Russia has the right to wish for a U.S. foreign policy less given to unilateralism, less enamored of the military option, and more attuned to the security interests of other states, the United States has the right to hope that Russia will gradually understand that it is in its national interest to deal with its neighbors by adopting a strategy of reassurance rather than a crude one of wielding carrots and sticks, particularly sticks.

## THE VIEW FROM MOSCOW

None of this will happen easily or quickly. And it will not happen unless the United States continues to lead the effort, because Russia's inertia and skepticism are too great. Too many Americans mistakenly believe that Russia's leaders are incorrigibly antidemocratic and bent on bludgeoning Russia's neighbors, blackmailing Europeans, and causing trouble for the United States. But Moscow's mood and its behavior really are constraints. Although many Russian leaders, beginning with Medvedev, want to see a more constructive U.S.-Russian relationship, they are limited by a dour, pinched notion of what is possible. Over the last decade, they have allowed their suspicion of Washington to fester to the point where they now view almost anything the U.S. government does -- from promoting the construction of oil and gas pipelines out of the Caspian Sea region to supporting civil society in states that neighbor Russia -- as part of a conscious and coherent strategy to weaken Moscow. Russia's leaders justifiably demand to be treated as equals, to be given a real voice in critical international deliberations, and to be allowed to define Russia's national interests themselves. Yet they are unwilling to treat their most immediate neighbors as equals or to respect their independent voices.

Mood is not the only problem. Russia's institutionally amorphous political landscape also stands in the way, for neither the current diarchy formed by Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin nor the system's broader semiauthoritarian power structure is stable. Predicting long-term political trends in Russia, or even who or what will ultimately shape them, is a fool's endeavor. Moreover, the twists and turns likely to mark Russian foreign policy over the next few years will only reinforce these ambiguities.

Then there is Russia's conflicted profile. Russia's traumatic experience over the last two decades has given an intense emotional edge to its relations with the outside world, accentuating the gap between the international status Russia desires and the wherewithal it would need to obtain it. This underlying tension leaves its leaders either unwilling or unable to compose a clear vision of Russia's place and role in the world. Those who speak for Russia have made plain what they oppose but not what they propose instead. Their preference for multipolarity over unipolarity, their exhortations to "democratize" international relations and "strengthen multilateralism," and their calls for a new European security framework are vague appeals. At a more fundamental level, the Russian leadership shies away from deciding with whom to tie the country's fate -- the West or rising powers such as China and India -- or whether to settle for playing the field.

Still, the chances for a fresh start are better now than they have been in more than a decade, for two reasons. U.S.-Russian relations soured not only because of frictions between Washington and Moscow over issues such as NATO enlargement, the status of Kosovo, and Washington's plans to place a ballistic missile defense system in central Europe. Russia's antipathy toward the general thrust of the Bush administration's foreign policy, particularly what Putin and his entourage came to see as Washington's excessive unilateralism and disposition to use force, also did more than its share of damage. Thus, if the style and substance of Obama's foreign policy change as much as he and his team have suggested they will, the context for U.S. policy toward Russia will improve no matter what happens on the specific issues that set the two countries at odds.

Second, the economic crisis that began engulfing Russia last September has thus far softened the Russian leadership's demeanor. The swagger in its foreign policy is less pronounced, and its speeches are more tempered. Some Russians close to Medvedev openly acknowledge that the social bargain of the last eight years -- "the limiting of civil rights in exchange for economic well-being," to use the phrase of Medvedev's confidant Igor Yurgens -- has sundered. Thus, as Medvedev himself has acknowledged, a more respectful dialogue between the leadership and the public is required. The Kremlin no longer boasts of turning Russia into the world's fifth-largest economy or Moscow into a leading financial center. "Patience" and "sacrifice" have become the new watchwords.

Russia's leaders have also begun to shed the skepticism they displayed during the first weeks of the Obama administration and are attiring themselves in more optimistic raiment. But because they still insist that it is the Americans, more than they, who need to shift positions on the issues that agitate them -- NATO enlargement, ballistic missile defense in central Europe, and the failure to ratify the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty -- the real proof of the economic crisis' bracing effect will only be clear when they soften their own less-than-

accommodating attitude. Already, one does notice Moscow's new emphasis on the need for economic cooperation, including on how to refashion the international financial architecture, and its greater diffidence when it comes to issues for which Russia's leaders once pretended to have the better solutions, such as how to build more effective security arrangements in Europe or how to build a fairer global economic order. Now, when they introduce radical ideas, for example, creating a supranational reserve currency, they acknowledge that it is not, as the French say, "for tomorrow." And when they reprise notions that raise eyebrows in the West, such as the claim that Russia has "privileged interests" in the post-Soviet area, they are at pains to moderate their significance. Short of an economic crisis that spirals out of control -- in which case, all bets are off -- it is reasonable to expect Russia's foreign policy to be less assertive and testy for the time being. The leadership's realization that Russia's near-term economic future will entail low or negative growth (not the seven percent annual increase once projected), that its security depends more on economic transformation at home than on fending off external threats, and that further delaying internal reforms is no longer an option suggests that going forward, Russia will be less inclined to brandish its refurbished power and more likely to welcome relief from quarters it previously scorned.

## IN THE BEGINNING

Given the level of mistrust between Washington and Moscow, the Obama administration has rightly started to address the disrepair by taking concrete steps. Doing so has not been easy, as the president and senior officials have learned. Often, particularly in the early going, no matter what Washington offered to Moscow, those Russian leaders with divided minds reacted hesitantly and those with their minds made up looked for traps and suspected ulterior motives. Persistence matters. It will take time for those in the impacted upper circles of Russian power who want a more constructive U.S.-Russian relationship to exert themselves.

Symbolic steps by Washington are important in launching the process, and none more so than repealing the Jackson-Vanik amendment swiftly, without fanfare or horse-trading. The Obama administration understands this and has placed the task high on its agenda. But it also needs to understand that given the reluctance of some members of Congress to forsake any lever with Moscow, nothing will happen unless the White House takes the lead in pushing for its repeal. In April, Obama promised Medvedev that he would speed efforts to bring Russia into the World Trade Organization, secure ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, revive the U.S.-Russian Civilian Nuclear Cooperation Agreement, and advance the treaty ending the production of fissile material for nuclear weapons. The symbolic effect of these measures will generate a powerful impetus toward improving relations -- provided, first, that Washington follows through and, then, that Moscow reciprocates with symbolic gestures of its own.

Whatever the first steps, however, real and lasting progress will depend on the two sides' ability to advance the relationship's substantive agenda. The place to start is with the three issues that the Obama administration has singled out in its early efforts to reengage Moscow: arms control (controlling strategic nuclear arms and strengthening the nuclear nonproliferation regime), Iran, and Afghanistan. As both sides recognize, the first priority is reaching an agreement bridging the gap between the end of START I in December and the

creation of a more ambitious strategic arms control accord that would pick up where the two sides left off 12 years ago in preparing negotiations for START III. Chances are good, based on the progress achieved so far, that Washington and Moscow can agree on further reductions in their warhead count (without yet having to resolve the spoiler issue of ballistic missile defense), simplified monitoring and verification procedures, and mutually acceptable counting rules. When the two presidents meet for their first full-scale summit in July, they should be able to announce the outlines of an initial framework agreement and instruct their delegations to complete the work by the end of the year.

The issue of Iran and its nuclear program is the second major question that needs to be addressed. Judging by the language they now use to frame the issue, the two sides already seem closer than they once were. And although Medvedev has strenuously resisted the Obama administration's efforts to link the United States' plans to deploy missiles in central Europe to progress on the Iran issue, the atmosphere surrounding the U.S.-Russian dialogue has improved, and Moscow seems ready to work on the issue more intensively.

Admittedly, this apparent goodwill does not guarantee success with Moscow, let alone Tehran. Progress depends, first, on whether Russia's leaders can persuade themselves that the importance of preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear power outweighs the risks of harming their many other interests involving Tehran, such as gaining access to Iranian oil and gas, dividing up Caspian Sea resources, selling arms, and stemming Islamist extremism in the North Caucasus and Central Asia. Russian leaders will also have to overcome their fear -- no doubt far-fetched -- that the recent softening of Washington's approach to Iran, combined with a win for the moderates in the Iranian elections in June, could lead to a rapprochement between Washington and Tehran that either government could then use against Moscow.

This highlights the need for Washington to make a conscious effort to convince Moscow that by collaborating with Washington on containing Iran's nuclear aspirations, Moscow would be ensuring that its interests are respected even if Iran starts normalizing relations with the West. But this is unlikely to be enough, either. To convince Russia to toughen its diplomacy, the United States, along with France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (the three states that have led the European effort), will almost certainly have to offer Iran a deal that is acceptable to Tehran. Either Iran should be allowed to have a nuclear-fuel-cycle capability of its own, provided that the facilities are under International Atomic Energy Agency controls and that the enrichment and reprocessing of fuel occurs outside Iran. Or, better, Iran should be induced to join an international fuel-service center. In either case, Russia's role will be crucial: in the first instance, because Russia would likely be the primary source of nuclear fuel and reprocessing, and in the second, because the international fuel-service center in Angarsk, Russia, would likely be the one with which Tehran would partner.

The third essential and urgent item on the U.S.-Russian agenda is dealing with the mounting crisis in Afghanistan. Russian leaders know it is not in their national interest to see the West's efforts to stabilize Afghanistan fail; were that to happen, Russia's southern border would be subjected to the threat of an Afghanistan in a shambles or in the grip of the Taliban. But they are torn between doing what they can to ensure a successful outcome there and indulging their urge to expel the U.S. military from Central Asia. Russia's readiness to allow the transit

across its territory of nonmilitary supplies to U.S. troops in Afghanistan helps, but military goods should also be permitted to move along this corridor, a step the Russians have signaled they are prepared to take. Ultimately, however, the United States should reach out to Russia, China, and other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and encourage them to contribute more to the coalition of states active in Afghanistan. The Obama administration was wise to participate in the SCO conference on Afghanistan last March, because its subject, the fight against drug trafficking out of Afghanistan, is important. But the move only scratches the surface of what should be a larger U.S.-Russian collaboration in addressing the turbulence in and around Afghanistan and its potential reverberations in Central Asia.

## FAR AND WIDE

Ultimately, in order for the U.S.-Russian relationship to move forward on a fundamentally different footing, something far more innovative will be needed. If the Obama administration hopes to overcome the bickering that surrounds nearly every issue on the current agenda and reduce the poisonous suspicion with which Moscow regularly greets U.S. initiatives, let alone transform the relationship into a strategic partnership, it must strive sooner rather than later to establish a deep and far-reaching dialogue with Moscow.

There are several reasons why. First, if Washington does not get to the root of the problems that generate tensions and impede progress in negotiations, the future will almost certainly resemble the recent past: mistrust will grow, and the parties will retreat, convulsively and emotionally, at each new point of trouble. Second, by openly airing and then dealing with the deeper impulses that shape their behavior, the two governments will increase their chances of clearing away the misapprehensions that often prevent sensible outcomes. Third, if it commits to a serious discussion of the most basic issues in the relationship, the Obama administration will increase the likelihood that U.S. policy toward Russia will be more comprehensive, coherent, and well integrated -- the qualities most absent in the past.

This is not an original idea. Previous U.S. administrations have attempted something approximating a strategic dialogue with their Russian counterparts. But these experiments were either short-lived or, as in the case of the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission (which was set up in the 1990s to support bilateral cooperation on space, energy, and technology), more focused on resolving operational concerns than on deeply plumbing the assumptions underlying each side's position. Still, they offer lessons. The first and central one is that in order to succeed, a strategic dialogue must be led by no more than three or four principals on each side -- people detached from government bureaucracies but who enjoy the full confidence of their respective presidents. Past efforts were undone either because the process grew too bureaucratic and lost the flexibility necessary to get at the fundamental source of the problems or because the delegations were no longer led by an interlocutor with direct access to the president. A second lesson from the best of prior experience is that the two sides need to agree on paper, at the outset of negotiations, to the principles that will guide them -- including the understanding that no topic will be off the table. Reflecting a third lesson, Moscow and Washington are now creating ways to guarantee regular high-level contact, maintain an active agenda, and task and discipline their bureaucracies. To succeed, this effort will have to be organized around a presidential checklist -- that is, concrete tasks approved by

the two presidents must be assigned to specific agencies with designated dates by which progress achieved is to be reported and then reviewed at presidential summits.

Obama's people understand this well. But that alone cannot ensure success: unless an effective process by which key agencies are held accountable is devised and the U.S. president empowers a senior member of his administration to put teeth into the process, the sum of Washington's efforts will be considerably less than the parts. It is also unclear whether the mechanism currently under consideration, as elaborate as it is, is intended to serve as the basis for a dialogue that gets at the deep underpinnings of the U.S.-Russian relationship.

Yet this is a necessity, for the heart of this strategic dialogue is the agenda itself. Four areas dominate all others, and they represent four of the twenty-first century's preeminent security concerns: European security, security in and around the Eurasian landmass (especially the post-Soviet area), nuclear security, and energy security. Not coincidentally, these also frame the most friction-laden aspects of the U.S.-Russian relationship, namely, the future relationship of Georgia and Ukraine with NATO, the role of ballistic missile defense in central Europe, the U.S.-Russian interaction in the post-Soviet area, and the jockeying over oil and gas pipelines.

Each of these issues needs to be approached at a fundamental level. Thus, the dialogue about European security should start with each side's assessment of the core threats facing Europe. It should then evolve into an open-ended discussion of how Europe's existing security institutions might be improved to better address these threats, mitigate the insecurity felt by states left outside these institutions (such as Georgia and Ukraine), and create an overarching framework in which NATO and parallel organizations in the Commonwealth of Independent States could address various security challenges together. Although this must be a conversation among Americans, Russians, and Europeans, a bilateral dialogue between Washington and Moscow would offer a crucial basis for testing the potential of a broader European security dialogue.

The issue of mutual security in and around the post-Soviet area will be the most difficult to tackle, but it cannot be avoided; no question cuts more deeply to the core of the current tension in the U.S.-Russian relationship. The starting point for this discussion should be a frank and practical look at how each side sees its own and the other's concerns, interests, and role in the post-Soviet area. However awkward and tense this discussion gets, it must address the specific sources of friction: NATO's activities, the claims and counterclaims surrounding the separatist conflicts in Moldova and the Caucasus, the role of Western nongovernmental organizations in the region, Russia's leverage over its neighbors, and competition over oil and gas. The dialogue must especially explore ways in which the United States and Russia can work together to manage the two most explosive issues: the future of Ukraine and the way toward a more stable and constructive Russian-Georgian relationship.

The topic of nuclear security consists of five challenges, each one critical, all of them linked. First, the fundamental question is how best to strengthen the nuclear nonproliferation regime and, most immediately, how to prevent Iran and North Korea from further eroding it. Second, intimately connected to this challenge is the need to minimize the risk of nuclear

proliferation as more and more states look to nuclear power to meet their energy needs -- sometimes as an excuse or a cover for developing nuclear weapons programs -- thereby giving themselves the potential ability to enrich uranium. That effort will require working with suppliers in the nuclear power industry to develop reactors less easy to use for weapons development and concentrating nuclear fuel services in facilities monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency. This, in turn, will require close cooperation between the United States and Russia -- a reason to revive the stalled negotiations for a so-called 123 agreement, which would promote peaceful commercial nuclear activities between the two countries. Third, if Obama and Medvedev are serious about moving toward a world without nuclear weapons, as they affirmed in their joint statement in April, they need to decide how they intend to go about it. Fourth, in their own nuclear relationship, the United States and Russia are no longer like "two scorpions in a bottle," but if left unregulated, their choices -- about whether to pursue ballistic missile defense, weaponize space, introduce nuclear weapons into conventional war doctrines -- could still be destabilizing. And fifth, the United States and Russia will have to lead any effort to establish a broader multilateral arms control regime designed to reduce the hazardous aspects of the nuclear postures of the other nuclear powers, particularly those weapons systems in China, India, and Pakistan that blur the line between conventional and nuclear attacks.

Finally, there is the question of energy security. The United States and Russia have long toyed with the idea of having an energy dialogue. They launched one in 2002, let it languish, and then partially revived it during the last year of the Bush administration. Useful as the discussion of potential projects and practical measures may be, however, the two sides need to push the dialogue deeper. Discussing ways to bring Russian oil and liquefied natural gas to the North American market and to enhance cooperation within the consortia developing Caspian Sea oil, while vigorously pursuing dueling pipeline projects, raises the core question: Do the two countries intend for the relationship to be cooperative or competitive?

Addressing the enormously complex issues surrounding the politics of oil and gas from Russia and the Caspian Sea basin only makes sense as part of a three-way dialogue among the United States, Russia, and Europe (Europe is Russia's largest oil and gas market, and Russia is far and away Europe's largest supplier). This does not mean, however, that a serious and well-conceived U.S.-Russian dialogue should neglect the subject or shun the chance to find out precisely what Putin meant in Davos in February when he urged states "to work out a new international legal framework for energy security." "If implemented," he added, it "could have the same economic impact as the treaty establishing the European Coal and Steel Community" and could "unite consumers and producers in a common energy partnership that would be real and based on clear-cut international rules." Similarly, Medvedev has called for developing a far more expansive energy convention than the current Energy Charter contains, a document that neither Russia nor the United States has signed.

## A FRESH START

Outlining the agenda of an ambitious strategic dialogue is not to assume that agreement will come soon or easily or even at all. National interests will clash even when the issues have been stripped

of emotion and misunderstandings. And issues subject to the warping effect of domestic politics will not submit to the most well-intentioned international dialogue. At root, the purpose of a strategic dialogue is to take the realm of what was impossible and shrink it and the realm of the barely possible and enlarge it.

Finally, nothing in this approach prejudices, much less precludes, a strong and independent U.S. policy toward Georgia, Ukraine, and the other states of the former Soviet Union. It is in the U.S. national interest -- not least because it is in the interest of global stability -- that as many states in the region as possible emerge as peaceful, stable, prosperous, and self-confident democratic societies. But it is also in the United States' long-term interest to avoid promoting this goal in ways that intentionally or unintentionally encourage these states to balance against Russia or that treat Russian-sponsored institutions in the region as inherently suspect, rather than as potential complements (with some adjustments) to parallel structures in the West.

Nor does this approach suggest that the often roiling subject of clashing U.S. and Russian political values or U.S. concerns over political trends within Russia should be soft-pedaled or ignored. These issues need to be a part of the relationship, not because Washington has the right to judge Moscow or instruct the Russians and their leaders but because any durable and deeper partnership depends on a minimally kindred sense of what the two societies stand for and will defend. The two sides must also find a way to discuss these matters in a civil, constructive manner. Rather than putting Russia in the pillory, the United States should identify areas in which both countries face common challenges and have come up short: say, the problem of illegal immigration or the tension between the struggle against terrorism and the protection of civil rights. Washington and Moscow ought to prove that they can have a productive conversation and only then move on to more sensitive subjects.

One final suggestion: it has been more than 16 years since U.S. President Bill Clinton, speaking on the eve of his first summit with Russian President Boris Yeltsin, delivered the last major U.S. presidential address on U.S. Russia policy. The time is right for Obama to share with his administration, the American people, and an intensely interested Russian audience his strategic vision for U.S.-Russian relations and where he would like these to be several years from now. He should then invite the Russian side to join in a frank, wide-ranging discussion of how to get there. As the president readies himself for his first full-scale summit with his Russian counterpart this summer, and as the two countries strain to prove that they can succeed with the agenda they set last April, he has a chance to end a friction-ridden and barren decade in U.S.-Russian relations and help set the two countries on a far more promising road.

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