



Assessing the “Reset” and the Next Steps for U.S. Russia Policy

Samuel Charap April 2010

Introduction and summary

When President Barack Obama took office in January 2009, the U.S.-Russia relationship was at its lowest point since the end of the Cold War. Just five months earlier, his predecessor was presented with the option of conducting military strikes against the Russian military units that had invaded Georgia—a move that would have had catastrophic consequences. But even before the Russia-Georgia war, the bilateral relationship was in a state of near-complete disrepair.

The Obama administration came in with the conviction that permitting this situation to continue would be highly detrimental to the national security of the United States. An improved U.S.-Russia relationship would be crucial for the new team's attempts to make progress on their top priorities, such as stabilizing Afghanistan and locking down loose nuclear materials.

They decided to adopt a new approach and engage Moscow on critical issues facing both countries—a tactic Vice President Joe Biden described as pressing “the reset button” in the bilateral relationship. But the administration was also determined not to let engagement come at the expense of other U.S. priorities and our fundamental values.

On April 8, 2010, President Obama met Russian President Dmitri Medvedev in Prague to sign New START, the successor to the original landmark Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty, making good on the administration's top priority for the reset. New START calls for significant, verifiable cuts in both sides' arsenals.

The signing of the new arms control agreement also serves as an opportunity to assess the “reset” and to focus on the future of the U.S.-Russia relationship now that the treaty has been signed.

A thorough stock-taking of the administration's Russia policy shows engagement has yielded clear dividends. Indeed, New START itself demonstrates the remarkable improvement in U.S.-Russia relations that has taken place since President Obama's inauguration.

There have been other significant achievements as well, including cooperation on stabilizing Afghanistan, joint attempts to address the Iranian nuclear program, and the creation of an infrastructure for the relationship in the Bilateral Presidential Commission. Less appreciated,

but equally important, is the administration's initial success in repairing the deep mistrust between the two countries. The new atmosphere of diminished antagonism played an important role in preventing several potentially damaging outcomes from occurring, including a repeat of the conflict in Georgia on the anniversary of the August 2008 war.

To be sure, there have been missteps and miscalculations. And on certain issues, such as ensuring Russian compliance with its international commitments and improving economic ties, progress has been minimal.

But the constructive, substantive bilateral relationship that exists today represents a sea change from its state when President Obama took office. And, despite frequent assertions to the contrary in the media, this improvement did not come at the expense of any other policy goal. The administration did not engage in any "grand bargains" with Moscow as part of the reset.

This report will review the accomplishments and remaining challenges of the reset's first year and offer policy recommendations to address these challenges and broaden the relationship.¹ Specifically, the administration should take the following steps:

Arms control

- **Broaden the arms control agenda.** Now that the New START has been signed, the administration should begin talks with the Russians on even farther-reaching cuts in nuclear weapons.

Georgia

- **Develop an action plan for Russian compliance with the August 2008 cease-fire agreement with Georgia.** The administration should continue holding Russia to its international commitments vis-à-vis the situation in Georgia, several of which it is now violating. But a more creative approach to the impasse in Georgia is necessary to achieve progress—and to avoid a second conflict in the future. The United States should outline concrete steps that could create positive momentum and build confidence.

Democracy and human rights

- **Fully implement the new approach to democracy and human rights.** The Obama administration has put an end to the destructive finger-wagging of the past and adopted new tactics to further democratic development in Russia. But its approach remains more a concept than a policy agenda.

Reinvigorate economic ties

- **Move beyond WTO membership.** Despite Russia's frequent protestations that it still wants to be a member of the World Trade Organization and needs U.S. help to accomplish that goal, the Customs Union it established with Belarus and Kazakhstan has put off accession indefinitely. Unless Moscow reverses course, there is little the United States can do beyond the efforts it is already making to assist Russia's accession.
- **Facilitate Russia's OECD membership.** The membership process for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development involves a wholesale audit of a country's economic policy. Russian engagement with the OECD could serve as a strong stimulus for economic reform and the development of the rule of law.
- **Focus on energy efficiency cooperation.** Energy efficiency cooperation presents multiple benefits: It is a top priority for both presidents, offers the potential for economic gains, and reduces carbon emissions.

Strategic communications

- **Make priorities clear.** The reset has been widely misinterpreted both by the media and by our allies and friends. The administration should make clear that the reset is not a Russia-first policy or a Kremlin-first policy.
- **Manage expectations.** There have been unrealistic expectations about the reset from the start. To a certain extent, the administration facilitated this by setting a highly ambitious agenda and suggesting that successes would come early and easily. U.S. Russia policy must be guided by a sober assessment of what can and cannot be achieved in the bilateral relationship and a clear understanding that working with today's Kremlin is not going to be easy.
- **Avoid sending Moscow mixed messages.** The Russian leadership's suspicion of U.S. motives will not disappear anytime soon. As a result, the reset of the bilateral relationship over the past year and the benefits it has conferred are tenuous and can easily be reversed. While the administration should not change policy course to overcome the Kremlin's mistrust, it can go a long way by maintaining a coordinated, coherent message.

These recommendations will help cement the gains made in the first year of the reset. But a strategic partnership with today's Russian government, which often acts in ways both at home and abroad that demonstrate a "values gap" between our countries and a lack of interest in being a responsible stakeholder in the international system, is highly

unlikely. U.S.-Russia relations will remain a mix of competition and cooperation, and Russia could at times be a source of frustration for the United States in realizing its foreign policy objectives.

The record of the reset's first year, however, shows that a policy of constructive engagement can yield important benefits.

The Center for American Progress is a nonpartisan research and educational institute dedicated to promoting a strong, just and free America that ensures opportunity for all. We believe that Americans are bound together by a common commitment to these values and we aspire to ensure that our national policies reflect these values. We work to find progressive and pragmatic solutions to significant domestic and international problems and develop policy proposals that foster a government that is “of the people, by the people, and for the people.”

Center for American Progress

