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The Transformation of US-Russia Relations

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On August 8, 2010, the US and Russian air forces embarked on a remarkable exercise. The assignment, dubbed Vigilant Eagle, involved tracking a Gulfstream jet that had sent out a mock distress signal shortly after taking off from a runway in Alaska. The plane flew in the direction of the Bering Strait with the intent of testing the two countries' readiness to respond to a hijacking by an international terrorist.

F-22s from the North American Aerospace Defense Command, the joint US-Canadian group that was created explicitly to protect the skies over North America from a Soviet attack, were scrambled and within 10 minutes were escorting the Gulfstream over the Pacific. When the F-22s fell back to refuel, US ground controllers gave a signal to their Russian counterparts and a MiG-31 and two Su-27s took up positions to trace the plane as it headed toward its destination in the Russian Far East.

For the two militaries this was a major step forward in building capacity to jointly address shared threats, and to work off persistent cold war hangovers on both sides. But the exercise was all the more striking in light of recent history. Two years to the day before the F-22s took off from Alaska, a war broke out between Russia and Georgia that almost shattered the relationship and could have led to US-Russia military confrontation.

That summer in the White House, frantic officials undertook discussions about possible US retaliation against the Russian forces that had invaded Georgian territory. The options discussed included surgical strikes on a tunnel connecting Russia with the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia, which at the time would have been full of Russian soldiers and military hardware. Although the principals in the administration of George W. Bush ultimately rejected a direct military response, all working-level ties between Pentagon officials and their Russian colleagues were ordered cut after the war. In addition, the United States pushed for, and achieved, a suspension of the NATO-Russia Council, one of the primary forums for bilateral interaction on security issues.

An outside observer might assume that Vigilant Eagle, along with a wide array of other measures in bilateral security cooperation that the Barack Obama administration has implemented since it took office, is a sign that the Georgia war has been forgotten, and that its long-term effects are insignificant. But in fact, the events of August 2008 have had a major and lasting impact on the bilateral relationship. Moscow's recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (the other breakaway Georgian region) and Russia's continuing and deepening military presence in the two territories represent the most significant problem in the bilateral relationship today.

RISING TEMPERATURES

The indirect impact of the Russia-Georgia conflict has been even more profound. The August 2008 war, largely because it took place in the midst of a tough presidential election campaign in the United States, made the relationship between Washington and Moscow an important issue in American politics for the first time since the end of the cold war. Russia became part of the national political conversation at a time when politics in the United States was beginning its final, rapid descent into the pitched partisan warfare that it has become.

In a different way, and for different reasons, in Russia as well the war marked a parallel politicization of the bilateral relationship. For Russian President Dmitri Medvedev, lifting the relation-

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ship from its post–August 2008 depths is one of the few concrete achievements he can show for his time in office, at a time when the process for deciding his political future is intensifying. In short, the relationship's political temperature has risen in both capitals, and this inevitably will have an impact on the relationship itself.

Still, as of this writing, the state of US-Russia relations is better than it has been at any point in the past decade. The quantity and quality of interactions between the two governments had degraded to post–cold war lows even before the first shots were fired in August 2008. Even discussions of shared threats had become nearly impossible due to deep suspicion and distrust. The war laid bare the flimsiness of bilateral ties: Moscow felt it had nothing to lose when it ordered troops into Georgia.

When President Obama took office in January 2009, tensions remained nearly as high as they had been the previous summer. The day after he was elected, his Russian counterpart announced the deployment of Iskander missiles in the Kaliningrad exclave. Early on Obama and his team decided that it was unacceptable to allow the highly tense atmosphere that resulted from the Georgia war to persist, and that returning to the prewar status quo ante was not in the US national interest. They recognized that it would be impossible to address core threats to American national security (ranging from the proliferation of nuclear materials to climate change) or to realize key foreign policy priorities (such as stabilizing Afghanistan) without a constructive and substantive US-Russia relationship.

So they decided to adopt a new approach, described by Vice President Joe Biden in February 2009 with a metaphor that has stood the test of time: pressing the "reset" button on the bilateral relationship. The administration's idea was to engage with Russia on shared threats and on issues where interests converged, while also pushing back against Kremlin actions that contradicted US interests—but in a way that did not completely undermine the relationship. Officials argued that only in extreme circumstances should disagreements prevent cooperation on issues of mutual interest, but that such cooperation would not come at the expense of other US interests, whether they be maintaining ties with allies or promoting fundamental values.

The resulting tactical changes in US diplomacy have included altering the tone that surrounds the handling of disputes; treating Russia as a potential partner in addressing shared challenges, instead of approaching Moscow with demands; and emphasizing transparency when it comes to US goals and plans. In retrospect, these changes seem modest in comparison with the dramatic results.

GETTING IT STARTED

While certainly not revolutionary, the policy shift represented a clear risk for the United States. There had been no leadership change in Moscow and thus there was little reason to believe that Russia would respond to Obama's overture. Yet it did—and thus far the reset's dividends for US national security, across a wide range of policy priorities, have been significant. The biggest headlines have come from progress on nonproliferation and nuclear arms control.

Embracing closer relations with the West is no way to boost your popularity in Russia.

In April 2010, the two sides signed New START, a successor to the original Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty. New START will limit the number of deployed strategic nuclear warheads on each side to 1,500—roughly a 30 percent drop from the 2,200 currently allowed. The allowable numbers of nuclear launchers—land-based missiles, submarine-based missiles, and bombers—that either the United States or Russia can maintain will be reduced from 1,600 to 800. No more than 700 of these launching systems will be deployed by either country at a given time. The treaty also modernizes the verification framework of the original START accord.

Regarding nonproliferation, Iran has been the central concern for the US administration, and by historical standards Russia has played a constructive role over the past year and a half. In October 2009 Moscow proposed that Iran send most of its low-enriched uranium to Russia for further enrichment and then to France, to produce fuel for the Tehran Research Reactor (TRR).

The TRR proposal, which the Iranian regime initially accepted, offered both a way to end the impasse over the country's nuclear program and, after Tehran subsequently rejected it, a means of legitimizing the decision to pursue what became known as the "pressure track." Here too, after

months of negotiations, Russia in June 2010 signed on to United Nations Security Council Resolution 1929, which slapped a new, significantly strengthened round of sanctions on Iran. Although the sanctions did not explicitly require it to do so, Moscow then scrapped the planned sale of advanced S-300 antiaircraft missiles to Iran.

Nonproliferation measures on which Russia has cooperated also include a May 2009 Security Council resolution that strengthened sanctions on North Korea and allowed for maritime interdiction of cargo ships suspected of containing banned materials; and a protocol signed at the Nuclear Security Summit held in Washington in April this year that commits both the United States and Russia to dispose of weapons-grade plutonium equivalent to approximately 17,000 nuclear weapons.

Russia, meanwhile, has been central to facilitating the unprecedented logistics involved in supporting NATO's International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan. A rail route—from the port of Riga, Latvia, through Russia and Kazakhstan, to the Uzbekistan-Afghanistan border at Termez—became operational in April 2009. The route, which carries supplies to Afghanistan in nine days, offers a number of advantages over alternative supply lines across Pakistan, where convoys must travel through enemy territory to reach their destination. As of June this year, approximately one-quarter of the nonlethal supplies heading to Afghanistan were moving through Russia by rail.

Following an agreement signed by Medvedev and Obama in July 2009, Russia also opened up an air corridor across its territory to carry troops and lethal supplies. As of the spring of this year, an average of two flights per day were being conducted under the agreement, and by June over 35,000 US personnel had flown over Russia on their way to Afghanistan.

Russia has facilitated US and NATO efforts regarding other aspects of the operation in Afghanistan as well, for example by backing in January 2010 a US-sponsored proposal in the Security Council to lift sanctions against five former Taliban officials who now support the government of Hamid Karzai. The move was a significant shift, after years of Moscow's opposition to delisting the men. Russia has shared intelligence on the *hawala* system of informal exchange, which the Taliban use to launder drug money and fund their operations. Moscow has supplied more than 80 Mi-17 helicopters to the Afghan armed forces on a commercial basis, and recently indicated that it would donate over a dozen more. And Russian firms supply almost one-third of the fuel used by the US military in Afghanistan.

"MODERNIZE," PARTNER

In the past year, moreover, US-Russia relations have expanded beyond traditional security-based cooperation. Both sides have made an effort to boost their traditionally anemic economic ties (Russia, the world's 8th-largest economy, ranked number 25 among America's trading partners last year) and, despite the global downturn, have had some success. Several business deals have made headlines, including a Russian firm's purchase of up to 65 planes from Boeing and PepsiCo's decision to invest $1 billion in Russia. At a June 2010 meeting in Washington, Obama and Medvedev also announced several new government-supported efforts, such as an initiative on cooperation in energy efficiency and the resubmission to the US Congress of a bilateral civil nuclear energy deal.

The Obama administration has embraced Medvedev's drive to boost innovation in Russia by, for example, facilitating delegations of venture capitalists and information technology executives and launching cooperation on e-government and transparency. Medvedev in turn has made the improved bilateral relationship part and parcel of his modernization drive. He began his June 2010 trip to the United States on the West Coast, with a visit to Silicon Valley to meet with leading entrepreneurs such as Google CEO Eric Schmidt. More recently he has said that a "modernization partnership" with the United States is a top foreign policy priority.

Medvedev and Obama, during their Moscow summit in July 2009, created the US-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission. The intent was to regularize interaction between the two governments across a wide range of issues, creating an institutional framework for the relationship. The commission consists of 16 working groups, which cover issues from space to emergency situations, and brings together representatives of over 60 US and Russian government agencies. More than 100 meetings and exchanges have taken place under the commission's auspices, ranging from the first-ever US-Russia youth basketball exchange—which saw Russian youngsters shooting hoops with the president of the United States at the White House—to now-regular meetings between the countries' top counternarcotics officials.

The Obama administration has also sought what it calls "dual-track engagement," in addition to traditional democracy assistance programs. Officials have applied the "dual-track" label to activities of the sort that also occurred under previous administrations—such as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's meeting with Russian human rights activists and opposition politicians in October 2009—as well as to a new program facilitating "peer-to-peer" cooperation between civil societies in the two countries.

SOURCES OF TENSION

Although the bilateral relationship today is vastly improved compared to its post–August 2008 doldrums, major differences remain. Three problems have been particularly acute over the past year. First, the two countries take conflicting approaches to major international security issues, ranging from the future of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture to missile defense.

Regarding the former, Moscow continues to push an agenda—embodied in Medvedev's proposal for a new European security treaty and his government's plans for reform of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe—meant both to boost its voice in decision making and to diminish the authority of the institutions it holds in disfavor and the salience of those norms it finds objectionable. This agenda is often diametrically opposed to Washington's.

The second problem has to do with the "values gap"—the contrast between the ideals that define politics in the United States and Russia's controls on participation in public life and continued limitations on personal freedom. While the gap has been reduced as an irritant because of the Obama administration's change in tone, it has not disappeared. Indeed, some would point to recent violent breakups of peaceful demonstrations and arrests of human rights activists and argue that the gap has widened, though there is more political contestation in Russia now than there has been in several years. US officials, meanwhile, continue to make statements about human rights violations in Russia; and US financial assistance to local nongovernmental organizations and the new peer-to-peer NGO engagement doubtless irk the Kremlin.

Traditionally, a third major obstacle to a closer relationship has been the conflict between Russia's insistence that the former Soviet region constitutes its "sphere of privileged interests," as President Medvedev has described it, and Washington's equally adamant stance that the countries of the region should be free to make their own foreign policy choices. However, with the exception of Georgia, US-Russia competition in the region has diminished significantly.

Changes in international energy markets have largely ended the so-called pipeline war in Central Asia, which saw Russia and the West pushing competing plans to get hydrocarbons from the Caspian to Europe. With a democratically elected president in Kiev who actively seeks closer ties with Moscow, Ukraine has largely ceased to be a locus of geopolitical tug-of-war. On other issues in the former Soviet region, such as Armenia-Turkey reconciliation or the process of conflict resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh, Moscow has actually played a constructive role. Similarly, in the aftermath of the ouster of Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiyev, the United States and Russia worked together—first, to ensure his safe escape into exile, and then to coordinate a response to the humanitarian crisis in Kyrgyzstan.

Even so, two years later, it is clear that the issues stirred up by the Russia-Georgia war will themselves constitute a roadblock for US-Russia relations for years to come. The United States considers Russia to be in violation of the cease-fire agreement that ended the war, which, at least in the Western reading, calls for all forces to return to prewar positions and levels, and for the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) to have access to the region to verify compliance.

Instead, Moscow is bolstering its military presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, after having signed basing and border protection agreements with the de facto governments in Tskhinvali and Sukhumi. Russia claims that the cease-fire was signed before the emergence of what it (along with Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Nauru) considers two new independent states and therefore no longer applies. Moscow is not willing to allow the EUMM access to South Ossetia, nor has it pushed Tskhinvali to participate in early-warning conflict prevention mechanisms. As a result, an already tense situation on the ground is only made more volatile.

Russia continues to pressure states such as Belarus to recognize the two breakaway Georgian provinces and, together with representatives of the two regions, has monopolized Geneva-based multiparty conflict talks with a demand for a non-use-of-force agreement that appears to be a backdoor route to discussion of the regions' sta-

tus. Meanwhile, Russia continues to meddle in Georgia's domestic politics, to treat its democratically elected government as if it were the leadership of a rogue state, and regularly to question the propriety of any US-Georgia bilateral engagement, particularly in the defense sphere.

For US-Russia relations, these issues are in themselves bad enough. The very real possibility of a second conflict and the utter absence of positive momentum suggest that they will remain a problem for years to come. In short, the 2008 war in Georgia planted a ticking time bomb under the bilateral relationship, notwithstanding the dramatic improvement in ties under Presidents Obama and Medvedev.

ASSAILING OBAMA

The war's indirect impact on the bilateral relationship is likely to be equally if not more damaging in the long term. For much of the post–cold war era, debates within the United States about relations with Moscow were largely confined within the Washington Beltway. The US-Russia relationship, like the vast majority of foreign policy issues, simply did not capture the public imagination in the way that the economy did—or, for that matter, the US relationship with the Soviet Union. Russia episodically came up in electoral politics, but more as an afterthought than a central theme.

Even within the Beltway, pundits' and experts' opinions regarding strategy toward Russia might have varied, but the dividing lines rarely corresponded with partisan splits or broader debates about the direction of US foreign policy. In late 2002, a task force report (prepared by Sarah Mendelson for the Century and Stanley Foundations) on the domestic politics of America's Russia policy concluded that "Aside from a few issues, there has been relatively little policy debate among even those experts who follow events in Russia on a full-time basis. To a great extent the US government has had an extremely free hand in setting the basic contours and details of policy toward Russia. . . . Regardless of the policy, whatever the issue, from promoting democracy to stopping nuclear proliferation, the American public rarely has been engaged." For almost six more years, this analysis would hold true.

But the events of August 2008 changed all that. When war broke out, then-candidate Obama had already experienced a rough primary battle that featured a television ad questioning his readiness as commander in chief to handle a late-night crisis. The future president's team was acutely sensitive to allegations of inexperience and naïveté in foreign policy, especially given the statesman stature that his opponent, Senator John McCain, had gained because of a decorated military career and his years in the Senate.

On Russia, Obama emphasized cooperation in securing loose nuclear materials. This contrasted with McCain's approach, which, following his 2007 call to remove Russia from the Group of Eight, bordered on a neo-containment strategy. And while Obama, as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee's subcommittee on Europe, had cosponsored a resolution applauding NATO's decision at the Bucharest Summit to eventually include Georgia and Ukraine as members of the alliance, McCain's credentials as a long-standing "friend of Georgia" were unmatched.

Early on Obama and his team decided that it was unacceptable to allow the highly tense atmosphere that resulted from the Georgia war to persist.

Against this background, the August war was bound to take on greater significance in the 2008 campaign than it otherwise might have. Sensitivities were compounded by a flap over a statement Obama released when hostilities first broke out, which included the following: "I strongly condemn the outbreak of violence in Georgia, and urge an immediate end to armed conflict. Now is the time for Georgia and Russia to show restraint, and to avoid an escalation to full-scale war." Even though Obama's words echoed those of the Bush White House at the time, they proved a lightning rod.

Critics quickly drew distinctions between Obama's statement and McCain's, which focused exclusively on the need for Russia to curtail its actions. The Obama camp protested that its first reaction was a reflection of the information available at the time, and that later statements did in fact focus more on Moscow, but by that point Russia policy had entered the partisan political realm.

During the three presidential debates that fall, Russia was probably the foreign policy topic mentioned most often after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. For McCain, the accusation that Obama's initial statement had demonstrated a

combination of naïveté, inexperience, and poor judgment, all of which should make Americans think twice about choosing him as commander in chief, became a trope in speeches.

As McCain put it during the second presidential debate, "Senator Obama was wrong about Iraq and the surge. He was wrong about Russia when they committed aggression against Georgia. And in his short career, he does not understand our national security challenges." This message seemed to resonate: In a poll conducted after the war in Georgia, 55 percent of likely voters named McCain as best qualified to deal with Russia, compared to 27 percent for Obama.

The Russia issue soon became conflated with a broader narrative about Obama's (and his party's) approach to foreign policy generally. At the Republican national convention, former New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani denounced Obama's reaction to the Russia-Georgia war as an example of a proclivity to blur what should be clear distinctions: "Obama's first instinct was to create a moral equivalency, suggesting that both sides were equally responsible, the same moral equivalency that he's displayed in discussing the Palestinian Authority and the state of Israel." This sort of accusation has continued to this day: that Obama is a foreign policy realist who cares little for principles or friends and is content to work with enemies because he does not see them as such.

Certainly this line of attack on Democrats is not new, but the insertion of Russia into the discussion was an innovation—one that required demonizing the country. During the second debate, journalist Tom Brokaw posed a question this way: "This requires only a yes or a no. Ronald Reagan famously said that the Soviet Union was the evil empire. Do you think that Russia under Vladimir Putin is an evil empire?" Obama answered that Moscow had "engaged in an evil behavior" but cautioned that "it is important that we understand they're not the old Soviet Union." Neither he nor any national political figure could hope to survive if he fully rejected the premise of the question: the equation of Russia with the Soviet Union.

More than two years after the August 2008 war, the political intensity surrounding US-Russia relations shows no signs of abating. The McCain view of Russia as an evil dictatorship irrevocably committed to undercutting US interests and reestablishing complete regional hegemony—once considered somewhat extreme within the Republican foreign policy establishment—is now the party line.

Further, the accusation that the Obama administration has in the course of improving US-Russia relations somehow downgraded US ties with both new NATO allies in Central Europe and non-NATO partners in the region (in particular Ukraine and Georgia) has dogged the reset of relations from the beginning, despite the lack of factual evidence to support the claim. Critics even deny the improvement in US-Russia relations, or argue that it has not produced any gains for American national security.

As McCain himself put it in a recent opinion article in *The Washington Post*, "The administration has appeared more eager to placate an autocratic Russia than to support a friendly Georgian democracy living under the long shadow of its aggressive neighbor. It has lavished Medvedev with long phone calls and frequent meetings, with only modest foreign policy gains to show for it." In the phrase of one Czech politician, a phrase that echoed Giuliani's convention speech and resonated in Washington, Obama's foreign policy is "enemy-centric." That is, he either fails to understand that Russia is an "enemy" or he simply prefers doing business with "enemies."

The reset's dividends for US national security, across a wide range of policy priorities, have been significant.

In short, the politicization of Russia policy that followed the August war has transformed one of the administration's relatively few clear-cut foreign policy successes into something of a political liability. It has also begun to have an impact on the relationship itself, with the New START treaty facing an uphill battle for approval in the Senate. One senator has referred to Russia as the Soviet Union several times in the course of committee hearings on the treaty, while the former Massachusetts governor and presidential candidate Mitt Romney has dubbed the accord as "Obama's worst foreign policy mistake."

MEDVEDEV'S MIXED BAG

The US-Russia relationship has, within Russia too, undergone a process of politicization since the Georgia war. The vast majority of the Russian public, including many of Putin's harshest critics,

strongly favored the Kremlin's actions in August 2008—with the decision to recognize the two breakaway republics representing a partial exception. But the August war, because it plunged US-Russia relations to their lowest point since the end of the cold war, paradoxically gave Medvedev the opportunity, through rebuilding those relations, to generate political capital at home.

Clearly, Russia's authoritarian political system bears little resemblance to American democracy. But the current "tandemocracy" model, with both Medvedev and Putin playing important roles in public life and policy making, has created more space for political contestation and intra-elite competition than was the case when Putin ruled alone. That is not to say that significant conflict exists between the two members of the ruling tandem. Medvedev has been Putin's colleague and close confidant for more than a decade and they generally see eye to eye on major issues.

But early in Medvedev's tenure it became clear that, if he was to make a credible case in the country's intra-elite selection process for serving a second presidential term, he would need to identify some issues that he could make his own. With Russia's economy devastated by the global economic crisis, an incipient civil war in the north Caucasus, and Putin not shying away from the limelight, it would not be enough merely to serve as president of the Russian Federation. So Medvedev embarked on a branding mission. He chose as his central domestic policy priorities economic modernization and the fight against the country's all-encompassing corruption. Both issues resonate among the public and the elite. But slow progress on both has meant that neither has produced much in the way of concrete "deliverables" for Medvedev.

The improvement in US-Russia relations, however, along with the New START treaty, can very clearly be branded as success stories for Medvedev. Putin, meanwhile, has steered clear of the reset—with the exception of a bizarre "traditional" Russian breakfast meeting with Obama outside Moscow and a one-on-one meeting with Secretary Clinton that by all accounts was unpleasant. Putin is said to harbor deep resentment toward the United States because of what he sees as false promises made by President Bush, and because he reportedly believes that the United States was deeply involved in the color revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia and in the Georgia war itself. For Putin to embrace closer ties with Washington would represent a difficult climb-down, considering the infamous speech he delivered in Munich in 2007, when he seemed to compare the United States to the Third Reich. In any case, Putin has been content to let Medvedev take the lead on the relationship with Washington.

For Medvedev, even this success story is a distinctly mixed bag: Embracing closer relations with the West is no way to boost your popularity in Russia. In a March 2010 survey, 35 percent of respondents listed the United States as "Russia's biggest enemy." The month before, a poll had found that only 14 percent of Russians wanted closer ties with the United States, while 40 percent were content with the status quo and 36 percent advocated "seeking a greater distance." (That said, the number of Russians who hold positive views of the United States soared to 60 percent in May 2010 from a low of 31 percent in November 2008, while the number who maintain negative feelings fell to 26 percent from 55 percent.)

PARALLEL STATES

For Medvedev, however, in contrast to Obama, popular opinion is far less important than elite opinion. His primary political objective as the 2012 presidential election approaches is to prove to the small group that matters in Russian politics that he deserves to remain in office for a second term. The improved US-Russia relationship is one of the few deliverables that his time in office has produced.

A year and a half after they first met, Presidents Obama and Medvedev therefore find themselves in an unlikely parallel state. The dramatic improvement in bilateral relations that they have overseen should be an unambiguous policy success story. Yet the politicization of the relationship that the August 2008 war initiated in both countries has stopped either man from loudly trumpeting it as such. At the same time, the political fortunes of both men stand to suffer if that relationship sours. Conversely, the relationship between the two countries might be negatively affected if either Obama or Medvedev proves to be a one-term president. ■