

28 February 2013

Russia-US Relations under Obama: Round 2

Many commentators believe that the Obama administration has failed to 'reset' its ties with Moscow. Richard Weitz may agree, but he also reminds us that Russia and the US continue to share a number of interests together. They make cooperating with each other an imperative rather than an option.

By Richard Weitz for ISN

Earlier this month, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov took [five days to answer](#) Secretary of State John Kerry's phone call to discuss urgent matters relating to Syria and North Korea. This is yet another sign that Russia-US relations could provide a major challenge for Barack Obama's second term. Initially, the 'reset' between Washington and Moscow during the President's first term of office scored some notable early successes. Consensus was reached, for example, on nuclear arms control issues, multiple reentry visas and the transportation of non-lethal supplies to Afghanistan via the [Northern Distribution Network](#).

However, early progress has been replaced by inertia and growing concerns that Russia and the United States are becoming entangled in a mutually destructive tit-for-tat cycle that will unduly harm their shared interests. And as the world has moved far beyond the time when Moscow and Washington had a decisive influence on all important global issues, mutual interests should form the basis for the second phase of Obama's 'reset' with Russia.

Regression to the Mean?

Relations between Washington and Moscow began to deteriorate after [Vladimir Putin returned to the Russian presidency](#) last May, replacing Dmitry Medvedev in what was regarded as a highly cynical exchange of positions. Although Putin has previously demonstrated that he can reach agreements with the United States, he currently believes that Washington did not adequately reciprocate his early overtures. Moreover, Putin's decision to skip last year's G8 and NATO summits in the United States also suggests that he does not consider improving relations with Washington his highest priority.

However, improving bilateral ties is by no means the most urgent agenda item for the Obama administration either, with Washington's relations with the Asia-Pacific region currently taking precedence. Indeed, Russian and US policymakers quite often express their goals regarding the other country in negative terms. One reason why both sides may have lost interest is that the pace of 'deliverables' - in the form of treaties and other concrete achievements - has been decreasing while popular attention has been focusing on notable differences between both sides. Rather than announcing cooperation over Afghanistan or the financial crisis, Russia and the United States are seen to be fighting over Syria and missile defenses.

Despite the US military withdrawal from Iraq, the Arab Spring has also revived Russian-US tensions over the Middle East. Russian officials have vigorously criticized NATO's intervention in Libya and warned against US attacks on Iran. Moscow continues to support the Assad regime in Syria, fearing that his removal would result in a victory for jihadi extremists. Russia's [continued support for Assad](#) also reflects that the North Caucasus region remains highly unstable, even as the country prepares to host the next Winter Olympics in nearby Sochi.

Things are hardly better at the domestic level. For instance, [new regulations](#) limit opportunities for Russian Non-Governmental Organizations' (NGO) to cooperate with US partners. Moscow's decision to [expel the US Agency for International Development \(USAID\)](#) has, in turn, increased Washington's anxiety about Putin's neo-authoritarian tendencies. This is a far cry from a few years ago, when both sides could make progress on arms control while still criticizing each other's internal policies.

Due to their limited economic cooperation and past history of antagonisms, there is by no means a large group of stakeholders in either country that support better relations. The two sides lack 'permanent normal trading relations', with [mutual trade last year](#) amounting to only \$40 billion. This amounts to less than one percent of the United States' annual trade turnover and ten times less than Russia's trade with the European Union. Prospects for boosting economic ties also look grim. Not only does the United States not need Russian oil, gas, or weapons, an unpredictable and corrupt business environment deters US foreign direct investment in Russia. A range of sanctions, export controls and other trade barriers also constrain Russian access to US technology and trade.

Tit for Tat

Poor trading relations – coupled with a lack of economic 'shock absorbers' – may also result in Washington and Moscow developing policies that put at risk their mutual interests. After Congress enacted the [Sergei Magnitsky Accountability and Rule of Law Act](#) - which punishes Russian human rights violators by restricting their access to visas and US business opportunities – Moscow retaliated by denying Americans the right to adopt Russian orphans. More recently, the Russian government announced that it was terminating a decade-long [law enforcement and narcotics control agreement](#) under which the United States provided financial assistance to Russian law enforcement agencies and programs.

Most worrying of all was Moscow's announcement last fall that it would not renew the main framework agreement for the [Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction \(CTR\) Program](#) when it expires in June 2013. The program has provided billions of dollars to the Russian government to help it dismantle its nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons complexes, whose elements might come under the control of rogue states, criminals, or terrorists. The program also stands out as one of the most successful examples of peacetime security collaboration between major military powers let alone former global adversaries. For the time being, it remains unclear whether Russia plans to end the entire CTR program after the general agreement ends this summer or whether officials are simply negotiating for major changes to terms and conditions.

Russian officials have also effectively rejected Obama's call for further bilateral nuclear arms reductions. Instead, Moscow has reiterated longstanding demands that the United States curtails its missile defense program and agrees to legally binding limits on its size, location, and capabilities - something that would be politically impossible for Obama to accept. Yet the United States also risks inflicting self-defeating wounds by neglecting Russia's potentially positive contributions to the politics and security Asia-Pacific region, where Moscow is often treated as an [afterthought](#) by Obama's pivot. Russians resent being treated as a selective partner in which Washington ignores its views regarding an issue or area they consider important.

Or Overshooting the Mark?

Moscow may not wield as much diplomatic influence or military capabilities as the former Soviet Union, but Russia can often act as a spoiler due to its veto power in the UN Security Council and contacts in Tehran, Pyongyang, and other places less hospitable to US influence. Indeed, both countries have the potential to act as spoilers of each other's policies and national security strategies. Although they no longer view each other as enemies, Russia and the United States still fundamentally consider each other rivals rather than partners.

Notwithstanding recent tensions, Russia and the United States share a number of important interests that require at least coordination, if not cooperation. Islamic fundamentalism, the rise of China, nuclear proliferation, even the energy sector (fundamentally sellers need buyers) are areas where it would be mutually beneficial for Russia and the United States to engage. At a minimum, these common interests should keep US-Russia relations from becoming too adversarial. At best, they could provide a foundation for achieving deeper or broader cooperation between the two countries.

For additional reading on this topic please see:

[Does the United States Need a New Russia Policy?](#)
[The United States, Russia, Europe, and Security](#)
[Russia and the West](#)

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