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Moving From ‘Boris and Bill’ to a Real Reset

By Alexei Pushkov

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As we enter September, a question naturally arises: What is the future of the much-famed “reset” in U.S.-Russian relations? The previous political season between the two countries ended on a low note because of the spy scandal in the United States, which started — as if by coincidence — three days after President Dmitry Medvedev left Washington, where he had seemingly successful talks with U.S. President Barack Obama. This new season started with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin’s recent remarks that so far he does not see any reset in relations between the two countries. And these are not the only signs that there is trouble brewing between Moscow and Washington, despite protestations to the contrary.

Of course, in the last two years things have changed for the better. And the progress hasn’t been limited to a change of style in the relationship. There have also been some substantive shifts. Much to the dismay on the part of the U.S. political class, as well as in some Eastern European capitals, the White House decided to reconsider the plans of former U.S. President George W. Bush to establish the key elements of a future U.S. missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic. Thus Obama removed a major stumbling block on the reset path.

Second, U.S. plans to accept Ukraine and Georgia into NATO have been put on the back burner. From the Russian point of view, this was a welcome break from the policies of Obama's predecessor.

Unlike during the Ukrainian presidential election in 2004, the United States wisely stayed out of the most recent Ukrainian presidential election, even though the leading candidate, Viktor Yanukovych, clearly had Russian sympathies. In Moscow, this was perceived as a sign that the Obama administration would not put the new relationship at risk by playing against Russian interests in the post-Soviet space.

On Russia's side, the moves to accommodate U.S. global interest were, as some suggest in Moscow, even more important. During Obama's first visit to Moscow in July 2009, Russia gave its agreement for the United States to use Russia's airspace in order to send military supplies — and even possibly troops — to Afghanistan. This was something Washington had sought for a long time and something it had failed to obtain in the quasi–Cold War climate of 2007 and 2008 under Bush. Just with a change in tone and rhetoric, Obama managed to achieve in a few months an agreement that Bush and former U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice could not achieve in years. I was present at the official reception in Obama's honor at the Kremlin, and I have never seen happier U.S. officials.

Second, to support Washington on the key issue of Iran, Russia dramatically reversed its position, going so far as to support U.S.-backed sanctions — a stance considered to be highly improbable only a few months ago. Moscow also agreed not to make waves about the spy scandal and not to retaliate in a Cold War manner for the humiliation it suffered after its so-called agents were arrested in the United States.

Yet it remains to be seen whether this reset will go any further than a mere detente, which has occurred periodically between the two countries over their long histories. We have seen a similar thaw of relations between former Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev and former U.S. President Richard Nixon; between former U.S. President Ronald Reagan and former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev; between Presidents Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton; and finally between Putin and Bush. But they all invariably ended with new Cold War-type tensions. Will the reset be different?

One cannot help but notice that there are strong critical voices against Obama's rapprochement with Moscow in the United States. In Russia, however, there is less public criticism, and the Kremlin seems to be rather enthusiastic. In July, speaking before the country's ambassadors at the Foreign Ministry, Medvedev praised his relationship with Obama and the White House, suggesting that it should be used as a model for Russian diplomats when dealing with other countries. In his recent foreign policy speeches, the president also played down the negative aspects of the relationship — such as U.S. support for Georgia — and stressed the role of the United States as a key partner in his ambitious goal to modernize Russia's economy.

But a fairly high degree of skepticism in Moscow certainly remains. Russians still remember the "Boris and Bill friendship" of the 1990s. At that time, Yeltsin was looking for a new relationship with the United States and went out of his way to accommodate U.S. concerns. But as was depicted in Strobe Talbott's book "The Russia Hand," the approach of the Clinton

administration to Russia was to wriggle all possible concessions from Moscow without giving Yeltsin anything in return. If we are to believe this book, to obtain these concessions Clinton used not only his charm and U.S. diplomacy, but also the power of alcohol, to which the ailing Yeltsin was highly susceptible. While Talbott congratulates the administration at such a skillful use of Yeltsin's weaknesses, the result for the overall relationship was devastating. By the year 2000, the very concept of a U.S.-Russian partnership was considered a deeply flawed, one-way street that only benefited U.S. foreign policy interests.

Later, in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, tragedy, Putin's attempt to create a new partnership based on a joint war against terrorism also fell flat. The Bush administration took Russia's support in Afghanistan and Central Asia for granted and had no plans to reciprocate. Instead, in 2002, the United States unilaterally withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, demanding that Moscow conduct talks with the Chechen separatists and support any anti-Russian trends which manifested themselves in the post-Soviet space — from the Baltic states to Ukraine.

But there is more to it. After Medvedev's last visit to Washington where he basked in Obama's hospitality, Russians received three cold showers in a row. First, the U.S. administration chose probably the worst way to deal with the so-called "Russian spy network" discovered in Washington. Although there was hardly any evidence of spying activities, the arrest of the suspected "agents" was conducted in a public and scandalous manner. Even if Obama did not mean it as a slap to Medvedev, it certainly looked like one. Critics of the reset in Moscow asserted that it was no coincidence, and the general conclusion was that there could have been better ways to deal with this crisis, at least if Washington regarded Moscow as an important partner.

The second cold shower came with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's remarks in Tbilisi in early July where, to the delight of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, she accused Russia of the "ongoing occupation" of Georgian territory. Certainly this was not language to be used toward a "strategic partner," but it was clear that the language was deliberately chosen. Clinton also told Saakashvili that the United States "can walk and chew gum at the same time," referring to her assurances that the United States won't change its policies toward its allies, wherever they might be, for the sake of the reset with Russia.

After these statements, the White House explained to Moscow through diplomatic channels that Clinton did not really mean what she actually said and that the whole talk was intended to boost Obama's position in advance of the November elections; and that otherwise the administration would have looked "weak" and would have been accused of "selling out" U.S. friends in the former Soviet republics. Moscow feigned acceptance of this explanation so that the spirit of the reset would not be damaged by an equally vitriolic Russian response.

Yet it is clear that the situation in Georgia is definitely not a priority for the U.S. electorate, especially in the context of the ongoing economic recession as well the war in Afghanistan and the enormous problems facing the Obama administration in Iran and in the Middle East. Therefore, for many in Moscow, Clinton's statements were taken at face value — especially since the Clinton "walk and chew" statement strangely reminded Russians of the statements made by her hawkish predecessor, Rice. Rice also advanced the concept that the United States would cooperate with Russia where possible and oppose it where necessary. But the result was

disappointing. The United States pursued its policies without Moscow's support on important issues, and there was little cooperation. In fact, the relationship degraded to the state of a quasi-Cold War.

The third cold shower came in the form of the New START arms reduction treaty. Medvedev and the State Duma expressed a great deal of enthusiasm toward the agreement, calling it the most practical result of the "reset." The State Duma was ready to ratify it almost automatically and as soon as possible. This, however, would need to be synchronized with its ratification in the U.S. Senate. But now, the Senate has decided to put off the ratification until the fall. It is certainly not clear whether the treaty will be ratified before the November elections, and there is a strong temptation to talk not about synchronization, but rather "de-synchronization," of the Russian and U.S. approaches.

This de-synchronization is apparent in other important areas as well. In his recent remarks, Putin said he would like to believe in the much-vaunted reset in ties between Moscow and Washington, but remained skeptical. Putin singled out the ongoing rearmament of Georgia by the United States and the highly contentious issue of deploying elements of the U.S. missile defense system in Europe. Having praised the mutual understanding that there would be no interceptor missiles in Poland and no radars in the Czech Republic, Putin expressed his surprise that the U.S. administration practically immediately announced that the same is being planned for other countries in Europe. Putin rightfully asked: "Where is the reset? We do not see it in this respect."

The issue of future NATO expansion continues to weigh on the relationship as well. While the Obama administration clearly stated that this was not a priority, the inclusion of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO remains the official goal of U.S. foreign policy. Medvedev has also proposed a new treaty on European security that those in Moscow see the White House as being strongly against. This is in contrast to a number of European countries that voice their support for the idea. This, among other things, drives Russia and the United States apart, despite all the voiced good intention.

In light of this, does the reset have any future? Yes, if it does not happen to be just another detente, where tactics change but the two countries remain fundamentally opposed to each other. In this case, the United States would see Russia as a temporary, instrumental partner to help in Afghanistan and to rein in Iranian nuclear ambitions. On the Russian side, the United States would be considered a source of investment in the Russian economy and a part-time partner on other issues, such as entry into the World Trade Organization. Such a tactical alliance is bound to fail sooner or later. And this is exactly what would happen if the administration espoused the view that the reset is merely an instrument to make Russia "bend to the United States."

What both Moscow and Washington need is a deep reconciliation of their national and foreign policy interests in light of the many global issues the world is facing. The "reset," it should be noted, has at its core something more important than mere foreign policy calculus, even if some politicians in Moscow and Washington are still not quite aware of the fact that in an age of globalization and interdependence — and in the context of a multipolar world — countries are truly faced with an array of mutual interests. Actually, this is what made Obama's message, if not actual policies, so lauded around the world. Today, both sides have to show

that they are ready for a deep reconciliation. If Russia and the United States move along this way, the politics of a reset will have a future from which both sides would benefit.

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