

Medvedev's Awkward 'Gorbachev Moment'

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Not surprisingly, Russian state television portrayed a brief photo-op in Munich with Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton exchanging articles of ratification for the New START treaty as the key international event of the week.

New START is the only tangible example of President Dmitry Medvedev's singular foreign policy achievement — the reset with Washington.

Other reset deliverables are either yet to materialize — for example, repealing Jackson-Vanik — or constitute largely "reputational gains" for Moscow when it buys international goodwill at a cost, such as Medvedev's arms embargo on Iran.

It is true that the reset with U.S. President Barack Obama has changed international attitudes toward Medvedev personally, bolstering his domestic position and facilitating his efforts at domestic modernization. This is important, but insufficient.

Medvedev is approaching a Gorbachev moment. He either makes the reset more of a two-way street, or he risks being portrayed as a U.S. stooge. Picking a territorial fight with Japan over the Kurils will not compensate for weakness with Washington.

A year before the end of his first term, Medvedev's other foreign policy initiatives are lagging. His proposal for a new security treaty in Europe has gone nowhere. Its awkward objectives – to replace existing security structures in Europe with a primitive nonaggression pact – doomed the effort.

A similar fate might await Medvedev's other big-ticket initiative: building a joint missile defense with NATO. Russia's "sectoral" proposal, which is structured in such a way to weaken the effectiveness of NATO's defenses, is unlikely to be accepted by the alliance. Moscow will either have to agree to NATO's proposal – separate but coordinated systems – or risk a new confrontation it cannot win.

Medvedev has been rather successful in the former Soviet space. His Kremlin exhibited unusual flexibility, pragmatism and ruthlessness in dealing with feuding political groups in Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Moldova to enhance the Kremlin's influence in the region. In Moldova, for example, Moscow managed to reformat a pro-Western government with a Russia-friendly party and president. In Belarus, with Lukashenko's questionable re-election, Medvedev has turned a disastrously weak hand into a victory.

His natural pragmatism serves him well to achieve short-term goals, but there seems to be a problem with long-term planning and execution. This is something to work on during his second term.

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