

U.S. Expects 'Reset' to Carry On With Putin in Charge

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WASHINGTON — U.S. President Barack Obama's administration said Saturday that the "reset" in relations it has pursued with Russia would remain on track despite Vladimir Putin's expected return to the presidency next year.

But analysts said Putin's comeback could complicate — and possibly slow — the process of reconciliation between the two countries.

With Putin considered by Washington to be the "alpha dog" of the ruling tandem since yielding the presidency in 2008 and becoming prime minister, his decision did not come as a surprise to the U.S. foreign policy establishment.

White House spokesman Tommy Vietor said Obama's diplomatic outreach to Russia — which the president declared from the outset to be a centerpiece of his global agenda — did not depend on "individual personalities" at the top.

"We will continue to build on the progress of the reset whoever serves as the next president

of Russia because we believe that it is in the mutual interests of the United States and Russia and the world," Vietor said in a statement.

Since taking office in 2009, Obama has made it a foreign policy priority to fix relations with Moscow, which frayed in the final stretch of Putin's presidency when George W. Bush was also nearing the end of his eight-year tenure as U.S. leader.

The "reset" has yielded a new U.S.-Russia nuclear arms reduction treaty and what Washington sees as improved diplomatic cooperation, including help in pressuring Iran over its nuclear program and logistical support for U.S. troops fighting in Afghanistan.

But U.S. missile defense plans and fallout from the 2008 Russia-Georgia war have remained major irritants.

Matthew Rojansky, a Russia expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, said that while the reset could not have proceeded without Putin's blessing, his stridently nationalistic tone — compared with President Dmitry Medvedev's technocratic approach — would bring new uncertainty to the relationship.

"Putin's way is security, stability and power — and 'don't mess with Russia,'" he said. "That doesn't mean the reset disappears the day he takes office. There's too much at stake."

Though the White House sought to play down such concerns, Rojansky predicted that any major diplomatic initiatives could be stalled while the power shift in Moscow is sorted out.

James Goldgeier, a Russia expert at American University in Washington, said the United States and Russia have too much common interest on issues such as global economic recovery and containing China to keep things on hold for long. "There will be a businesslike relationship, but not a warm one," he said.

As prime minister, Putin has occasionally been stridently critical of U.S. policies. He raised eyebrows in Washington last month when he accused the United States of living beyond its means "like a parasite" on the global economy.

Obama has cultivated a relationship with Medvedev — they are of similar age and temperament and are both lawyers — but has less direct dealings with Putin.

"While we have had a very strong working relationship with President Medvedev, it's worth noting that Vladimir Putin was prime minister throughout the reset," Vietor said.

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