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A Friendlier Reset

By Michael Bohm

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Thank goodness Russia's presidential campaign and election are over. The past six months were a rough ride for U.S.-Russian relations. But now with the election behind us, the two countries can hopefully concentrate their efforts on resetting the "reset."

Despite the ongoing differences over Syria and Iran, the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama is doing what it can to let bygones be bygones after an inflammatory presidential campaign when the Kremlin and the state-controlled media repeatedly accused the United States of plotting an Orange-like revolution against Russia.

After Obama congratulated Vladimir Putin on his victory in the presidential vote — albeit several days late — the United States has tried to mollify the Kremlin's concerns about U.S. missile defense installations near Russia's borders, which has been one of the largest irritants of U.S.-Russian relations over the past decade.

Last week, Deputy Assistant Defense Secretary Brad Roberts, speaking before a House Armed Services subcommittee, said the United States is moving closer to sharing sensitive data with Russia about the SM-3 interceptors. This could conceivably include technical data about

the maximum speed of the interceptors, which will help prove that they can't reach Russia's intercontinental missiles.

Sharing sensitive information about the SM-3 has always been a divisive issue between the Obama administration and Republicans in Congress. Recall how Senator Mark Kirk held up the confirmation of Michael McFaul as ambassador to Russia over concerns he might give missile defense secrets to the Russians as a way to boost the reset, McFaul's pet project when he served as Obama's chief adviser on Russia. (Kirk ultimately backed down when he received written assurance from the Obama administration that before any classified information about missile defense is handed over to Russian officials, the White House must give Congress 60 days notice and get approval from the interagency group known as the National Disclosure Policy Committee.)

In addition, on March 6 Obama unexpectedly changed the venue for the May 18 Group of Eight meeting from Chicago to Camp David, 100 kilometers from Washington. Kommersant, citing a U.S. government source, claimed that Obama's venue switch was intended primarily as a goodwill gesture to Putin.

The G8 summit was originally planned to take place in Chicago, followed immediately by an annual NATO summit in the same city. Since Putin will attend the G8 meeting and likely skip the NATO summit, Obama wanted to avoid a possible diplomatic demarche if it were to appear as if Putin "demonstratively left" Chicago as the NATO summit was just about to begin. Now Putin can quietly leave Washington after the G8 meeting with minimal diplomatic damage.

"It's a friendly gesture," the Kommersant source said. "We're helping Putin avoid an awkward situation."

For Russia's part, the reset received a big boost on Wednesday when Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov announced a proposal to allow U.S. and coalition forces to use an air base near Ulyanovsk to move troops and military cargo to and from Afghanistan. Although Russia has allowed Afghan-bound NATO transports through its territory since 2009, the Ulyanovsk base would be the first time Russia has allowed the United States to set up a logistical base on Russian territory.

To be sure, Obama's reset has its share of opponents among Republicans. For example, Mitt Romney, the leading Republican candidate for the 2012 election, is one of the more vocal critics of Obama's Russia policy. Romney has criticized the New START treaty, which Obama and President Dmitry Medvedev signed in April 2010, as giving away too much to the Russians. He would also like to shift back to former President George W. Bush's more aggressive plan for missile defense installations in the Czech Republic and Poland — something Obama nixed in favor of more modest installations farther away from Russia's borders. Moreover, Romney did not do the reset any favors when he told a reporter on a campaign bus in New Hampshire in December that Putin is "a real threat to the stability and peace of the world."

At the end of the day, Romney wants to "reset Obama's reset," as he put it in his foreign policy white paper —⊠that is, take a much harder line on the Kremlin if he is elected in November.

But the better way to reset the reset is to reject destructive, vitriolic rhetoric and to work

together as partners in areas that are beneficial to both sides, something the Kremlin and the White House have laudably exhibited in the past week. The United States should keep the ball rolling by taking the next step — repeal the Jackson-Vanik amendment.

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