

Putin and Obama Will Be Friends — for Now

By [Vladimir Frolov](#)

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Despite a seemingly lethal overdose of anti-American vitriol during Vladimir Putin's presidential campaign, the stage is being set for a short-term improvement in U.S.-Russia relations. The Kremlin and Barack Obama's White House are anxious to get down to business as usual and have tacitly agreed to ignore the rhetorical excesses of presidential politics.

The upside for Obama of having to deal with Putin in the Kremlin is that Putin can afford to act more boldly than outgoing President Dmitry Medvedev. This will come in handy in May when Putin and Obama discuss missile defense at Camp David.

The contours of the deal are in place. Putin may accept Obama's written statement that U.S. missile defense in Europe will not target Russia's strategic nukes, accompanied by U.S. assurances that the velocity of U.S. interceptors will not allow for a boost-phase intercept of Russian missiles. Obama may embrace Putin's new proposals for data sharing and joint threat assessment, which build on Putin's 2007 offer to then-President George W. Bush

at Kennebunkport.

On Syria, the risk of United States and Russia sliding toward a war by proxy is gone. Washington has concluded that an armed intervention is untenable because President Bashar Assad's regime retains a significant war-fighting capability. Moscow is relieved that the United Nations Security Council will not vote again to sanction regime change in a sovereign country. UN mediation efforts in Syria look promising.

Obama has opened the door for U.S. military action to take out the Iranian nuclear program. Ironically, this could allow closer U.S.-Russia cooperation on Iran, pushing Moscow to seize the opportunity to enhance its standing as a peacemaker of last resort. But if Obama is maneuvered into war with Iran, Putin would not mind seeing the United States bogged down in another conflict, leaving it with less appetite for mischief in countries neighboring Russia.

On the democracy front, the Kremlin is glad to discover that Ambassador Michael McFaul's mission in Moscow may not be to stage an Orange Revolution but to discredit Putin's opponents by tightening the U.S. Embassy's embrace of them.

In the short term, Putin and Obama could make for good bedfellows. But in the long term, the relationship lacks a common strategic purpose, making it perilously unstable.

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