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Putin's Turn to Press the Reset

By The Moscow Times

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Obama is flexible. Putin isn't.

Thanks to Mitt Romney, President Barack Obama's "reset" with Russia has emerged out of nowhere as a campaign issue in the U.S. presidential election.

Romney, the leading Republican presidential candidate, took advantage of Obama's gaffe when a candid conversation with President Dmitry Medvedev was caught on a hot mic during a nuclear conference last week in Seoul. After Obama told Medvedev that he would have more flexibility on missile defense following the presidential election in November, Romney fired back just several hours later when, during an interview with CNN's Wolf Blitzer, he criticized Obama's reset policy and called Russia the United States' "No. 1 geopolitical foe."

When Blitzer asked Romney what he meant by "foe," he switched to a softer word, "opponent" — perhaps to make it clear that he didn't mean to call Russia the United States' No. 1 "enemy." After all, an opponent is someone who doesn't share your views or someone you go head-to-head against in a competition, such as in sports or a political race, while an "enemy" is someone you might have to go to war with. On first glance, the difference

might appear to be only semantic, but it is quite significant in its core meaning.

In any event, Romney clarified that Iran and North Korea are more serious threats than Russia. This clarification may have been a disappointment to many Russian hawks who pine for the good old superpower days when the Soviet Union was, indeed, Washington's Enemy No. 1.

Of course, calling Russia an "enemy" not only fails to reflect reality, but it also would have been foolish politically, particularly considering a February Gallup poll that found only 2 percent of Americans think that Russia is the United States' main enemy. Iran, China and North Korea were the top three U.S. enemies, according to those polled. One can assume that Romney was aware of this poll, so it makes no sense whatsoever that he would want to cater to only 2 percent of his potential electorate by calling Russia the United States' No. 1 enemy.

To make sure there was no doubt on the issue, Romney, in a March 27 article in Foreign Policy magazine, downgraded Russia's status even further — from being Opponent No. 1 to "thorn in our side," particularly, Romney added, when the Kremlin supports Syria and other rogue states.

In the Foreign Policy article, titled "Bowing to the Kremlin," Romney also said Obama's reset is too pliant to Moscow and can be summed up by "We give, Russia gets."

This is an unfair and inaccurate depiction of Obama's reset policy, which has resulted in many mutually beneficial benefits, including the ratification of the New START treaty, World Trade Organization membership, progress toward agreement on Iran and Russian transport routes for U.S. and allied operations in Afghanistan. If the State Duma approves the Foreign Ministry's proposal to give the United States use of the Ulyanovsk air base to evacuate war material from Afghanistan, the reset will be brought to even higher levels.

Obama's "flexibility," as he expressed to Medvedev in Seoul, has played a key role in the reset's success. But this was when Medvedev, with whom Obama has good personal chemistry, was president. One big question is whether President-elect Vladimir Putin will show even a fraction of Obama's flexibility. After all, it takes two to reset.

Up until now, the Obama-Putin relationship can be described as cool at best. Putin's numerous anti-American comments over the last four years — and especially during the Russian presidential campaign — have not helped to warm relations. But Putin has a good opportunity to change this when he meets with Obama at Camp David during the Group of Eight summit on May 18 — 11 days after Putin's inauguration. Now that the Russian election is over, let's hope Putin takes advantage of this opportunity.

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