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A Cold but Promising Obama-Putin Meeting

By Andrei Kortunov

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Proponents of the "reset" in U.S.-Russian relations have reason to celebrate. The meeting between Presidents Barack Obama and Vladimir Putin on the sidelines of Monday's Group of 20 summit was not a disaster, as many experts had predicted. Although there may not have been a surplus of warm chemistry between the two, the joint statement suggests that it is too early to write off the reset.

Notably, the joint statement starts with the economic dimension of the U.S.-Russian relationship, not with the traditional security agenda. Although this dimension has been woefully underused over the past 20 years, Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization, which the United States actively lobbied for, will certainly help boost trade between the two countries.

To be sure, the disagreements on security issues, such as missile defense, threaten to derail the reset. But it is significant that the joint statement reconfirms the importance of the New

START treaty. Moreover, Russia and the United States confirmed their common positions on nuclear disarmament and nonproliferation. If potential nuclear proliferators or rogue states were hoping to play Moscow and Washington off of each other, it appears that Obama and Putin's commitment to nuclear nonproliferation will not give them this opportunity.

At the same time, it is unclear whether Obama and Putin will be able to reconcile their positions on Syria. Nevertheless, the joint statement reflects an intention to look for shared views and overlapping interests, not to emphasize differences in the two countries' policies and positions.

Finally, both Russia and the United States reaffirmed their commitment to the reset's key regulating mechanism: the Bilateral Presidential Commission. The bureaucratic continuity in day-to-day interactions between the two sides will be preserved — at least until the U.S. presidential election in November.

In short, the reset is recognized by both the United States and Russia as an asset, not a liability. For Obama, this is self-evident because overall good relations with Russia are one of the White House's few foreign policy accomplishments over the past four years.

But for Putin, the issue is more complicated. Many hardliners in Moscow would like to see a major revision of former President Dmitry Medvedev's softer policy toward the United States. Many would prefer that Putin declare the reset null and void and return to his traditional tough line toward Washington.

Can we now assume that U.S.-Russian relations are back on track? Clearly, there is a bumpy road ahead, and a great deal will depend on whether the political declarations can be converted into a practical roadmap covering a broad range of areas for cooperation, including energy, regional conflicts, education and civil society initiatives. A breakthrough in relations is not likely to happen this year, but the two countries should use the next six months to accumulate innovative ideas and unorthodox proposals and challenge outdated concepts.

This ammunition will be much needed to overcome disagreements on several key political and security issues. The next chapter in U.S.-Russian relations is likely to be difficult, but as former British Prime Minister Winston Churchill once said, "Difficulties mastered are opportunities won."

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