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How Obama's 2nd Term Can Help the Reset

By Mark Nuckols

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President Barack Obama's re-election offers an excellent opportunity to improve U.S.-Russian relations.

As a general principle, the essential contours of U.S. foreign policy and defense strategy do not shift with changes in the White House. Since World War II, there has not been any profound difference between Republican and Democratic administrations when it comes to basic national security policy. However, compared with his predecessors, Obama does have a fundamentally different understanding of U.S. national interests, which will substantially affect Russia and its relations with the U.S. Since Obama has shown himself to be a pragmatic politician, he will try to advance what he believes to be these critical national interests when there are clear and available opportunities to do so.

To fulfill the most important tasks on Obama's global agenda, he must secure Russia's cooperation. Obama believes that climate change and nuclear weapons are existential threats

to both the U.S. and the entire world. These are issues that he discussed frequently and in detail long before he became president. But there is yet no broad consensus or sufficient political support in America to effectively address the issue of climate change in the foreseeable future. This is a problem Obama must leave for a future U.S. president. But Obama does have realistic prospects to achieve additional and significant cuts in U.S. and Russian nuclear strategic and tactical weapons. He also believes that reducing the threat of global nuclear annihilation is a responsibility he owes to the human race.

Unlike his Republican challenger, Mitt Romney, or his predecessor, George W. Bush, he is relatively unburdened by fears or delusions left over from the Cold War era. He is therefore willing and politically able to find common ground with Moscow to gain what he believes will be one of his signal achievements while conceding on issues he considers of distinctly secondary importance for U.S. vital interests. In the first half of his first term, Obama secured a sharp reduction in U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals. Under New START, each country is limited to 1,550 deployed nuclear warheads, but Obama believes even more drastic reductions, perhaps to as low as 300 for each side, are both desirable and achievable.

In contrast, however, the Kremlin may not be as deeply concerned with the future of the human race or the threat of nuclear war. Nuclear weapons are one of the few components that Russia can cling to in order to claim it is still a superpower. Russia can never hope to match the U.S. and its alliance partners worldwide in conventional weaponry or economic power. But if the Kremlin is ready and willing to horse-trade, Obama can achieve an agreement on further nuclear cuts if he makes the deal attractive to the Kremlin.

One thing that the Kremlin wants most and that Obama might be able to offer is a new, mutually acceptable configuration of U.S. missile defense installations in Europe. The original conception of missile defenses based in Poland was clearly unacceptable to Moscow, and Russia's defense establishment is wary of the revised plans to deploy missile defense installations elsewhere in Europe or in the Mediterranean. For this to work, Obama will need to find a technological and diplomatic solution that will satisfy both the U.S. Senate and the Kremlin. But after the election, the Democrats increased their majority in the Senate, which will facilitate Obama's ability to secure the required two-thirds Senate approval for any new arms control treaty in his second term.

The Kremlin will also find Obama in his second term more amenable on matters it considers to be vital to its interests in the other former Soviet republics. Obama does not share Bush's desire to promote "color revolutions" in Russia's backyard. Many old-school Republicans believe that Georgia can become a U.S. foothold to resist Russian domination in the region. These same Republicans believe that inside every citizen of the former Soviet republics is an American waiting to be born. After the United States' failed attempts to convert Iraqis and Afghans to U.S.-style democracy, Obama has no illusions about the eagerness of all peoples to adopt the American way of life.

Obama has no particular political or personal interest in needlessly antagonizing Russia. Some hawks in Congress still find it advantageous to promote legislation designed to provoke the Kremlin. During a second Obama administration, there is a good chance that the Jackson-Vanik law penalizing Russian trade will finally be discarded. What's more, Obama can hardly consider the proposed Magnitsky law, aimed at penalizing Russian bureaucrats for human

rights abuses, as being vital to U.S. national interests on the same level as nuclear weapons reduction.

Like most presidents, Obama would like to leave a positive legacy. Behind Obama's cool professorial demeanor stands a man who seriously aims to bring about meaningful change. After his signature health care reform, reducing the threat posed by the unthinkably destructive danger posed by nuclear weapons would cement his place in history. To do so, he needs Russian cooperation to achieve his most important foreign policy objectives. Under a second Obama administration, Russia has a unique opportunity to secure agreement with the U.S. in areas of its own national interest as well as its mutual interests with the U.S.

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