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Rethink Before You Reset

By Richard Lourie

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The United States' best foreign policy is its own example. Millions around the world watched in admiration as the U.S. voted without strife or a whiff of corruption in the recent presidential election, with the loser conceding graciously. The election looked especially good compared to China's simply proclaiming the country's new leadership. The only suspense had been whether the new Chinese president would take control of the military immediately or not. He will, and this has significant foreign policy implications.

Things get a bit more complicated, of course, when the U.S. moves from example to pursuing its own interests in action.

What will most likely be the main foreign policy challenges for President Barack Obama's second administration, and what part will Russia play in them?

Though Russia and the U.S. do have significant unilateral business, like the reduction of their nuclear stockpiles, Russia is more important to the U.S. as a component in a larger strategy.

The immediate crises are in the Middle East: the Syrian civil war and Iran's potential to develop nuclear weapons. Russia has been one of the main obstacles to any international cooperation on Syria. The power to thwart is better than no power at all. But Central Asia may hold a solution to the Middle East.

The Middle East is beginning to diminish for the U.S. in one essential way: By 2030, the U.S. is expected to be the largest oil- and gas-producing country in the world and a net exporter. It is China whose power and importance grows rapidly for the U.S., while the Middle East's gradually diminishes.

The central foreign policy question for the U.S. is whether China is evolving into something that needs to be "contained" or only "balanced."

China feels vulnerable on its seaways, which it depends on for much of its energy and raw materials. It is also vulnerable in two vast western regions, Tibet and Sinjiang, with a large Muslim, Turkic-speaking population who feel more at home in the culture of Central Asia than among the Han Chinese.

If the U.S. ultimately regards China as dangerously ambitious, it will need to do more than balance it. Being able to pressure China from near its western border will require good relations with the (mostly) bad regimes of Central Asia. Russia will view this as unconscionable meddling in its natural sphere of influence.

Yet there may be a cause for shared Russian and U.S. interests in the region. One of the aging strongmen of Central Asia, Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan or Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan could fall ill or die soon. With no clear successor and the example of the Arab Spring in mind, tumult could easily sweep through Central Asia. Russia's already restive Muslim areas in the North Caucasus could become a target for jihadists on the move. The already dangerous flood of heroin from Afghanistan could increase. In that case, it would be useful to have U.S. military bases with intelligence-gathering capabilities in Central Asia that could also later serve as a barrier against Chinese designs on Russia's fertile and underpopulated Far East.

The U.S. offer to Russia could be something like: You help us put out the fires in the Middle East so we can turn our attention to the Far East, which is where the real action is going to be. We'll help you there when chaos sweeps Central Asia or Chinese aggression focuses not only on barren rocks in the South China Seas but on Russian lands near the Chinese border.

Relations must be rethought before they are reset.

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