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Obama Won't Go Out of His Way to Please Russia

By Vladimir Frolov

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U.S. President Barack Obama is a cool customer on foreign policy. When faced with a quid pro quo that advances his political goals and U.S. interests, he opts for the transactional.

That's why Obama's White House, although disgusted by President Vladimir Putin's anti-American overkill, may still re-engage with Russia where it seems to matter. This month, senior U.S. officials, starting with Vice President Biden in Munich, will test the potential for re-engagement. But they will not sweat for it.

Obama's interest in Russia is constrained by his limited time to secure a legacy, Russia's dwindling ability to deliver and Putin's turn to domestic political repression and anti-American posturing as a new source of popular legitimacy.

Obama may see a foreign policy legacy in a new nuclear arms reduction treaty with Moscow. But he may find its price prohibitive. Russia is not really interested in more nuclear cuts,

particularly with tactical nukes in the mix. Arms control runs counter to Putin's strategy of arms buildup as one of the ways to shore up his domestic support. New reductions would require canceling some strategic programs, like a new heavy ICBM, which would cost Putin politically.

Moscow will condition any new nuclear cuts on U.S. legally binding guarantees that the planned U.S. missile defense system in Europe will not have the technical capability against Russia's strategic missiles. But Obama cannot provide such guarantees, and Putin can no longer afford to climb down from this demand.

On Syria, Moscow cannot deliver President Bashar Assad's exit or his agreement for talks with the real opposition. An emerging endgame scenario in Syria has Assad forces carving out a rump Alawite state on the Mediterranean coast around Tartus and asking Russia to help defend it, hardly a plan for U.S.-Russia cooperation.

On Iran, Russia has no leverage to get the mullahs to abandon their clandestine uranium enrichment program. The only way Iran could possibly be turned around is by the crippling U.S. and EU financial sanctions, which Russia cannot influence.

Continued stifling of dissent and persecution of opposition leaders in Russia will raise the political pressure on Obama to exert a price on the Kremlin. Congress is likely to impose policy linkages.

There are few areas where Obama actually needs Putin. He can afford to pick carefully where his time and energy will be better spent.

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