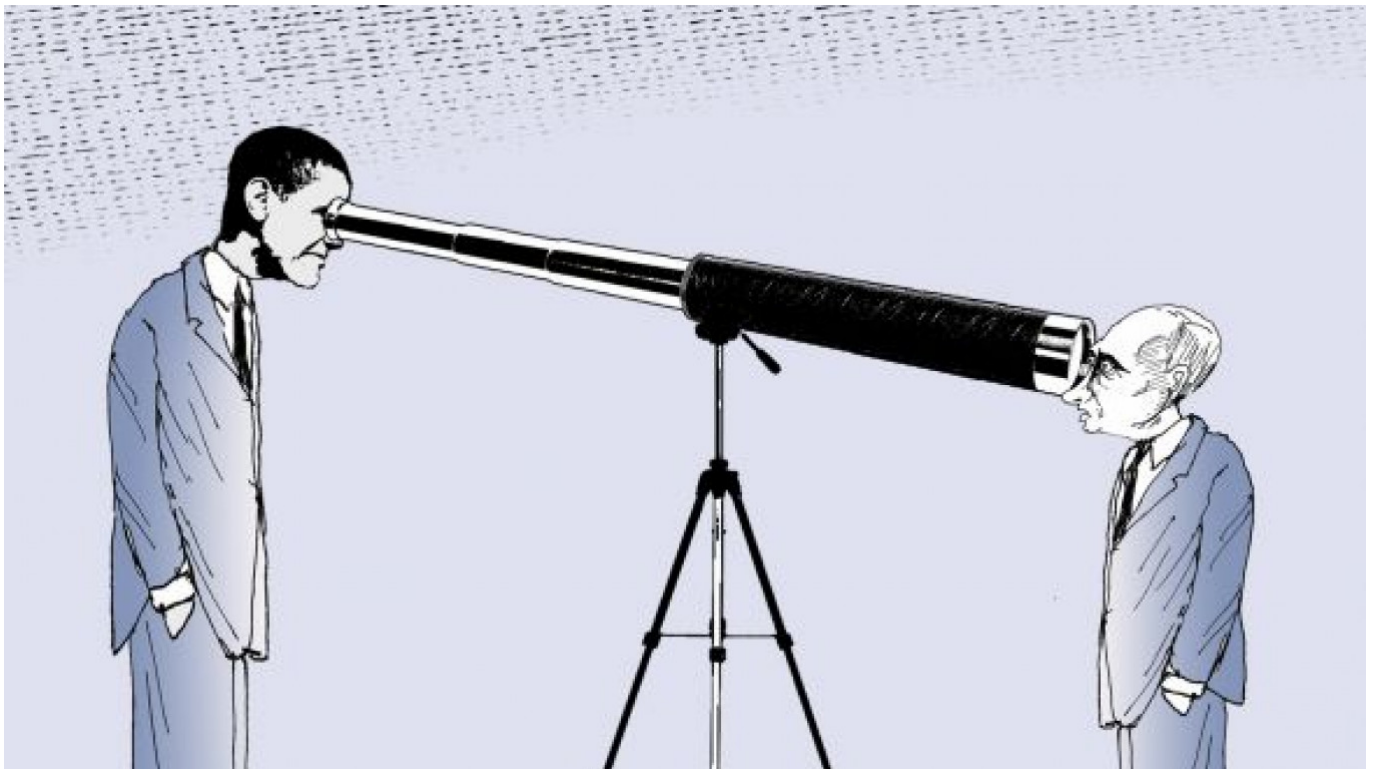


Putin's Problem of Irrelevance

By [Steven Pifer](#)

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Despite the distraction posed by Edward Snowden's continued presence in Moscow, the administration of U.S. President Barack Obama would like to inject some positive momentum into the flagging U.S.-Russia relationship. The Kremlin, however, evinces little interest in making progress on issues that are important to the White House. If that remains President Vladimir Putin's approach, the Moscow summit in early September is in jeopardy, and Putin may find he does not matter much for Obama during his remaining time in office.

Much in the U.S.-Russia relationship has changed the past four years. When the Obama administration took office in 2009, it saw Moscow's support as critical to meeting major challenges such as nuclear arms reductions, Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons and Afghanistan. Those requirements drove the "reset," an effort to lift the relationship out of the nadir that it had hit during the George W. Bush presidency in 2008.

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In private discussions, officials in the Obama administration were candid about the president's approach. They said Obama would make an investment of time and attention with Moscow. But if he saw no return, Obama would cut his losses and shift his foreign policy focus elsewhere.

As it turned out, Obama hit it off with Dmitry Medvedev when he was president, and the reset paid early dividends. Within months, the sides established a framework for the New START treaty. Moscow began expanding the flow of NATO supplies through Russia to Afghanistan and permitted overflights by U.S. aircraft carrying lethal military equipment. The Kremlin also acceded to U.S. efforts to increase sanctions on Iran, agreeing in June 2010 to a United Nations Security Council resolution that, among other things, imposed an arms embargo on Tehran.

Thus, the reset secured Russian help on important issues for U.S. interests. It also advanced Russian interests: New START benefited both sides, and the U.S. government brought a civil nuclear cooperation agreement into force while assisting Russian entry into the World Trade Organization.

Unfortunately, sustaining a positive relationship proved difficult, particularly as Putin returned to the presidency and initiated a crackdown on the country's opposition. Still, as troubled as they appear, U.S.-Russian relations today stand in better shape than in 2008, when Moscow ignored Washington's protests during the Russia-Georgia conflict, and some administration officials reportedly advocated intervening with U.S. air strikes that invariably would have killed Russian troops.

Can the positive momentum in bilateral relations of 2009-10 be restored? Probably not. The broader dynamics of the relationship today differ.

First, as Putin has adopted increasingly repressive measures at home, he has become less attractive as an international partner. Engaging with him risks becoming a political liability in the U.S.

Second, no one in Washington expects Moscow to agree to put additional pressure on Tehran. Obama has no reason now to invest in the Kremlin for Iran purposes. In nearby Syria, no amount of presidential engagement would persuade Putin to drop his support for the Assad regime.

Third, the situation in Afghanistan is changing. By the end of 2014, the U.S. and NATO troop presence will be much smaller than today. Russian help in providing logistics routes will be welcome but not essential as it was in 2009. Moreover, if Afghanistan fails badly after 2014, it will pose as big a problem for Russia and its Central Asian neighbors as for the United States.

Fourth, while both sides want to boost commercial links, the main problem is the business climate in Russia. If Putin really seeks U.S. and Western capital and technology to modernize his country's aging industrial base, he must make investment conditions more attractive.

The U.S. president needs Moscow far less than four years ago. One thing that Obama would like is further nuclear arms cuts — both in strategic and tactical nuclear arsenals — accompanied by a settlement of differences over missile defense. New START was an important achievement, but it still permits each side 1,550 deployed strategic warheads, a number that harkens back to Cold War nuclear doctrines. Obama wants to do more. In June, he proposed reducing New START's warhead limit by one-third.

Putin may prefer to cling to outsized nuclear forces and veto any progress on arms control. If Obama concludes that there is no prospect of Russian movement on this or other issues key to his agenda, the value of going to Moscow for a bilateral meeting with Putin on the eve of the Group of 20 summit in St Petersburg becomes questionable, particularly when the Edward Snowden case and political repression in Russia would generate criticism at home. More broadly, the White House may decide that Putin has little to offer — and thus does not really matter — for Obama's goals in his last three years in office.

That, in turn, would raise an interesting question: How would it affect Putin's self-image as the leader of a superpower if the U.S. president comes to regard him as irrelevant?

Steven Pifer, a retired career U.S. Foreign Service officer, is a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

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