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Obama's Doomed Reset

By Sergei Karaganov

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When he canceled his scheduled summit in Moscow in early September with President Vladimir Putin, U.S. President Barack Obama effectively terminated his four-year effort to "reset" the bilateral relationship. The meeting of the two presidents at the recent Group of 20 summit in St. Petersburg was civil but did not change the situation. The exchange of rhetorical barbs has continued, despite Russia's new initiative on Syria's chemical weapons.

The failure of the "reset" should come as no surprise, owing to its deeply flawed foundations. The bilateral relationship had been faltering long before Russia gave former U.S. Intelligence leaker Edward Snowden temporary asylum in early August. In 2011, after the U.S. and its allies convinced then-President Dmitry Medvedev not to block a United Nations resolution to impose a no-fly zone over Libya, they launched a full-scale military bombardment of Libya that helped to bring down the regime, a move that Russian officials called "deceptive."

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Since Putin's return to the presidency last year, the relationship has deteriorated further, owing to disagreements over arms control, missile defense and human rights. For example, late last year the U.S. Congress imposed sanctions against Russian officials implicated in human rights abuses, prompting Russia to institute a ban on adoptions of Russian children by U.S. families.

Moreover, while Obama and Putin may come to terms over the removal of chemical weapons from Syria, U.S. policy still backs Syrian President Bashar Assad's removal, whereas Russia continues to support the regime, owing to the fear that its collapse would usher in a radical Sunni-led government — or chaos. Farther east, the U.S. and Russia are not cooperating as expected on Afghanistan's postwar transition.

But while disagreement on these issues has undoubtedly weakened U.S.-Russian ties, the real reason that the bilateral relationship is crumbling is more fundamental. Instead of acknowledging geopolitical shifts and adjusting their relationship accordingly, U.S. and Russian officials remain committed to an obsolete post-Cold War dynamic.

While Russia and the U.S. remain capable of destroying each other many times over, they have had no intention of doing so for a long time. But admitting that there was no longer any threat of direct attack would have been politically impossible in the aftermath of the Cold War, when the bilateral standoff still seemed to be a cornerstone of international stability.

Today, the prospect of either country launching a nuclear attack against the other seems almost ridiculous. Given this, the legacy of the Cold War should give way to issues like ensuring that China's rise remains peaceful, preventing the current chaos in the Arab world from spreading beyond the region, limiting the scope of nuclear weapons proliferation, and contributing to global efforts to address climate change, water scarcity, food security and cybercrime.

But rather than pursuing joint initiatives aimed at advancing the two countries' shared interests in these areas, the U.S. proposed nuclear weapons reductions as the primary mechanism of the diplomatic reset. Russian diplomats, whose outlook also remains largely shaped by the Cold War, seized on the proposal. And just like that, the old disarmament dynamic was renewed, as if by nostalgic old friends.

The subsequent negotiations produced the much vaunted New START, which, despite doing little to advance disarmament, provided a political boost to both sides and bolstered the bilateral relationship. But progress soon stalled with Russia rejecting U.S. proposals for further reductions — especially of tactical nuclear weapons, an area in which Russia dominates.

Russia, whose nuclear arsenal represents one of the last remaining pillars of its "great power" status, declared that it would agree to further cuts only after the U.S. offered a legally binding agreement that its proposed missile defense shield in Europe would not be aimed at Russia. In Russia's view, which is probably fanciful, such a shield could intercept its intercontinental ballistic missiles, or ICBMs, thereby posing a strategic threat.

In the hope of breaking the deadlock, Obama signaled his willingness to compromise. But Putin had little reason to reciprocate, not least because agreement on the issue would have opened the way to further nuclear arms reductions. Moreover, members of Russia's military and political elite hoped to use some of the country's oil revenues to deploy a new generation of ICBMs. And it seems that some Russians began to believe their own propaganda about the danger posed by a European-based missile defense shield.

By focusing on nuclear disarmament and New START, Obama's reset strategy remilitarized the U.S.-Russia relationship while marginalizing issues that could have reoriented bilateral ties toward the future. In this sense, the initiative was doomed from the start, and the whole world has suffered as a result.

Both countries' leaders should acknowledge what should now be obvious: Nuclear weapons reduction can no longer serve as a reliable basis for bilateral relations.

Either the U.S. and Russia resort to undercutting each other whenever or wherever they can, or they can use the current break in their relationship to devise a new, future-oriented agenda for cooperation that focuses on global problems, such as the ongoing chaos in the Middle East. Neither Russia nor the U.S. can resolve global problems alone. But together, and with China, they could lead the world toward a more stable and prosperous future.

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