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Resetting U.S.-Russia Relations Would Be a Mistake

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President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris look on as Wall Street Journal reporter Evan Gershkovich, former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan and journalist Alsu Kurmasheva. **The White House**

Is the Biden administration thinking about a "reset" of relations with Russia? A recent Politico article cited Ukrainian sources who said they were told that is the reason why Washington is prohibiting them from using U.S. weapons against targets inside Russia. Figures in the Biden administration have forcefully denied that this is White House policy.

No matter what was said in private, and by whom, there are long-standing indications that Washington is thinking about the need to restart cooperation with the Kremlin on various issues in the medium term. If this is shaping the Biden administration's Ukraine policy, they are making an enormous mistake.

To understand why another reset between the U.S. and Russia is impossible for the foreseeable future, it is helpful to look at the last one. Resetting relations with Russia was the

Obama administration's first major foreign policy initiative, launched by then-Vice President Joe Biden in early 2009. The aim was to improve Washington and Moscow's relationship after a period of very bad relations that culminated in the 2008 Russia-Georgia war.

The Reset aimed to do three interconnected things. The first was to resolve issues in the relationship that were priorities for the U.S., particularly those relating to nuclear weapons and the legacy of its Global War on Terror. The second aim was to stabilize the relationship by creating structures that allowed for routine interaction between the two countries, helping to take the drama out of their relations. Finally, the Reset was intended to improve the relationship so that the U.S. could focus on its main foreign policy concerns without the Kremlin acting as a spoiler.

For two years, the Reset was a success from the Obama administration's perspective. The U.S. and Russia tackled nuclear arms control with the New START treaty. They addressed nuclear proliferation (a major U.S. concern) by cooperating on sanctions against Iran and North Korea. They also secured an agreement to allow U.S. troops and supplies to transit through Russian territory and airspace to Afghanistan. To broaden the scope of the relationship and to make it more stable and predictable, they created the Bilateral Presidential Commission, a reboot of the 1990s Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission.

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After 2010, the Reset failed for multiple reasons including the impact of elections in both countries; Vladimir Putin's growing anti-Westernism, disengagement by the Obama administration, and last but by no means least, Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity and the annexation of Crimea that followed it.

The Reset was a policy designed for its specific moment and it made sense at the time. But the conditions that made it both desirable and possible have vanished. It is impossible to see how it could be revived with the current Russian government.

One reason is that although the U.S. wants to work with Russia on some of the same issues as before, cooperation in these areas no longer serves the Kremlin's interests. Biden's National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan has signaled an interest in reviving arms control "without preconditions" but the Russian government takes the view (an understandable one, it has to be said) that negotiations about arms reductions are not possible if the U.S. is behaving like an enemy.

Biden himself has said that states "don't need to agree on everything to keep moving forward on issues like arms control," which is true. But the two sides cannot move forward if they agree on nothing at all. Bilateral U.S.-Russia arms control discussion is not a realistic objective when Moscow regards the U.S. as its primary enemy and Washington sees the Russian government as one of the main threats to global security. "Distrust and can't verify" is not a viable basis for arms reduction.

It is also impossible to see how arms control could work when the security environment has been so badly destabilized that escalation, not arms reduction, is the main preoccupation. As long as European states inside and outside NATO are worried about the threat of Russian

aggression, this will continue to be the case.

The prospects for any re-engagement on non-proliferation issues look even worse, given that Washington's primary nuclear concerns for the last 25 years have been Iran and North Korea. These are two of the states on which Russia is now dependent for the conduct of the war against Ukraine.

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There is no policy area on which a renewal of U.S.-Russia relations could be built because the two states have moved too far apart in the years since the last reset ended. Not only are there no shared interests, there are not even any compatible interests that could make cooperation possible. To make matters worse, each state has greatly strengthened relations with third parties that the other regards as enemies: the U.S. with Ukraine; Russia with Iran and North Korea).

Even less significant improvements than a Reset 2.0 seem impossible because détente requires a minimum level of trust that is obviously absent. It is hard to think of a time since the early 1980s, or perhaps even the 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, when Washington and Moscow have appeared to trust each other less than they do now.

Even if all this could be overcome, there remains the problem that Putin has put visceral anti-Westernism at the center of his presidency. One of the justifications for everything Russia has done since February 2022 is the idea that a U.S.-led West is an existential threat to not just the Russian state but to Russian values and Russian identity. For as long as that continues, a thaw in relations must surely be impossible.

Finally, given the Kremlin's view of the West and the crude, zero-sum version of realism that drives their foreign policy thinking, any U.S. attempt at engagement is highly likely to be seen by the Russian government merely as weakness and credulity to be exploited.

If the Biden administration is limiting Ukraine's self-defense because they want to improve relations with Russia, ironically, their actions are helping to prevent that from becoming a possibility. That is because the only chance for any meaningful improvement in U.S.-Russia relations is a change in the type of regime governing Russia, not just a change of president.

Washington cannot reset relations with a Putin-led Russia or a Russia governed by any individual or group with the same highly aggressive, resentful, paranoid and virulently anti-Western worldview. A reset with Russia would require a reset inside Russia first. And fear of that is one of the main things that has been driving the U.S. and Europe's cautious support of Ukraine.

It may be that no one in the Biden administration is hoping for a reset with Russia. But if they are, it suggests they are either unwilling or unable to understand how much things have changed since the early 2010s. Envisaging a future reset with Russia is not pragmatism. It is wishful thinking. Few things have done more damage to U.S. foreign policy than that.

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