



FPI Analysis: Evaluating the U.S.-Russian “Reset”

The Obama administration often cites its “reset” of relations with Russia as a major foreign policy accomplishment. According to administration officials, through deft diplomacy with Russian President Medvedev, President Obama has reversed a “drift” in relations that emerged in the final years of the Bush administration as the United States and Russia faced off over issues such as missile defense and Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia, and competed for influence in the former Soviet satellite states in Central and Eastern Europe.

Proponents claim three main successes of the “reset”: the conclusion of a New START agreement, increased Russian cooperation on Iran’s nuclear program, and enhanced Russian assistance on Afghanistan. This FPI Analysis reviews these “accomplishments” and also examines two other areas that are often not mentioned by the Obama administration – the negative impact of the “reset” on U.S. relations with Russia’s neighbors as well as Russia’s internal political developments, including its burgeoning opposition. A careful review of the record indicates that the concessions made by Washington as it engages Moscow vastly outweigh what the Kremlin has offered in return.

Arms Control

President Obama described the follow-on agreement to the 1992 Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) that he and President Medvedev signed in April as “an important milestone for nuclear security and non-proliferation, and for U.S.-Russia relations.” In reality, the impact of the agreement is more limited than this rhetoric belies, achieving miniscule reductions while appearing to place new restrictions on the United States.

Although New START will theoretically lead to reductions in the size of the U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals, when compared to previous agreements, the treaty’s reductions are insignificant. The cuts are so minute that Russia was technically in compliance with the agreement before the treaty was signed. New START also falls short in other key respects. The treaty does not address Russia’s overwhelming advantage in tactical nuclear weapons, while arcane counting rules -- where a bomber armed with multiple cruise missiles is counted as one launcher -- could allow the Russians to increase the size of their deployed nuclear arsenal, should they find the resources to expand their bomber fleet.

Furthermore, the agreement may limit U.S. missile defense systems and future global strike capabilities, despite Obama administration statements to the contrary. In its signing statement, Russia states that were the United States to pursue a “qualitative or quantitative build-up in [its] missile defense system capabilities,” the Russian Federation would withdraw from the treaty. Although the Russian statement is not legally-binding, one wonders what lengths an administration committed to a world free of nuclear weapons will be willing to go to ensure that Russia does not follow through on this threat.

In sum, New START places restrictions on the United States, while having only a limited impact on Russia’s nuclear force. As Bob Joseph and FPI Director Eric Edelman [write](#), “Our nation faces daunting challenges with regard to nuclear terrorism and new nuclear states. The Senate will have to decide whether the limitations on future U.S. capabilities that are in this treaty will

enable us to have adequate means for meeting the threats we know we will face, as well as those that we cannot know but may well emerge.”

Iran

The passage of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1929 on June 9th has led some to argue that one of the greatest accomplishments of the “reset” has been an improved Russian position on Iran’s nuclear weapons program. Supposed Russian willingness to cooperate on Iran has been a chimera for several U.S. administrations.

In actuality, Russia’s assistance in curtailing Iran’s nuclear program has been minimal. Russia has provided instrumental support for Iran’s nuclear program for over a decade, and has repeatedly used its veto-wielding power to dilute the Security Council’s efforts to censure the Islamic Republic both before and after the “reset.”

In addition, Russian rhetoric on Iran continues to vacillate depending on the day and the spokesman. Russia continues to construct a nuclear reactor at Bushehr, which Prime Minister Putin announced would go online this summer. Just weeks after the passage of UNSCR 1929, President Medvedev complained about U.S. and European Union sanctions that went beyond those passed by the Security Council.

To get Russian support for new sanctions, the Obama administration paid a steep price – removing U.S. sanctions against five Russian entities, and resubmitting a nuclear cooperation agreement that was previously frozen after Russia’s invasion of Georgia. Despite administration denials, many observers wonder whether President Obama’s cancellation of missile defense sites in Poland and the Czech Republic in September 2009 also were part of a package deal with Moscow. Although in the wake of the resolution’s passage, some Russian statements indicated that Russia would continue to freeze its sale of the advanced S-300 air defense system to Iran, top Russian officials have not been clear about the issue, epitomizing what Secretary Gates recently called Russia’s “schizophrenic” approach to Iran.

Despite U.S. efforts to placate Russia in return for support on Iran, Russia has done little more than it did during the Bush administration to halt Tehran’s march toward a nuclear weapon. As FPI Director Robert Kagan [writes](#), “Russia has responded to the Obama administration in the same ways it did to the Bush administration before the ‘reset.’ Moscow has been playing this game for years. It has sold the same rug many times. The only thing that has changed is the price the United States has been willing to pay.”

Afghanistan

Another supposed success of the “reset” has been increased Russian support for U.S. efforts to secure new logistical routes into Afghanistan. In July 2009, President Obama hailed a new agreement on air routes over Russian territory as “a substantial contribution by Russia to our international effort, and it will save the United States time and resources in giving our troops the support that they need.” The New York Times [reported](#) that the agreement would permit up to ten flights a day, amounting to thousands per year.

Unfortunately, only five supply flights occurred in the first six months of the program, an underwhelming number considering the administration’s bold projections. This failure to meet expectations prompted *Politico*’s Ben Smith to [remark](#) that it was “hard to see this as a particularly major achievement of a revived relationship.” Philip Gordon, the Assistant Secretary of State for European and Russian Affairs, recently stated that as of June 18, only 275 flights had

occurred over Russian territory. Had the administration's bold projections proved accurate, nearly 3,500 flights should have already occurred.

Russia has also played an extensive role in undermining NATO transportation capabilities in other countries throughout the region, and in some cases has actively worked against U.S. efforts to adequately supply forces in Afghanistan. Recently, the United States was forced to triple its annual leasing rights payments to Bishkek after Moscow placed significant pressure on Kyrgyzstan to remove the U.S. air base at Manas. A Russian-influenced campaign led to the ouster of President Bakiyev of Kyrgyzstan and placed the tenuous status of the Manas air base again in peril. If continued unrest in Kyrgyzstan leads to a closure of Manas, Russian intransigence in Central Asia could prove to be very costly for the American war effort.

Russia's Neighbors

The Obama administration has argued that its efforts to "reset" relations with Moscow have not come at the cost of relations with key allies in Central and Eastern Europe. In one of the earliest enunciations of the "reset" policy, Vice President Joe Biden stated that "We will not agree with Russia on everything...We will not recognize any nation having a sphere of influence. It will remain our view that sovereign states have the right to make their own decisions and choose their own alliances."

In reality, the "reset" has put U.S. relations with current and future NATO allies under great strain. In July 2009, a group of distinguished leaders from Central and Eastern Europe wrote a letter to President Obama that welcomed the "reset," but expressed concerns about its impact on their region. President Obama's September decision to cancel planned missile defense sites in Poland and the Czech Republic and replace them with an alternate system was poorly executed. The allies involved were informed literally in the middle of the night with little prior consultation, leading to speculation (denied by the administration) that "reset" priorities were given precedence over alliance concerns. Although the administration has made an effort to assuage the concerns of Central European leaders, the events of 2009 caused lasting damage.

In addition to NATO allies, the "reset" has had implications for U.S. relations with allies Georgia and Ukraine. In 2008, at NATO's Bucharest Summit, these countries were promised eventual membership in the alliance. In the wake of the Russian invasion of Georgia, the perception in the region is that the United States and other NATO allies are rethinking this commitment given their unwillingness to confront Russia. Recently, Prime Minister Putin suggested merging Ukraine's national energy company with the Russian state-owned firm Gazprom, which would place the entirety of Ukraine's oil pipelines under Moscow's control. Russia also continues to occupy the Georgian territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which it seized in 2008. Perhaps stating the obvious, a senior administration official recently [said](#) "To be very candid...I don't see us having a strategy that can actually achieve that goal of reunifying Georgia's borders."

As David Kramer recently [wrote](#) in The Washington Post, "Obama and other senior U.S. officials have repeatedly said they do not recognize a Russian "sphere of influence," but actions, or non-actions, speak louder than those words. Through its neglect of countries in the region except for Russia, the administration is ceding to Moscow exactly such a sphere."

Human Rights

One of the most troubling aspects of the "reset" is the fact that it has subjugated concerns about Russia's internal situation to issues such as arms control and Iran. The Russian political situation is marked by unfair elections and the abolition of elected governorships, control of civil

society organizations through intimidation, harassment and regulation, the dominance of state controlled media and restrictions on independent media, impunity for perpetrators of violence, including murder, against regime critics and brutal abuses in the Caucasus. Opposition parties struggle to compete in elections and to hold demonstrations. A monthly effort to protest the lack of freedom of assembly was violently broken up by police on May 31 and more than 100 people were arrested.

In the midst of the Federation's continuing chokehold on basic liberties, a boisterous Russian opposition has emerged, as thousands of protestors have taken to the streets of Russian cities in recent months, braving swift and severe responses from Putin's security forces. Last week, 200,000 copies of a report by Russian opposition figures critical of Vladimir Putin's leadership were confiscated by security forces and the website on which the report was hosted suffered a crippling cyber attack.

In short, the "reset" has not led to improvements in Russia's internal behavior. When President Obama met with a large number of opposition leaders and rights activists on his visit to Moscow last July, Garry Kasparov, a leader of the Solidarity-Russia opposition party [called](#) the effort ""less than we needed but more than we expected." Since then, the administration's main thrust on democracy and human rights has been the U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission's Civil Society Working Group. The sincerity of the Russian side is reflected in the fact that its delegation is led by Vladislav Surkov who is better known as the architect of Putin's concept of "sovereign democracy," a fig leaf for Putin's authoritarianism. A meeting of this commission took place shortly before the arrests at the May demonstration. Participants representing Russia's human rights community [criticized](#) the event: one of them called it "a political exercise to show that they are officially having discussions. But nothing came out of it, no criticism and no discussions."

Conclusion

In recent testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary of State Clinton stated that New START would "continue our progress toward broader U.S.-Russia cooperation," and reap benefits for "other foreign policy priorities, including dealing with Iran's nuclear program, [and] cooperating on Afghanistan." "[O]ur efforts," she emphasized, "including this treaty, are producing tangible benefits for U.S. national security."

As Russian intellectual Lilia Shevtsova [wrote](#) earlier this year, "The United States, of course, needs to have a dialogue with Russia on security issues, including arms control. But turning a nuclear arms pact into the main item on the agenda only reveals how reluctant both sides are to discuss the real issues at stake -- the fundamental political differences between the two societies. Instead, Moscow and Washington revive ghosts of the past and use a Cold-War era mechanism to try to imitate cooperation. In the end, the U.S.-Russian security dialogue will do little to help President Barack Obama accomplish his goals of reining in an aggressive Iran, ending the war in Afghanistan, and advancing a nonproliferation regime. Instead, it will work in the Kremlin's favor, bolstering Russia's great-power status and making it easier to prop up the current authoritarian system."

Even during the Cold War, the United States was able to engage Moscow on key national security issues while simultaneously making clear where U.S. and Russian interests diverged. The Obama administration has thus far shown itself either unable or unwilling to do the same.

The supposed successes of the "reset" related to arms control, Iran, and Afghanistan have been limited and the United States has paid the heavy price of alienating key allies in Central and

Eastern Europe and those fighting for human rights and enhanced freedoms on the streets of Russian cities.

As he continues to pursue a "reset" of relations with Russia, President Obama should heed the plea from the Central and Eastern European leaders that wrote him last year. "When it comes to Russia," they wrote, "our experience has been that a more determined and principled policy toward Moscow will not only strengthen the West's security but will ultimately lead Moscow to follow a more cooperative policy."