
UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES: IMPACT OF THE U.S. - RUSSIA DÉTENTE ON THE WIDER EUROPE

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Abstract

Cooperative relations between Washington and Moscow do not necessarily generate security throughout Wider Europe. Much depends on Moscow's goals and vulnerabilities of Russia's neighbors. The Barack Obama administration has been criticized for neglecting the national interests of East European, South Caucasian, and Central Asian states in order to obtain Moscow's collaboration in arms control, Iranian sanctions, and maintaining a supply corridor to NATO troops in Afghanistan. Such an approach emboldens Russia's leaders to press their former Soviet subordinates into closer dependency relationships that limit their sovereignty. One major shortcoming of Obama's foreign policy is a failure to clearly articulate U.S. security interests and strategic goals in the Wider European and Central Asian regions. These include preventing regional insecurity, precluding the emergence of a regional hegemony that challenges broader American interests, and involving a diverse array of states to assist Washington in combating common threats stemming from the broader Middle East and South Asia.

Introduction

We need to re-evaluate the conventional wisdom that improved U.S.-Russia relations are automatically advantageous for all European and post-Soviet states. Closer ties between Washington and Moscow may encourage some European and Eurasian capitals to seek less confrontational relations with Russia and to develop their bilateral agendas, but this largely depends on Moscow's approach. Indeed, two potential negatives may result from the current U.S.-Russia détente. First, it may generate profound anxieties that Washington has abandoned

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East European, South Caucasian, and Central Asian national interests in order to obtain Moscow's cooperation in combating security threats in the Greater Middle East. This could either worsen relations with Russia as fears of domination increase, or it could encourage greater official acquiescence to Moscow because of the absence of sufficient Western protection or leverage. The latter scenario can also polarize and radicalize domestic politics.

And secondly, Moscow itself will feel emboldened by a perception that Washington may be willing to disregard security interests of East European and Central Asian states in order to ensure cooperation with Russia. Indeed, the Kremlin has been testing Washington's response to a range of assertive moves toward neighbors, such as pressuring Belarus through sudden increases in oil and gas prices and intensive propaganda attacks against President Alyaksandr Lukashenka; extending the presence of the Russian fleet on Ukrainian territory and pushing to absorb Ukraine's gas industry under a Russian monopoly; threatening Georgia with further conflict and partition; and increasing pressure on Azerbaijan to supply Moscow's energy networks.

1. Impact of the New West-East D tente

In general terms, when U.S.-Russian relations improve, pressure is eased within Europe as the EU becomes potentially less divided in its Russia policy, especially if Moscow is not engaged in some stark new military aggression in its neighborhood. This appeared to be the case after President Barack Obama took office in January 2009 and Washington stressed the importance of collaborating with Moscow in pursuing common security interests in Afghanistan and Iran, as well as in the control of nuclear weapons. The new U.S. approach was seen as generating stability in Russia at a time when the EU also seemed less focused on promoting democratic reforms. For Berlin, Paris, and other EU capitals, stability in Russia was more important than the country's systemic transformation.

Although some EU officials remained concerned about the fact that closer U.S.-Russia ties could lead to a downgrading of Moscow's relations with the EU, countries that had upheld cooperative relations with Russia throughout the George

W. Bush administration felt relieved and even vindicated by Obama's policies. Indeed, policy makers in Germany and France believed that the previous U.S. government was the main culprit in unsettling relations with Moscow through its actions in the Middle East and had provoked the war in Georgia by giving Tbilisi the prospect of NATO membership, which convinced the Saakashvili government to act with impunity against Russia's alleged national interests. They chose to ignore Moscow's intent to recreate a regional condominium under its supervision or considered it a benign hegemony that would unburden the EU of the necessity to support and integrate the former Soviet republics.

In the wake of the White House "reset" with the Kremlin, several EU governments who had been most outspoken about Russia's policies appeared to soften their stance and new avenues of cooperation were pursued. For example, since early 2009 London has focused on manageable questions with Moscow seeking gradual bilateral improvements. Several Central-East European (CEE) governments were willing to give the new U.S. President the opportunity to curtail Russia's aggressiveness and make it a more constructive international player. This was especially visible in the stance of Poland's Prime Minister Donald Tusk who sought to improve Polish-Russian relations even before Obama's election.

Russian authorities calculated that it would be more difficult to drive political wedges between the EU and the U.S. under the Obama administration as there were fewer obvious points of disagreement that they could exploit whether over Iraq, counterterrorism, human rights, or missile defense. On the other hand, a lessened U.S. focus on transatlantic relations could serve Russia's long-term goal of disconnecting the Alliance. Moscow also decided to settle some enduring disputes with selected European states in order to gain greater leverage within the Union or with particular European states outside the EU to further its strategic and economic ambitions.

Poland's Donald Tusk government sought to improve relations with Moscow after assuming office in November 2007. Indeed, several CEE capitals believe that the Obama administration may be taking credit for improving their relations with Moscow, whereas the Polish case demonstrates that such bilateral revivals were already underway before the U.S. "reset." The rapprochement is largely driven by strategic considerations since Moscow views Poland as a rising power within the EU, as evident in the revival of the Weimar Triangle, a French-German-Polish initiative to coordinate their European policy. It is therefore offering closer business

and energy connections between the two states to increase Russia's influence within the Union.¹

However, any bilateral thaws in the former Soviet zone are not irreversible as a great deal depends on Russia's internal developments and external behavior. Currently, Moscow is engaged in a campaign of outreach led by President Dmitri Medvedev and intends to obtain foreign capital and investment to modernize the Russian economy. However the thaw could move into reverse if Russia stumbles into a neighborhood conflict or a prolonged domestic crisis.

2. Skepticism toward Obama's Policies

One fundamental shortcoming of President Obama's foreign policy has been its inability or unwillingness to clearly articulate U.S. security interests and strategic goals in the wider European, Caucasian, and Central Asian regions, even if these are not currently overarching national priorities. These interests can be encapsulated in at least four policy objectives: first, consolidating bilateral partnerships and regional alliances to prevent the emergence of weak, fractured, or conflicted states that undermine regional security; second, precluding the expansion of any dominant regional power or regional alliance that challenges broader American interests and even the American presence; third, involving a diverse array of states to assist Washington and NATO in combating common threats stemming from the broader Middle East and South Asia; and fourth, ensuring the development of energy resources and their secure transportation from the Caspian Basin to Europe via the Caucasus and Black Sea region to uphold the stability of America's European allies.

In general, Europe's new democracies were not as enthusiastic about the Obama presidency as many of their West European counterparts. The Bush years were viewed relatively favorably as they had become an integral part of the Alliance

¹ Adam Newman, "Is Russian Energy Dependence Threatened by Poland?" *O&G, Next Generation*, Sunday May 2, 2010, www.cisoilgas.com/news/polands-shale-gas-deposits. Moscow is concerned about the fact that exploitation of vast reserves of Polish shale gas could challenge the economic viability of Nord Stream. Hence, it is seeking new energy deals with Warsaw. With an estimated 1.36 trillion cubic metres of shale gas, Poland has the potential to increase the EU's reserves by almost a half and offer a long-term alternative to Gazprom as a major energy provider to the EU.

and were courted and praised for providing military assistance to the missions in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some disenchantment became visible during the latter part of the Bush presidency when the CEE received neither economic and military benefits, nor inclusion in the U.S. visa waiver program that several capitals had expected in exchange for support of the American war effort.

Subsequently, Obama was an unknown quantity who appeared to view Russia as his number one priority in Eurasia. Rightly or wrongly a “Russia-first” policy is perceived in some capitals as a “Russia-only” policy and the new administration has been widely viewed as making cordial relations a strategic priority regardless of Moscow’s neo-imperial designs on its neighborhood.

President Obama’s meeting with eleven government leaders from CEE during his trip to Prague on April 8, 2010 was intended to project “strategic reassurance” and convince them that upgrading contacts with Russia did not entail downgrading ties with the new democracies or closing the door to NATO’s growth eastward. For their part, the Central Europeans have sought Washington’s commitment to five strategic “no’s:” no weakening of NATO’s security guarantees; no U.S. military withdrawal from Europe; no redivision of the continent into spheres of influence; no termination of NATO enlargement; and no grand bargains with Moscow over the heads of former Soviet satellites.

The fact that President Obama needs to periodically “reassure” the new NATO allies that they have not been abandoned indicates that several capitals remain troubled not just about Russia’s aspirations, but about U.S. and NATO policies. For this reason, they will be looking closely at several significant landmarks. First, the content of NATO’s new Strategic Concept is important in defining the role of the Alliance over the coming decade and its commitment to collective defense. In particular, how Russia is depicted in the document, as a partner or a potential adversary, or both, will be closely monitored in CEE capitals. Second, NATO’s Summit in Lisbon in November 2010 will be important with regard to any recommitments to mutual defense and enlargement. And third, the contours of the new Missile Defense system will need to be fleshed out and how Russia will be included in the planned system.

CEE states remain concerned about Russia’s ambitions in countries, such as Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, and Georgia, and the pressure this can exert on their own security at a time when Washington no longer views the wider European project as a strategic priority. Indeed, by the summer of 2010 there was a growing

sense that the White House was gradually withdrawing from the post-Soviet region and placing greater emphasis on such instruments as the OSCE in conflict prevention and crisis management.² However, the OSCE had no proven track record in resolving conflicts, as it possessed no hard power deterrents or military instruments and was dependent on multi-national consensus. Washington evidently calculated that such an approach could prevent new confrontations with Moscow. This may also indicate that the U.S. and NATO were not prepared to surrender the post-Soviet region to Russian hegemony under the CSTO umbrella even though the Alliance was not playing an assertive role.

In a longer perspective, Washington's détente with Moscow may prove to be a window of opportunity for Russia and the Medvedev-Putin authorities will seek to extract as many advantages as possible from the Obama "reset." If Russia cannot deliver on U.S. requests for substantive assistance vis-à-vis Iran, North Korea, and Afghanistan, or becomes embroiled in new conflicts around its borders, it will prove to be of negative strategic value to Washington. Moreover, at the close of 2012 the Obama presidency may be replaced by a less Russia-focused administration, and Putin may return to the Kremlin with a more expansionist agenda.

3. Wider Europe in Question

Despite its reassurances that it will not support the delineation of interest spheres, in practice the Obama administration concluded that it would not vigorously challenge Moscow in its immediate neighborhood and could share influence in some regions. It calculated that even if Ukraine and other countries slipped under Russia's security and economic umbrella, this would not damage U.S. interests which center on much more vital concerns over Afghanistan, Iran, and nuclear proliferation. Indeed, closer Russian supervision over the post-Soviet republics was considered beneficial by some Western officials as such arrangement would purportedly generate fewer conflicts with Moscow. In effect, this constituted an informal concordat with Russia over respective zones of interest. However, the effectiveness of such an agreement will be tested particularly in the cases where resistance to Moscow's pressures and encroachments results in violent conflict or has a more direct impact on one of the new NATO members.

² Joseph R. Biden Jr. "Advancing Europe's Security," *The New York Times*, May 6, 2010.

According to Russian commentators supportive of the Kremlin, whether or not the détente in U.S-Russian relations flourishes remains dependent on how Washington behaves in the “post-Soviet space” and whether it poses no threat to Russia’s self-defined security interests.³ In September 2008, before Obama was elected, the Russian military staged a major strategic exercise (Stability 2008) as a warning to Washington. It involved a local conflict in the CIS area escalating into an all-out air, sea and land war between Russia and the West. This in turn erupts into a global nuclear conflict as Russia’s military planners envisage the limited first use of nuclear cruise missiles against targets in Europe and the U.S. In order to maintain this sense of impending threat, Russian officials continue to claim that Georgia has been rearming since the August 2008 war and has been preparing to retake its separatist territories.⁴ Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin has charged the U.S. with arming Georgia, thereby elevating Moscow’s confrontation with Tbilisi to a proxy standoff with the U.S. and NATO.⁵

To counter Moscow’s pressure, during his visit to Moscow in July 2009, President Obama signaled that any new attack against Georgia would precipitate American involvement with unspecified “grave consequences.”⁶ American military support for Georgia has been limited to providing training and equipment primarily for counter-terrorism operations rather than for homeland defense against a conventional invasion.⁷ Soon after the August 2008 war a Georgia-NATO Commission was created as it became clear that Tbilisi would not obtain a NATO MAP in the immediate future. The Commission established an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO to foster institutional reform.⁸

³ Andranik Migranyan, “At Last We Can Sum Up the Results of the Moscow Summit,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Moscow, Russia, July 29, 2009. Migranyan is the director of the New York office of the Russian Institute of Democracy and Cooperation Foundation.

⁴ Viktor Yadukha and Mikhail Chernov, “Premonitions of August,” *RBC Daily*, No.101, June 15, 2009, Moscow, Russia.

⁵ Pavel Felgenhauer, “Nuclear Submarines Deployed to Deter U.S. Interference in Russia’s Confrontation with Georgia,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 6, Issue 151, August 6, 2009.

⁶ Brian Whitmore, “Reset 2.0,” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, July 28, 2009, http://rferl/content/Reset_20/1787366.html.

⁷ Richard Giragosian, “Georgian Planning Flaws Led to Campaign Failure,” *Jane’s Defense Weekly*, August 20, 2008, www.jdw.janes.com.

⁸ “NATO-Georgia Joint Press Statement,” September 15, 2008, http://cps/en/natolive/news_46438.htm Ukraine also obtained Annual National Programs (ANP) from NATO which were largely equivalent to annual MAPs.

Nonetheless, such an initiative was widely seen as a substitute for membership, indicating that Moscow may have achieved one of its objectives by halting further NATO enlargement.

Some analysts have proposed a more visible Western role that could act as a deterrent to further conflict by deploying a NATO military mission in Georgia as a counterweight to Russian bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.⁹ Russia's invasion exposed major gaps in Georgia's defenses as Tbilisi had focused on counterinsurgency operations in distant theaters and neglected deftness against conventional military threats. Meanwhile over the past two years Moscow has increased its troop strength, established military bases, and signed defense pacts with its political proxies in the two occupied territories.

The Obama administration affirmed its commitment to the long-term security of Georgia by gradually assisting in defense sector reform, training, education, and force structure development that would enable Tbilisi to acquire a "modern, Western-oriented, NATO-interoperable armed forces capable of territorial defense and coalition contributions."¹⁰ To be effective, U.S. military assistance must include air defense, anti-tank capabilities, command, control, communications, equipment, intelligence systems, operational training for territorial defense, officer training, and reservist training and mobilization. This would enable Georgia to raise the cost of another Russian attack without necessitating the use of U.S. firepower.

Perceptions that President Obama had disengaged from the South Caucasus grew throughout 2010, as evident in several missteps, including the following: the failure to appoint a U.S. ambassador to Azerbaijan for almost a year; public indifference or lack of a coherent strategy regarding Moscow's purchase of a French Mistral ship that will help project Russian power in the Black Sea; a fixation on opening the Armenian-Turkish border without tackling the more important and inter-linked territorial disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan; and a growing perception that the U.S. favored Armenia in the conflict over Nagorno-

⁹ Pierre Razoux, "What Future for Georgia?" *Research Paper*, No.47, June 2009, Research Division, NATO Defense College, Rome, p.5.

¹⁰ Testimony of Ambassador Alexander Vershbow, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, "Georgia: One Year After the August War," Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Subcommittee for Europe, August 4, 2009.

Karabakh because of pressure on the White House from America's Armenian lobby.¹¹

In the wake of the Georgia war, Washington did not use the opportunity to intensify its security cooperation with either Azerbaijan or Armenia, or provide more impetus in mediating the Nagorno-Karabakh dispute. Baku in particular felt frustrated that it had been taken for granted by Washington despite its stellar record in providing transit for coalition forces to Central Asia and Afghanistan; in contributing troops to U.S.-led operations; and in spearheading Caspian energy development. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's visit to Baku, Yerevan, and Tbilisi in the first week of July 2010 was intended to dispel perceptions of U.S. disengagement, but the practical results remained unclear.

Additionally, in a joint statement released on June 27, 2010 by Presidents Medvedev, Obama, and Sarkozy, the three co-chairs of the OSCE's Minsk Group urged their Armenian and Azeri counterparts to pursue the peace process on the basis of OSCE's Helsinki Principles. However, these principles include two diametrically opposed positions: territorial integrity of states, which indicates that Nagorno-Karabakh should return to Azerbaijan, and peoples' right to self-determination, which would signify the region's independence or incorporation in Armenia.

In the case of Ukraine, during U.S. Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Kyiv in July 2009, the Charter on Strategic Partnership, signed by Presidents Bush and Yushchenko in December 2008, was renewed and a bilateral commission was announced to focus on economics, trade, energy, security and rule of law. It remained unclear how the partnership would function under the Yanukovich presidency, especially as the new president placed the EU and Russia at the forefront of Kyiv's foreign policy, and the U.S. and NATO on the back burner.

During the first half of 2010, U.S. reactions were barely audible to the closer integration of Russia and Ukraine, as evident in plans to absorb key sectors of the Ukrainian economy and extension of the presence of Russia's Black Sea fleet. While

¹¹ Vladimir Socor, "Is the United States Losing Azerbaijan? (Part Four)," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume 7, Issue 80, April 26, 2010. Socor points out that "The linkage between border opening and troop withdrawal had been a fundamental element in the negotiating process for almost a decade, and is Turkish policy since 1993 (when Armenian forces crossed from Karabakh into Azerbaijan's interior). Breaking that linkage—as per the October 2009 Turkey-Armenia protocols, strongly encouraged by the U.S.—would undermine Baku's patiently constructed diplomatic strategy for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. Baku proposes opening all borders to trade and transit as part of the first stage in the conflict resolution process, linked with the Armenian troop withdrawal."

President Yanukovych endeavored to bring Kyiv closer to Moscow, calculating that a less disruptive relationship would enhance the country's economic performance, both Washington and Brussels evidently calculated that such moves did not threaten Western interests and could bring stability to Ukraine. Western disengagement in turn emboldened Russian authorities and weakened Kyiv's potential bargaining position vis-à-vis Moscow. Such a short-sighted approach by the U.S. and the EU ignored the potential radicalization of Ukrainian politics precipitated by Yanukovych's policies and the likelihood of serious domestic conflicts in the years ahead.

4. Consequences of Rapprochement with Russia

The George W. Bush administration did not consider Russia as a major international player, but as a relatively weak post-imperial state that could be ignored in many policy decisions. Although Russia regained some of its strength over the last decade, it has nevertheless contributed little to international problem-solving, exaggerated its capabilities, and resisted constructive engagement.¹² Indeed, Russia could be viewed as a declining power benefiting from a brief resurgence driven by temporarily high energy prices and with a leadership that has sought to stifle the development of a more secure Europe tied to NATO and the U.S.

During the first half of the Obama administration, Russia has been publicly depicted as a key partner for the U.S. However, in looking more closely at Obama's approach, Russia is courted in a narrow range of security-related issues and is not viewed as strategically or economically ascendant. Washington's purpose in highlighting a Russian partnership appears aimed at placating its elite's sense of global importance while tapping Moscow's cooperation and preventing its leaders from sabotaging U.S. interests.¹³ The absence of extensive economic connections, where trade with Russia amounts to less than 1% of the U.S. total, indicates that

¹² Thomas Graham, "Resurgent Russia and U.S. Purposes," The Century Foundation, New York, 2009, <http://www.tcf.org/publications/internationalaffairs/Graham.pdf>, p.3.

¹³ For a valuable analysis of Obama's foreign policy concepts, see Constanze Steltzenmuller, *End of a Honeymoon: Obama and Europe, One Year Later*, Brussels Forum Paper Series, March 2010, Washington, D.C., German Marshall Fund of the United States.

in the event of renewed political conflicts common material interests are unlikely to reduce tensions.¹⁴

The notion has been widely disseminated that improved U.S.-Russia relations enhance security throughout Europe and Eurasia. This is certainly true if it helps restrict Russia's aggressive moves to undermine the sovereignty of neighboring states and results in a less confrontational relationship with NATO. However, the practical long-term impact of the U.S.-Russia détente needs to be assessed more thoroughly and counter arguments may also be valid.

For instance, Moscow may calculate that bilateral cooperation over Afghanistan and Iran are such paramount U.S. interests that Washington would be willing to retreat in other arenas to make sure that it succeeds. The Obama "reset" button in itself raised Russia's global stature. It was initially viewed with some suspicion and distrust in Moscow, although several pro-Kremlin analysts claimed that Washington had finally acknowledged that Russia had recovered from its post-Cold War torpor and would again be treated as a great power.¹⁵ A number of analysts believed that the "reset" actually indicated U.S. weakness in the midst of two wars and an economic recession.

Some analysts even asserted that Obama's policies signaled a "grand bargain" with Moscow in which the U.S. would permanently halt further NATO enlargement and accede to a Russian sphere of primary influence in the former Soviet Union in return for Russia's diplomatic and practical help with Iran, Afghanistan, North Korea, and other security concerns. To demonstrate closer consultations at high official levels, a U.S.-Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission with thirteen working groups was established in the aftermath of President Obama's visit to Moscow in July 2009. When Washington announced in May 2010 that Russia's military occupation of Georgia presented "no obstacle" to U.S.-Russian civilian nuclear cooperation and other collaborative ventures, Moscow understood that the new détente was clearly working to its advantage.¹⁶

¹⁴ Marcin Kaczmarek, "Rosja-USA: Ograniczone Zmiany," *Tydzien Na Wschodzie*, No.23(141), June 30, 2010, Center for Eastern Studies, Warsaw, Poland, p.3.

¹⁵ Check the analysis of Russia's reactions to the Obama "reset" in Yuri E. Fedorov, "Brief Analysis No.104: Russia's View of the 'Reset,'" *Central European Digest*, July 1, 2009, Washington, D.C.: Center for European Policy Analysis, http://www.cepa.org/ced/view.aspx?record_id=182.

¹⁶ Barack Obama, "Message from the President Regarding a Peaceful Nuclear Agreement with Russia." Office of the Press Secretary, May 10, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/message-president-regarding-a-peaceful-nuclear-agreement-with-russia>.

Warming U.S.-Russia ties raised suspicions in parts of Central Europe, especially in the Baltic States and Poland, over Washington's potential concessions to Moscow. As a result, U.S. officials made strenuous efforts to underscore that they did not support direct security trade-offs with Russia or the consolidation of Russian and American spheres at the expense of other states. Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Kyiv and Tbilisi in July 2009 was intended to reinforce such arguments. Biden's remarks that Russia was a country in economic crisis and needed an arms control agreement much more than the U.S. was interpreted in Moscow as "plan B" to the Obama "reset button." Russian analysts believed that if Moscow did not make the required compromises and the U.S. did not gain benefits from the Kremlin over Afghanistan and Iran, then Washington would aim to push Russia to the periphery of world politics.¹⁷

However, Biden's assumptions that Russia's economic difficulties ensured that the government would be more accommodating are debatable. Indeed, in the short-term Moscow could become more belligerent to disguise and deflect from its internal problems unless treated as an important international player. Furthermore, the White House left unclear what it considered to be the "red lines" of Russia's behavior in the Kremlin attempts to re-establish demarcated spheres of influence. Red lines become blurred and diluted where Russia's influence seeps in through unconventional instruments, such as energy blackmail, corrupt business connections, conflict manipulation, and peace-keeping deployments that assist its agenda of reimperialization.

Obama's announcement of a new *détente* with Russia in early 2009 had little immediate impact on concrete policy-making in Moscow. The Kremlin eventually approved the transit of logistical supplies across Russia to NATO forces in Afghanistan and backed a new set of UN sanctions against Iran in June 2010. However, Moscow reserved the right to close its territory to NATO passage and continued developing economic relations with Tehran. Moreover, Russia's leaders periodically tested American reactions by ratcheting up tensions with selected pro-Western neighbors, such as drafting legislation to make it easier to send troops abroad to avowedly defend Russian citizens.

¹⁷ Vladimir Milov, "The Latest American Insinuation," *gazeta.ru*, July 27, 2009, <http://www.gazeta.ru/column/milov/3227830.shtml>. For excerpts of Biden's remarks see Peter Spiegel, "Biden Says Weakened Russia Will Bend to U.S.," *The Wall Street Journal Online*, July 25, 2009, <http://www.online.wsj.com/article/SB124848246032580581.html>.

Michael McFaul, the U.S. National Security Council's senior director for Russian and Eurasian affairs and the chief architect of Obama's Russia policy, stated that Washington harbored no illusions about the worldview of Russian officials who consider the U.S. as the primary adversary.¹⁸ Given this official assessment, U.S. policy was presumably intended either to pacify Moscow through strategic engagement, or to outmaneuver Moscow through diplomatic cunning. Leaders in Moscow may not fully grasp that Russia no longer occupies a central position in American strategic thinking or in its foreign and security policy.¹⁹ However, an acknowledgement of Moscow's reduced status in the U.S. worldview may encourage Russia's belligerence to provoke Washington's reaction. And this may be a useful argument for the Obama team in purposively raising Russia's esteem through bilateral arms control agreements and other forms of cooperation and thereby deflating Moscow's anti-American and conflict promoting agendas.

Rather than elevating Russia to a global power, the war with Georgia in August 2008 may have demonstrated Russia's preoccupation with relatively minor territorial issues and its limited military capacities. Additionally, in the post-war setting the Obama White House was much more concerned about gaining Moscow's support in pressing international disputes and forging strategic arms agreements than in challenging Russia's neighborhood influence. For instance, in May 2010 Washington revived an accord with Moscow in which the two countries would cooperate on civilian nuclear energy; the initiative had been shelved after the August 2008 war.

An effective U.S. policy toward Russia needs to combine cooperation in arenas of common interest while tempering Moscow's assimilationist approach toward its neighbors. A failure to oppose Russia's assertive regional behavior could revive several dormant conflicts. Washington should not exaggerate what the Russians can offer in reducing regional threats and global crises.²⁰ For instance, it was doubtful whether the diplomatic energy expended in gaining Moscow's support of moderate sanctions against Iran through the UN Security Council in June 2010

¹⁸ "The Russia/America Summit," *The Economist*, July 11, 2009, http://www.economist.com/world/europe/displaystory.cfm?story_id=E1_TPJJPDNSN.

¹⁹ Andrei Zagorski, "Russia and the U.S.: The Kabuki Dancing Over?" *The EU-Russia Centre Review*, Issue 8: Russian Foreign Policy, October 2008, p.109, Brussels, Belgium, www.eu-russiacentre.org.

²⁰ Damon Wilson in "Russia Must Also Hit the Reset Button," April 1, 2009, Atlantic Council, Washington D.C., http://www.acus.org/new_atlanticist/russia-must-also-hit-reset-button.

actually made any major difference to Tehran's intent to develop nuclear weapons. At some point the White House needs to take full stock of what the new détente has accomplished for international security and for U.S. and NATO strategic interests.²¹

The notion of a "strategic partnership" between the U.S. and Russia is clearly premature. It assumes that Moscow and Washington share strategic objectives in terms of their global role.²² Strategic partners not only cooperate in particular endeavors, they are also bound by common interests, values, and goals. While Russia can be a tactical partner with the Alliance in dealing with specific threats, such as nuclear proliferation, or in negotiating arms control accords, the government in Moscow does not share the long-term strategic targets of either NATO or the EU. NATO allies respect the will of sovereign states to enter multinational institutions of their choice. They also favor and support the development of democratic systems and legitimate governments that combine national stability with respect for human and civil rights. The same principles do not apply to the Russian authorities.

²¹ Friedman contends that "START talks are from a world long passed. The issues now revolve around Russia's desire for a sphere of influence, and the willingness and ability of the West to block that ambition. In George Friedman, "The Western View of Russia," *Stratfor*, September 10, 2009, http://georgiandaily.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=14443&Itemid=132.

²² Robert Legvold, "The Russia File," *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2009, Vol.88, Issue 4, pp.78-93. Legvold asserts that Russia needs to "invest in promoting progressive change in its neighborhood" but does not specify what that would entail and why Moscow would support democratization among adjacent states if this pulls them away from Russia's orbit.