Reset or rerun? Sources of discord in Russian–American relations

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ABSTRACT

Despite some notable accomplishments, the effort underway since 2008 to “reset” U.S.-Russian relations on a foundation of mutual interests is far from secure. In the past the Russian Federation and the U.S. have moved through a number of cycles where phases of rapprochement have given way to intensified strategic competition. This pattern could reproduce itself if a momentum of expanded cooperation is not sustained. Today, in critical areas such as democratization and respect for human rights, arms control, counter-proliferation, energy security, and regional stability, conflict is becoming more pronounced. If the reset agenda is to lead forward to a more substantial redefinition of the U.S.-Russian relationship these underlying sources of conflict will need to be addressed.

For the promise of rapprochement to be realized the U.S. and its allies must look beyond the limited goals of the reset as originally defined towards a strategy of more comprehensive engagement designed to bring Russia into the fold as a cooperative member of the Western security community.

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1. Introduction

The Five-Day War between Russia and Georgia in August 2008 brought relations between the two former superpowers to a post-Cold War nadir. "Russian–American contradictions", in the words of a Russian commentator, "reached their apogee during the crisis in the Caucasus of August 2008" (Baranovskii et al., 2009). The war and its outcome (a crushing defeat for a U.S. ally and screeching halt to the momentum of NATO enlargement in the region), made clear that the U.S.-Russian relationship had disintegrated to a point where Washington was no longer in a position effectively to leverage Russian behavior.

The conflict demonstrated the risks of uncontrolled rivalry and gave rise to an effort to place relations on a more stable foundation. U.S. Vice-President Joe Biden set the tone in February 2009, calling for both parties to “press the reset button” (Whitlock, 2009). The recasting of Russian–American relations initiated by the administration of Barack Obama and dubbed the reset agenda was a serious diplomatic initiative, and it has borne fruit. (Gottemoeller, 2008). At their first meeting as heads of state during April 2009 presidents Obama and Dmitri Medvedev issued a joint statement identifying more than twenty areas of cooperation (Fedynsky, 2009). One year later, Medvedev’s visit to the U.S. gave rise to commitments to expand commercial relations and included a much publicized stop in California’s Silicon Valley, posed as a model for Russian modernization (Gvosdev, 2010). In May 2009 Russia’s new national security strategy stated that “Russia will strive to establish a complete and balanced strategic partnership with the USA on the basis of shared interests” (Strategiia natsional’noi bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii do 2020 goda, 2009).

The atmospherics of the relationship have improved. Public diplomacy and civil society initiatives designed to break down stereotypes and encourage understanding are underway under the aegis of a U.S.–Russia working group (Samarin, 2010; IREX Convenes US and Russian Civil Society Discussions, 2011). Policy intellectuals are actively developing scenarios for expanded collaboration (Valdai Discussion Club, 2011). A foundation has been laid for long-term civil-nuclear cooperation (US–Russian 123 Agreement, 2011). Russia now collaborates with the U.S. stabilization effort in Afghanistan, allowing transit of non-lethal

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supplies and personnel into the theater along a “Northern Distribution Network” traversing Russia through overland routes and air corridors (Gjetlen, 2011). The New Start treaty which entered into force on 11 February 2011 has revived arms control as a dimension of U.S.–Russian cooperation. Russia’s accession to the World Trade Organization in December 2012, strongly supported by the U.S., was the culmination of a long effort to “cement the integration of Russia into the world economy” (Jolly, 2012). The key U.S. external alliance has joined the game as well – the NATO Strategic Concept approved at the Alliance’s Lisbon Summit in November 2010 stresses the importance of “a true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia” (Active Engagement, Modern Defence, 2010). In the summer of 2010 Russia agreed to support UN Security Council resolution 1929 strengthening sanctions against Iran, and canceled a planned sale to Tehran of S-300 surface to air missiles.

If the goal of the reset policy is characterized as “a strategic reassessment of the United States’ relationship with Russia with an emphasis on exploring common interests” it may be said to have succeeded in its own terms ( Bipartisan Committee on US Policy toward Russia, 2009). The reset is cited by the Obama administration as one of its most notable foreign policy achievements. Overt hostility has been bled away, shared interests are being pursued in discrete areas, and prospects for continued and expanded collaboration do not lack (McFaul and Collins, 2010). But the picture is not entirely rosy. Russian–American relations have cooled over the past two years, with both sides placing greater emphasis on areas of discord. The reset has opened up space for modest collaboration, but it has not transformed relations in a fundamental way. Reversion to more hostile patterns of interaction remains within the realm of possibility.

Indeed, the Russian–American relationship has been characterized by cycles of détente and disintegration for some time. The two parties concluded the Second World War as allies, though more by accident than design. The onset of the Cold War was in part occasioned by ideological differences, but also by structural rivalry born of competitive bipolarity. U.S. cold war strategy, inspired by the idea of containment, was consistent but not inflexible. Periodic thaws in superpower relations (peaceful coexistence under Nikita Khruzhchev, détente under Leonid Brezhnev, New Thinking under Mikhail Gorbachev) alternated (and sometimes overlapped) with phases of enhanced tension (Nation, 1992).

Following the breakup of the USSR, the foreign policy of the new Russian Federation was launched on the basis of a presumed strategic partnership with the U.S., a promise that, in the words of one critic, the U.S. foreign policy establishment embraced “without reserve, in the naïve belief that the new Russia would be transformed overnight into a democratic, loyal, and above all unquestioning, supporter of Western policy” (Braithwaite, 1994). These hopes were quickly disabused. The violent confrontation between forces loyal to Russian President Boris Yeltsin and refractory members of the Russian parliament in October 1993 made clear that the new Russia was not a mature democratic partner, and turned the administration of William Clinton toward more assertive policies. On the Russian side, the replacement of foreign minister Andrei Kozyrev by Evgenii Primakov in January 1996 symbolized a return to a less conciliatory orientation (Rossiiskaia gazeta, 1997).

From 1995 onward U.S. intervention in the wars of Yugoslav secession, and the decision by NATO to enlarge into areas formerly dominated by Soviet power in Central and Eastern Europe, became sharply contested issues. The cycle of rapprochement and regression repeated itself in the first decade of the new century. Following the 9/11 attacks the administration of Russian President Vladimir Putin was quick to rally to the support of the U.S. in the name of a common commitment to oppose global terrorism. Within several years a series of issues, including U.S. concern for authoritarian tendencies in Putin’s Russia, ongoing NATO enlargement, and rivalry for access to the hydrocarbon reserves of the Caspian basin, had produced what some came to call a “new cold war” (Lucas, 2008).

The reset agenda represents yet another effort to reconstruct U.S.–Russian relations on the foundation of mutual interests. Despite many successes, the limits of the policy orientation have become more evident over time, and Russia’s relations with the U.S. and its key Western partners have slipped backwards. Vladimir Putin’s reelection to a third term as Russia’s president in March 2012 has been interpreted by some as an indication of harder times to come (Finn, 2011). Could the kind of pressures that have sabotaged phases of rapprochement in the past once again provoke intensified strategic rivalry? Such an outcome would be in neither country’s best interest, but it will become more rather than less likely if the reset agenda does not lead forward to more ambitious transformations. Cyclic patterns in U.S.–Russian relations reflect more than occasional conjunctural crises or the foibles of individual leaders. The Russian–American relationship has been and remains structurally unstable, for reasons that need to be explored and addressed.

2. Sources of discord: domestic governance

Russian political culture rests on a long tradition of authoritarian governance. Democratic transition in the post-Soviet period had very little to build on. Nonetheless, the process has produced a stable constitutional order with an elected presidency, bicameral parliament, and constitutional court; expanded personal freedoms for average citizens; and a reasonably open press. In historical perspective these things might be considered meaningful achievements. Academic and media coverage of Russian affairs in the U.S., however, has chosen to concentrate on the failures of transition, and in particular the strong state philosophy and “soft authoritarianism” of the Putin years. Russia’s purported authoritarian drift has become an important source of Western resistance to the integration of the Russian Federation into Western institutions (Hanson, 2007).

Concern about authoritarian tendencies in contemporary Russia has an objective foundation. Putin’s March 2011 announcement of the intent to campaign for a third presidential term served to crystallize the perception that Russia has at best a sham democracy with procedures manipulated to ensure the continued dominance of an uncontested strong man (Harding, 2011). In May 2011 a public declaration signed by prominent figures in Russian cultural life decried “the virtually
complete destruction in our country of democratic elections as such” (Timakova, 2011). The results of the Russian legislative election of December 2011, which allowed the governing United Russia party to retain its dominant status in the State Duma despite a decline in support, were widely denounced as the result of falsification. Speaking in the immediate aftermath, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called for “a full investigation of electoral fraud and manipulation” (Hillary Clinton Calls Russian Election Unfair, 2011). The Russia Ministry of Foreign Affairs responded with an official statement describing Clinton’s remarks as an “unacceptable” product of “long outdated stereotypes”, while Prime Minister Putin castigated them as a “signal” to opposition leaders inspired by “a well-known scenario” designed to destabilize and weaken Russia itself (Ministerstvo Inostrannykh Del Rossiskoi Federatsii, 2011; Elder, 2011). The pointed exchange was an indication of the kind of impact that trends in Russian governance, and the manner in which they are interpreted and responded to in Washington, may have on efforts to normalize U.S.–Russian relations. The December election has been followed by a sequence of public protests sponsored by the anti-Putin opposition that may well become an enduring feature of Russian political life.

These issues concern matters of political culture and domestic governance that in principle should lie outside the purview of interstate relations. The U.S. has coexisted comfortably with allies that have sustained one-party regimes over decades (Mexico, Japan, Egypt, etc.). Do Russia’s imperfect institutions have strategic implications that make them relevant in the domain of international affairs? For some the answer is an unambiguous yes. Authoritarian governance, it is argued, distances Russia from the Western community of values, enables profound corruption that makes her an unreliable economic partner, and serves as a source of imperial ambition within the post-Soviet space (Romaniuk, 2009). These conclusions may be debated, but there is no doubt that they are influential. Much has been made of the difference in tone between outgoing President Dmitri Medvedev, who while in office consistently articulated an agenda for deep modernization, and the “hardliner” Putin, accused of indulging in the exploitation of windfall profits derived from Russia’s oil wealth in order to consolidate personal power (Krumm, 2010; Rossia XXI veka, 2010; Medvedev, 2009). This distinction too can be called into question. Medvedev is exposed to the same kinds of criticisms as his mentor, to whom he has remained loyal. For example, the Russian rocket designer Iurii Solomonov has decried excessive dependence on foreign technology and disruption of state defense (Medvedev is exposed to the same kinds of criticisms as his mentor, to whom he has remained loyal. For example, the Russian rocket designer Iurii Solomonov has decried excessive dependence on foreign technology and disruption of state defense). These issues concern matters of political culture and domestic governance that in principle should lie outside the purview of interstate relations. The U.S. has coexisted comfortably with allies that have sustained one-party regimes over decades (Mexico, Japan, Egypt, etc.).

3. Sources of discord: strategic priorities

The New Start treaty was long overdue. Together Russia and the U.S. control over 90 percent of the world’s nuclear warheads and have an evident interest in reinforcing strategic nuclear stability. The terms of the agreement, which limit each side’s deployed strategic nuclear warheads to 1550 (over 50 percent lower than the limits defined by the 1991 START treaty), and define a robust verification regime, will contribute to that goal in meaningful ways. The treaty is also important for its symbolic value as a first step toward renewed Russian–American cooperation. But it is only a first step in what should be a long journey.

The New Start accord is intended as the prelude to subsequent rounds of negotiations where more difficult issues will be placed on the table (Pifer, 2009). These include the challenge of tactical nuclear weapons, stockpiled weapons, U.S. prompt global strike capacity, third country nuclear systems, counter proliferation, and missile defense – all areas where U.S. and Russian priorities diverge. In some cases differences are profound and virtually intractable.

By postponing deployment of interceptor missiles and radar systems in Poland and the Czech Republic in favor of smaller SM-3 interceptors to be initially deployed at sea, the Obama administration energized its reset agenda and revived the idea of bringing Russia into a cooperative missile defense endeavor. Unfortunately the initiative has flagged. The U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report issued in February 2010 describes a long-term commitment to missile defense as an essential component of national defense policy (Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report, February 2010). Repeated assurances, by U.S. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Michele Flournoy and others, that the commitment is “not intended to affect the strategic balance with Russia” have fallen on deaf ears (Garamone, 2010).
Russia does not oppose collaboration in principle, but favors a step by step approach to commence with a common threat assessment, followed by the identification of political and economic measures capable of averting threats, and only thereafter discussion of the joint deployment of a functional ballistic defense system. This timeline is regarded by the U.S. as a diversion. There are serious concerns about what opportunities collaboration in technical sectors might pose for Russian intelligence gathering, and powerful figures in the U.S. strategic establishment who want to preserve autonomy in decision-making and have no interest in cooperation whatsoever. As a result prospects for any kind of comprehensive U.S.–Russia missile defense program have dimmed. In confirmation hearings before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Michael McFaul, currently U.S. ambassador to Russia, described cooperation on missile defense as “at an impasse” (White House Nominee for Ambassador to Russia Vows Deep Support for Civil Society, 2011).

The status of Russia’s tactical nuclear systems is also problematic. At present Russia’s large tactical nuclear arsenal stands completely outside of any arms control regime, a state of affairs that the U.S. would like to change. Unfortunately, Russia has made both strategic and tactical nuclear systems the foundation of its entire national defense posture. The Military Doctrine of the Russian Federation states that nuclear weapons are considered to be “an important factor for the prevention of the outbreak of nuclear conflicts and military conflicts that use conventional assets” and asserts a first strike option in cases where “the very existence of the state comes under threat” (Voennaia doktrina Rossiskoi Federatsii, 2010).

At present the arms control calendar offers few prospects for expanded collaboration. Deep cuts in strategic arsenals beyond the New Start limits are not envisioned for the time being, and would in any case require the inclusion of China, and probably other nuclear weapon states, an unlikely eventuality (Perkovich and Acton, 2010). Russian analysts share President Obama’s sympathy with, but pragmatic skepticism about, the prospects for Global Zero. In the terse conclusion of one analyst, “the geopolitical conditions that would make it possible to carry a program for total nuclear disarmament through to completion are not yet in place” (Anichkina, 2011).

Russia and the U.S. have divergent views of the role of nuclear weapons in national defense policy and in 21st century world order. Contrasting priorities emerge from the gap in wealth and technological acumen that has opened up between the two former antagonists, their different positions in regional and global contexts, and the contrasting strategic cultures that animate defense policies – powerful structural determinants that will be difficult to change. The U.S. is more open to strategic innovation, less concerned with the traditional logic of mutual assured destruction, and increasingly focused on the challenge of proliferation as a primary threat that missile defense capacity can at least partly deflect. Russia maintains a traditional view of the centrality of strategic deterrence, fears the potentially destabilizing affect of a functional missile defense capacity controlled by the U.S., and relies heavily on its tactical nuclear arsenal as a foundation for territorial defense. Russia is aggressively modernizing its strategic nuclear arsenal in ways that the U.S. is not (Russland will Raketenproduktion praktisch verdoppeln, 2011; Payne, 2010). Putin’s sweeping agenda for Russian rearmament, released on 17 February 2012 in the midst of his re-election campaign, calls for the acquisition of no less than four hundred new ICBMs and eight strategic ballistic missile submarines over the next ten years (Putin, 2012). Putin’s aspirations may prove to be beyond reach, but the logic of Russia’s desire to sustain a competitive strategic posture is not likely to change.

In all probability the Kremlin will resist further cuts in its strategic arsenal that might call its deterrent capacity into question, continue to modernize its systems to make their deterrent function credible, hold fast to its tactical systems, and oppose U.S. sponsored missile defense programs that it is not in a position to oversee or control. Divergent strategic priorities born of contrasting strategic cultures make it unlikely that arms control can continue to serve as a motor for a dynamic of rapprochement.

4. Sources of discord: regional order in the new Eurasia

Russia has been the great outsider in efforts to construct a cooperative security order in post-Soviet Europe and Eurasia. According to Zbigniew Brzezinski, the entire future of post-Soviet Russia will be decided by its choice of geopolitical orientation, with Moscow admonished to abandon a presumed Eurasian heritage, align with the West, and join Europe. “The political struggle within Russia”, Brzezinski wrote in 1995, “is over whether Russia will be a national and increasingly European state or a distinctively Eurasian and once again an imperial state” (Brzezinski, 1995). In fact neither option has been on offer. Russia was never presented with the realistic prospect of joining Western institutions, but when in 1996 Foreign Minister Primakov sought to articulate an Eurasianist alternative, including the assertion of a Russian sphere of influence in what was then referred to as its “Near Abroad”, the aspiration was greeted like a declaration of war (Rogov, 1998).

No other aspect of the U.S.–Russian relationship has been so divisive. Russia has not turned away from the claim to what President Medvedev famously referred to as its sphere of “privileged interest” in the post-Soviet space, and uses its considerable assets (energy dependency, security assistance, labor remittances, market access) to impose its will (A Conversation with Dmitry Medvedev, 2008). The U.S. and its allies reject what are regarded as Russia’s hegemonic aspirations, and have worked in various ways to draw the new independent states of post-Soviet Eurasia closer to the West. Initiatives have included the enlargement of both the European Union and NATO, the Partnership for Peace program promoting security cooperation programs under NATO auspices, the European Neighbourhood Policy, the EU’s Eastern Partnership, launched in the wake of the war in Georgia and intended to promote relations between the EU and six “strategic” actors in Central Europe and the Caucasus (Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Armenia, Georgia, Azerbaijan), as well as various infrastructure and pipeline projects designed to bring the hydrocarbon resource of the Caspian basin into Western markets without transiting the Russian Federation. Competition for influence in Eurasia has taken on the contours of a zero-sum game.

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After the so-called Colored Revolutions (the Rose Revolution in Georgia in 2003 and Orange Revolution in Ukraine in 2004), interpreted in Moscow as the result of Western-sponsored subversion, it became a dangerous game, with the Five Day War in Georgia the result. For the moment the effort to bring Georgia and Ukraine into NATO has lost momentum, but Russian sources attribute this to international overexposure and domestic constraint rather than a meaningful redefinition of long-term U.S. priorities (Troitskii, 2011). In summaries of the achievements of the reset, the observation that “the Obama administration continues to have serious disagreements with the Russian government over Georgia” sounds a discordant note (The White House, 2010). Geospatial competition in Eurasia is a dimension of Russian–American rivalry that the reset agenda has to date failed to address.

Russia is objectively marginalized in the Eurasian security architecture that has emerged after the Cold War. The NATO–Russia Council gives Moscow a voice but little real influence within the Atlantic Alliance, where Russian national priorities (in cases such as the Kosovo question, reactions to the Arab Awakening, or the issue of militarization in the Arctic region) are often not aligned with the alliance consensus. Influential voices have called for a break with half measures and the integration of Russia into the Alliance as a full member (Rühe et al., 2010; Fischer, 2009). This would represent a virtual revolution in security affairs, but a critical mass of support for the idea is not in place on either side.

Relations with the EU have been contentious, due in part to the European desire to make democracy and human rights priorities for pragmatic cooperation, and in part to Moscow’s perception of the EU “as a competitor in the former territory of the Soviet Union” (Dettke, 2011). The EU–Russia Partnership and Cooperation Agreement originally concluded in 1994 expired in 2008 and is still being renegotiated. Divergent European attitudes toward Russia make a common EU policy in the spirit of privileged partnership difficult to achieve and sustain (Wilson et al., 2009). The construct “strategic partnership” that was applied to EU–Russian relations in the mid-1990s is now described as “exaggerated” (Fisher, 2008). Moscow has placed more emphasis on bilateral ties with key European allies, and aided by energy dependency and expanding commercial relations has experienced some success. On occasion real breakthroughs have been the result – even Moscow’s long time Polish antagonist now asserts the need to pursue a “strategic alliance” or “reliable partnership” with Moscow (Mink, 2010; Sikorski, 2010). On 17 June 2011 Russia concluded a record-breaking deal with France, purchasing two Mistral class assault ships/helicopter carriers for $1.4 billion, with options for further purchases, the largest ever deal between a NATO member state and Russia. On the same day, Germany concluded a $398 million contract to develop a combat training facility for Russian ground forces.

With limited prospects in Europe, Russia has sought to reinforce its Eurasian identity by sponsoring a number of multilateral regional forums, including the Commonwealth of Independent States, Shanghai Cooperation Organization, Eurasian Economic Community and associated Customs Union, and Collective Security Treaty Organization. None of these forums represents a mature and reliable security community. Russia’s 2010 proposal for a new, treaty-based Eurasian security framework that would link East and West in a cooperative forum and seek to institutionalize something like the Cold War ideal of a “zone of peace from Vancouver to Vladivostok” was rejected out of hand by the U.S. and other Western partners (Proekt dogovora o evropeiskoi bezopasnosti, 2009; K novoi arkhitekture evroatlanticheskoi bezopasnosti, 2009). The latest variation on this theme is the Eurasian Union project announced by Putin in October 2011, seeking to bring together Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan (and potentially other state members in the future) in a “unified economic space” to serve as the foundation for “a powerful supranational union capable of becoming one of the poles of the modern world” (Putin, 2011). These are extravagant expectations, but it is more likely the Eurasian Union will end up as yet another overly ambitious attempt to institutionalize a Russian sphere of interest in the post-Soviet space. Western analysts, predictably but not unfairly, have been quick to criticize the project as “premature” and unlikely to take off before Russia itself has achieved “greater success in its domestic modernization and other reform efforts to become a more attractive economic partner” (Weitz, 2010).

Russia’s close ties with China can be interpreted as an attempt to balance against a Western security community from which it has been effectively excluded. It is a robust relationship that has been defined since 1996 as a “strategic partnership”, institutionalized in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and based upon a strong foundation of shared interests. These include a convergence of world views, economic complementarities, and a determination to thwart U.S. ambitions in the Asia-Pacific region. The Obama administration’s articulation of a new U.S. strategic focus in Asia, widely interpreted as an admonition to Beijing, may have the effect of reinforcing Beijing’s commitment to a stable strategic relationship with the Russian Federation (Clinton, 2011; Cossa et al., 2009). Alignment with China brings Russia an important trade partner and source of capital investment, markets for arms and hydrocarbon resources, stable relations with a powerful neighbor, and a potential strategic ally. China obtains secure supplies of critical resources, military hardware, diplomatic support in international forums, and cover for its expanding engagement in Inner Asia. Both Russian and Chinese political leaders and policy analysts place a great deal of weight upon the relationship (Rossiia i Kitai v novoi mezhdunarodnoi srede, 2009). In Beijing during his first state visit following the announcement of the intention to stand for the Russian presidency in 2012, Putin boasted of the “deep friendship” and “comprehensive strategic cooperation” that defined Russian–Chinese relations (Lorenz, 2011).

Despite these outward signs of alignment, Russian–Chinese relations are subject to significant strains. Trade patterns are imbalanced, and Medvedev has expressed concern that Russia could gravitate toward the humiliating status of “a raw material base” for Asia (Medvedev: Far East Ignored too Long, 2008). There is a significant cultural divide, aggravating by Russia’s rapid shift in status from dominant to junior partner. Moscow is unhappy with increasing Chinese engagement in
Inner Asia and the Caucasus, but unable to counter. Differences over priorities lie just beneath the surface of the SCO and in general the power balance is perceived to be moving to China’s advantage and Russia’s detriment (Mikheev, 2005). Russia’s strategic convergence with China is both a reality and a necessity. But it does not provide an alternative point of geopolitical orientation for the Russian Federation, or a reliable counterweight to the West (Brækhus, 2007).

Russia’s interests in the new Eurasia are a logical product of the state’s history, geography, and cultural orientation. In the post-Soviet period, lacking reliable allies or firm allegiances either East or West, Moscow has sought to defend these interests by binding its neighbors to new kinds of centralized authority structures, redefining the area as a kind of chasse gardée capable of serving as the basis for a more independent exercise of power on the global stage (Trenin, 2011). Strategic competition with the West has been a predictable consequence. This is a competition that Russia cannot hope to win, not so much due to Western push back as to the tenacious commitment to the exercise of sovereignty on the part of her Eurasian neighbors. And the enterprise will not be risk free. The Caucasus and Central Asia in particular are volatile regions subject to bouts of destabilization. So long as Russia remains without a fixed geopolitical anchor, such as only full association with the West can realistically provide, Eurasia will function as a geopolitical shatterbelt, fragile socially and politically, contested by external actors, subject to periodic crises, and a barrier to efforts to broaden accommodation with the U.S.

5. Sources of discord: security and world order

The U.S.–Russian reset agenda has been built around a series of tactical gambits intended to alter the tone of interaction and define practical measures to address discrete issues of mutual concern. The work program has been more or less indifferent to larger world order considerations (The White House, 2010). Nonetheless such issues, including the altered configuration of power in the post-Cold War international system, the impact of globalization, and the changing nature of international security, have become critical determinants of the U.S.–Russian relationship.

Russian elites, and the Russian public at large, continue to resist what is often described as Western triumphalism over the outcome of the Cold War. According to this narrative after 1991 a defeated and humiliated Russia was pushed to the margin while the “sole remaining superpower”, intervening at will and indifferent to the most basic Russian national interests went about the business of reshaping the world to its own advantage (Utkin, 2002). The sharply etched anti-Americanism that has become a “mainstream of Russian politics and culture” is one consequence of such perceptions (Laqueur, 2010). Another consequence is the commitment on the part of the Russian leadership to reestablish Russia’s centuries old great power tradition by asserting national prerogatives more forcefully. The goals are closely related: “when Putin says ‘national strength’, suggests Victor Loupan, “the Russians hear ‘national dignity’” (Loupan, 2000). As “a world power with regional ambitions and interests” the Russian Federation has been particularly focused on issues in Europe and Eurasia, but it claims the whole world as a stage. Putin’s credibility and remarkable durability as an elected leader derives in some measure from the conviction that he has been successful in reasserting national pride and reestablishing Russia’s stature as a great power.

Washington has been unwilling to countenance Russia’s ambitions, considered unrealistic and contrary to U.S. interests. America’s preferred image of a transformed Russian Federation according to Russian analysts is that of a country which has been humbled by its defeat in the Cold War, subordinated to Western direction, and reduced to the second tier of world powers (Konyshyev and Sergunin, 2011). The frictions that have plagued US-Russian relations since 1991 emerge in some measure from these contrasting images of status, capacity and resolve. Conflicting world views and perceptions of national values and interests give Russian–American competition a powerful emotional grounding, a problem that the reset agenda is not designed to address and is not capable of addressing.

Russian foreign policy discourse promotes the image of a multi-polar or polycentric world order, sometimes compared to the Concert of Europe established at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, where a small group of self-selected great powers cooperate to shape global trends in their collective interest. Russia’s aspiration to assume its rightful place at the table of global governance is perceived to depend upon its ability to recreate its historical role as the political core of Eurasia, revitalize its economy through comprehensive modernization, and defend its interests abroad. Its leaders want Russia to remain as an independent power center with a coherent national strategic outlook not subject to outside direction. These commitments make effective cooperation dif

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> Russian foreign policy discourse promotes the image of a multi-polar or polycentric world order, sometimes compared to the Concert of Europe established at the Congress of Vienna in 1815, where a small group of self-selected great powers cooperate to shape global trends in their collective interest. Russia’s aspiration to assume its rightful place at the table of global governance is perceived to depend upon its ability to recreate its historical role as the political core of Eurasia, revitalize its economy through comprehensive modernization, and defend its interests abroad. Its leaders want Russia to remain as an independent power center with a coherent national strategic outlook not subject to outside direction. These commitments make effective cooperation difficult to achieve. The issue of Iran is a case in point. Counter-proliferation, considered as a matter of mutual concern where Russian–American coordination is required to achieve results, should be a pillar of the reset agenda. Neither Washington nor Moscow has any desire to see the emergence of a nuclear Iran. But Russia has conflicting interests at stake, many of which are related to its larger agenda for national revival, that complicate the picture. These include economic advantage, pride and reputation, and the desire to thwart what are still understood as the U.S.’s hegemonic regional aspirations. Conflicting motives lead to contradictory policies that give the Iranian leadership room for maneuver and frustrate Western intent (Vakil, 2006). In practice working with the Russians on an issue of shared concern comes to resemble a cat and mouse game that generates little positive advantage but considerable distrust and ill-will.

> Even in cases where Russian and American strategic priorities seem to be aligned, friction plagues the relationship and makes effective cooperation difficult to achieve. The issue of Iran is a case in point. Counter-proliferation, considered as a matter of mutual concern where Russian–American coordination is required to achieve results, should be a pillar of the reset agenda. Neither Washington nor Moscow has any desire to see the emergence of a nuclear Iran. But Russia has conflicting interests at stake, many of which are related to its larger agenda for national revival, that complicate the picture. These include economic advantage, pride and reputation, and the desire to thwart what are still understood as the U.S.’s hegemonic regional aspirations. Conflicting motives lead to contradictory policies that give the Iranian leadership room for maneuver and frustrate Western intent (Vakil, 2006). In practice working with the Russians on an issue of shared concern comes to resemble a cat and mouse game that generates little positive advantage but considerable distrust and ill-will.

> The same kind of complicated dynamics apply to Russian policy toward Afghanistan, where a shared commitment to resist a return to power by the Taliban is balanced by a desire for eventual U.S. disengagement, or toward the Arab Awakening.
where Russia should have no particular stake in the fate of various and sundry Arab dictators, but looks warily upon Western intervention (Blank and Saivetz, 2011). The cases of Libya and Syria have provided the most recent examples of divergent priorities. In March 2011 Russia opted not to veto UN Security Council Resolution 1973 sanctioning a “no-fly zone” with the purported intent to prevent an assault by the forces of Muammar Qaddafi against the civilian population of Benghazi. The decision was contested at the highest level when Prime Minister Putin went on record mocking intervention in Libya as akin to “medieval calls for crusades”, a position that was immediately refuted an “unacceptable” by President Medvedev (Putin Compares Libya Resolution to Crusade Call, 2011; Levy and Shanker, 2011). Soon however Moscow was expressing unqualified opposition to what had become a protracted, NATO-led military campaign bent upon bringing Qaddafi down. The eventual fall of the dictator in September, and his subsequent capture and brutal murder, seemed to reinforce all its concerns – Russia was deprived of an attractive commercial partner and once again confronted with the spectacle of Western military intervention facilitating regime change with open ended consequences (Felgenhauer, 2011). In the case of Bashar al-Assad’s violent repression of dissent in Syria, Moscow has consistently refused to cooperate with plans for external intervention, a policy characterized as “despicable” by Secretary Clinton (Clinton Blasts Russia, China on Syria, 2012). Moscow’s motivations in the Syrian conflict are complex, but undoubtedly include a healthy dose of skepticism about U.S. motives and their implications for Russia – skepticism that does not bode well for the future of U.S.-Russian relations (Lukyanov, 2012).

So long as the Russian leadership clings to a paradigm for national revival that identifies malevolent intent on the part of the U.S. and its allies as a primary challenge, and the U.S. leadership to a strategic vision that proclaims “the entire planet … as a zone of US vital interests” and resists Russian efforts to reassert its traditional role as Ordnungsmacht in Eurasia, it will be difficult for the reset agenda to progress beyond the modest tactical adjustments that have been achieved to date (Lukyanov, 2009). Antagonistic strategic visions grounded in contrasting images of world order impose structural barriers to a more profound U.S.-Russian détente.

6. Conclusion

The concept that has inspired the Russian–American reset agenda remains valid. Through 2008 relations had deteriorated to a dangerous extent. The two countries are not at odds over matters of vital concern, and have many goals in common. The commitment to establish more businesslike relations and expand cooperation in areas of mutual interest was an appropriate corrective that has brought positive results. Russia is a difficult partner but there is no need to assume inevitable hostility. “Does it really serve the West’s long-term interests”, asks Daniel Treisman, “to assume some unproven imperial agenda, to exaggerate the authoritarian features of the current regime, to demonize those in the Kremlin and romanticize its liberal opponents, to identify progress toward democracy with revolution, to jump to the defense of Russia’s international adversaries before the facts are clear” (Treisman, 2011)?

Despite its accomplishments the reset is far from secure. Since 1991 the Russian Federation and the U.S. have moved through a numbers of cycles where phases of rapprochement have given way to a deterioration of relations and intensified strategic competition. The reset agenda has been “limited and inherently unstable”, and at present the momentum of progress has stalled (Cohen, 2011). In critical areas such as democratization and respect for human rights, arms control, counter proliferation, energy security, and regional stability, conflict has become more pronounced. The change in atmosphere and tactical adjustments upon which the agenda for resetting was constructed has not been sufficient to overcome the more profound structural sources of U.S.–Russian rivalry (Mattox, 2011). This study identifies four such sources of discord: divergent patterns of domestic governance including political and strategic culture, persistent strategic rivalry, differences over the premises of regional order in the new Eurasia, and contrasting visions of world order. If the reset agenda is to lead forward to a more substantial redefinition of the Russian–American relationship, and of Russia’s place in the 21st century global community, these underlying sources of enmity will need to be dismantled.

The best way forward would place responsibilities on both parties that neither seems prepared to accept. Russia’s fixation on status and “greatness” does not correspond to its really existing potential. The country needs to prioritize domestic challenges on the basis of a long term agenda for deep modernization. Modernization will go forward in some shape or form, but under Putin Russia is unlikely to temper its international ambitions. Asked during an October 2011 interview in which he sought to justify the decision to seek a third presidential term, if he should be considered a “hawk”, the Russian Prime Minister replied, cleverly and revealingly, that “the hawk is a fine little bird” (iastreb-khoroshaia ptichka) (Putin podgotovil grazhdan k smeni vlasti, 2011).

The U.S. and its Western allies would ideally move beyond the limited goals of the reset as originally defined towards a strategy of more comprehensive engagement designed to institutionalize Russia’s status as a full fledged member of the Western security community. It is not difficult to define a practical agenda for bringing Russia closer to the NATO alliance. A study prepared by the London-based International Institute for Security Studies and the Moscow-based Institute for Contemporary Development recommends the development of a joint U.S.–Russian Strategic Concept to serve as the foundation for a series of enhanced confidence building measures addressing areas of shared interest that would make Russia a functioning associate of the Alliance without requiring the extension of an Article Five commitment or the surrender by Moscow of sovereignty over national security policy (Towards a NATO-Russian Strategic Concept, 2010). Medvedev’s proposal for a new Eurasian security architecture could be taken up by the NATO–Russian Council, or “an enhanced NATO-Russian Council incorporating selective cooperative elements of the Russian proposed security organization” (Mattox, 2011). Best would be the most unambiguous choice – a Membership Action Plan for Russia pointing toward full membership in the
Alliance when the conditions for association have been met. Such initiatives would require the revaluation of powerful vested interests, as well as a degree of coherence in Western attitudes and policy toward Russia that is not in place, and not likely to be put in place. It would also require an acceptance of more tempered ambitions that Moscow does not seem prepared to countenance. Bringing Russia into the Alliance would require a degree of strategic vision, political coherence, and willingness to accept risk, that is not likely to emerge from the divided polities on either side of the new East-West divide, preoccupied with distinct, but in comparable ways nearly intractable domestic concerns.

Muddling through with the limited initiatives of the reset agenda, in the hope that major dislocations will not once again throw the Russian–American relationship off the rails, is probably the best that can be hoped for. The current phase of U.S.–Russian détente has not exhausted its potential, but determined, creative, and flexible diplomacy and statesmanship will be required if it is to be sustained.

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