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Failed reset of American-Russian relations?

When the White House announced on August 7, 2013 that the meeting between President Barack Obama and Russia's leader Vladimir Putin would be cancelled, commentators and analysts responded quite unambiguously. They saw the cancellation as evidence of a complete collapse in US-Russian relations throwing the players back to nearly cold-war-era standards of mutual relations. Without a doubt, the crisis brought about by the US analyst Edward Snowden, an employee of the National Security Agency who leaked information on Internet surveillance by US intelligence agencies and who secured a temporary asylum in Russia after he had stayed there illegally for over a month, could spell a fiasco for the American policy on Moscow launched with the widely-publicized reset in mutual relations.

When Vice-President Joseph Biden first made his cleverly-worded reference to a "reset" in relations with Moscow in the early February 2009, his words were generally accepted as a true course of American policy. The expectations were soon confirmed by, among others, a certain familiarity observed between Obama and the then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev. Further evidence came from the White House with its decision, made as early as September 2009, to terminate the agreement with Poland concluded by the George W. Bush administration and consequently abandon plans to deploy a missile defense system, which Moscow had vehemently opposed. The new missile shield designed to take its place, with Poland's role significantly reduced, was definitely an attempt to placate Russia.

Such friendly tone of the American policy towards Moscow was in line with a confidential conversation between Obama and Medvedev in March 2012 during which the US President announced, under his breath, that once he would be successfully reelected, he would have “more flexibility” on the missile defense shield, suggesting willingness on the part of the old/new president to resolve the missile defense controversy to Russia's advantage. “On all these issues, but particularly missile defense ... this can be resolved but it's important that he [Putin] give me space”, continued Obama leaving no doubt as to his true intentions.

On the other hand, the reset in relations with Russia led to the adoption in the late 2009 of the new START treaty which substantially reduced nuclear stockpiles in America and Russia. The United States wanted Russia to allow it to continue to use its (post-Soviet) land and air space to ship supplies to its Western allies in Afghanistan. Such logistical support was a nearly *sine qua non* condition for the success of the joint NATO and American mission in the Hindu Kush area. Russia's indirect consent to a military intervention in Libya by NATO forces during the Arab Spring of 2011 given, similarly as by China, by refraining from a veto in the Security Council (Russia only abstained from the vote), suggested that the reset was actually paying off.

Matters whose resolution would be significantly more difficult without Moscow's support included the blocking of the Iranian and North Korean nuclear programs and resolving the Middle Eastern conflict. Last but not least came the Syrian problem. Russia's stance on these major international issues has been crucial as its headstrong veto in the Security Council and persistent support for the Bashar al-Assad regime has kept the hands of the United States and Western countries tied over the last two years. Therefore, an agreement with Russia appeared to be worth its while at least for the sake of resolving these global and regional issues.

With such views prevailing in Washington, Obama's first term of office in the White House ended up being focused on resetting relations with Russia. The US proceeded with varying success, notably at the expense of relations with certain countries of Central and Eastern Europe which felt ever more acutely they were being marginalized by the Obama Administration. While, admittedly, the capitals of post-Soviet Europe, and particularly Warsaw, overestimated their strengths and positions vis-à-vis the US, there was no denying that the US diplomacy has lost much of its interest in that part of the European continent. This triggered understandable criticism and demonstrated that President Obama and his associates have elevated Russia to the rank of a priority state at the expense of the interests of Poland and other countries in the region.



Should therefore the present collapse of American-Russian relations be seen as auspicious for the positions of Central and Eastern European countries in Washington? Could it bring about a shift in American foreign policy? Are any such issues worth discussing?

While the immediate reason for canceling the meeting between the Russian and American leaders were the disclosures by the former National Security Agency employee, a number of other factors have also played a part. Not least the personal relation between Obama and Putin, who has since reclaimed his office as Russia's President. The relationship has deteriorated for a number of reasons, some of them possibly psychological. What lacked in Obama's relations with Putin was the kind of emotional bond that had been observed between Obama and Medvedev. The bond underpinned the success achieved in resetting relations during Obama's first term as President. Yet, to make things harder, Putin turned out to be a much more difficult partner, partly because he is set on maintaining a domestic image as a tough and unyielding leader. Such an image is the mainstay of Putin's position and significance in his country. On top of this, Russia's President must be well aware of the strained global role and position of the US and the weakened grip on the country by President Obama who clearly had a problem with decision making. All of this undermined confidence in America's effectiveness.

Such developments have contributed to a stalemate in talks on further nuclear arsenals reductions as well as to Putin's stubborn support for the Assad regime and his blocking of all attempts to have Assad condemned by the United Nations. Putin's Russia has clearly presented itself as an international player equally important as the United States and one to be reckoned with, as it egoistically pursued its interests with little regard for the international community. The wheel has come full circle in Washington which is and will be forced to consider such circumstances. This is because, as mentioned earlier, Russia is the main interlocutor of the United States in debates of critical importance for America and the world. Regardless of the symbolism of such political gestures as the summit cancellation or the distance left between the leader of Russia and President Obama at the G20 table, the United States must continue its talks with Russia. Although differences of opinion between Moscow and Washington on such important and topical matters as Syria are very sharp and fundamental, they do not blight the prospects for achieving a consensus on this and other global issues.

Thus, no major shifts in US foreign policy priorities are to be expected. The summit cancellation was more of a show designed to demonstrate to the American and world public that President Obama is capable of responding decisively rather than an indication of the actual shape of American-Russian relations or an insight into the overall US policy. This was



in fact confirmed by Putin and Obama who, after all, ended up holding an informal meeting during the G20 summit in Saint Petersburg. Obama has no other choice but to engage in dialogue with Russia if he is to pursue his goal of “world without nuclear weapons”, as declared in a Prague speech on April 2009, or at least succeed in reducing the number of nuclear missiles by 1/3, as announced in Berlin on June 19, 2013. On the other hand, Putin's response to President Obama's proposal to reduce nuclear arsenals was far from enthusiastic not to say negative. Russians have also failed to present any disarmament plan of their own. Nevertheless, as claimed by American experts, the White House has left its door open to negotiations in the hopes that Moscow would take it up on its offer allowing Obama to go down in the annals of history as a President committed to building “a world without nuclear weapons”.

The developments in Syria show that Russia not only should but is actually likely to play a constructive role in overcoming the crisis. Whether it does indeed resolve this major problem effectively and credibly remains to be seen in the near future. Many see Russia's offer to place Syria's weapons of mass destruction under international control as an acid test of Russia's true intentions. Should this indeed take place, which cannot be ruled out despite all the misgivings, and should the Syrian crisis be resolved, the door to further talks and agreements with Russia will open much wider. This, in turn, would make the parties return to constructive dialogue and continue resetting their relations. Such a possibility is in fact very real.

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