American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research

Summer 2009

Russian Outlook

The Button and the Bear

By Leon Aron

The metaphor of a "reset button" in U.S.-Russian relations, first used by Vice President Joe Biden and then by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, has come to symbolize the Obama administration's desire to win Russia's cooperation on matters of great importance to the United States. Missing so far from the public debate has been the matter of this agenda's compatibility with Russia's national interests as understood and defined by the Putin-Medvedev government. The evolution of Russian behavior in the past quarter-century and especially in the last eight years strongly suggests that the Kremlin's ideology and its domestic political goals matter crucially where Russia's foreign policy is concerned and could impose significant limits on and modifications or even reversals of the agenda that the "reset button" is to activate.

Definitions of national interests (and, thus, of security and foreign policies that defend and advance them) are generally shaped by the leaders' visions of how their nations should live and what they should strive for; by memories of past humiliations and triumphs; by fear and pride, anger and prejudice; and by considerations of legitimacy and popularity—in short, by values, ideologies, and domestic political needs. This is true of every country, yet the Soviet Union and Russia in the last quarter-century provide an especially stark example of a great power whose foreign policy objectives and conduct are closely aligned with its domestic ideological and political evolution.

In 1985, when Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, all the key elements of the Soviet Union's geopolitical and national security environments were the same as they were in 1983–84 under Yuri Andropov and Konstantin Chernenko: the same number of warheads, missiles, and tanks; the same iron grip on the domestic and central-east European empire; and the same main adversary, the Reagan White House. Yet, within a few years, an ideological overhaul and domestic liberalization led to several unprecedented agreements on nuclear and conventional arms, the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, the abandonment of the central-east European empire, and support for the first U.S.-led Gulf War in early 1991.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the revolutionary Russia withdrew 1.2 million troops and civilian personnel from central-east Europe in 1992–95, surrendering the lands acquired in two-and-a-half centuries of imperial expansion. Russia's voluntary disarmament was unprecedented for a great power undefeated in war and unoccupied by victors. It included the reduction of its nuclear

Key points in this *Outlook*:

- The United States wants to hit the "reset button" in its relations with Russia.
- The prospects for the items on the agenda, however, are mixed at best.
- Since 2000, three phases of the regime's ideological and political evolution have coincided with three distinct changes in Russia's external behavior.
- Better relations or renewed partnership will have to wait for an ideological and political evolution in Moscow.

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arsenal from 10,000 deployable strategic warheads in 1991 to 4,500 in 1999; a sharp decline in funding for the military-industrial complex from at least 25 percent of GDP to under 5 percent; and a reduction of the armed forces from 2.7 million in 1992 to 1.2 million in 1998. At the request of the United States, Russia stopped conventional arms sales to Iran by the summer of 1995. In December 1991, Russia became the first nation to recognize the fully sovereign independent Ukrainian state, and in 1997, Moscow reaffirmed the recognition by a Treaty of Friendship and major territorial concessions, including Ukrainian sovereignty over the Crimea and Black Sea Navy bases. Russia signed the NATO-Russia Founding Act; voted in the United Nations (UN) for the sanctions against Saddam Hussein's Iraq; and in 1999, after much soul-searching and strong opposition to the NATO war on "brother Slavs," withdrew support from Serbia, a move "critical" to ending the NATO-Serbia conflict over Kosovo and the withdrawal of Serbian troops from the breakaway province of former Yugoslavia.[1]

2000–2003: Reforms and Cooperation

Since 2000, at least three phases of the regime's domestic ideological and political evolution[2] have coincided with equally distinct changes in Russia's external behavior in general and in its policy toward the United States in particular. The changes were all the more noteworthy for the fact that they took place while the same U.S. administration, that of George W. Bush, was in the White House.[3]

Between early 2000 and the fall of 2003, the Putin Kremlin generally continued the core policies of the 1990s, including continuing privatization of the economy; bold liberal reforms in taxation and labor laws; the adoption of the progressive Criminal Procedural Code, which championed defendants' rights and judges' independence; and a civil code that legalized the buying and selling of urban land. Although the state control of the media began to grow significantly with the government's acquisition of the majority-ownership of the most popular television channel, ORT, and Gazprom's takeover of the NTV channel, it was still possible for the political opposition, parties, and movements—which remained effective in national, regional, and local politics—to get their views across.

In foreign policy, Russia accepted, reluctantly but calmly, the U.S. exit from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and signed a treaty committing both countries to the sharpest reduction of their nuclear arsenals in history to less than half of the number of warheads each side possessed. The 2002 treaty was negotiated in slightly over a year and took two pages of paper instead of the customary hundreds. On September 11, 2001, President Vladimir Putin was the first foreign leader to call President Bush with condolences. Russia readily granted permission for U.S. and NATO planes to fly over Russian airspace on the way to Afghanistan. Moscow shared Russia's vast intelligence sources in Afghanistan and the links to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance; closed the Lourdes military complex in Cuba, which had been its largest military base and listening post in the Western Hemisphere; and shut down the eavesdropping post and naval base in Vietnam's Cam Ranh Bay. This rapprochement, unprecedented since World War II, included the first visit by a Soviet or Russian leader to a U.S. president's home when Putin stayed at then-president Bush's Crawford ranch on November 14–15, 2001.

2003–2007: Recentralization and a "Besieged Fortress" Russia

The next phase of the Kremlin's domestic political evolution, between 2003 and 2007, brought about recentralization of the country's politics and economy. Putin used the tragedy of Beslan in September 2004 (when 334 civilians, 186 of them children, were killed in an attempt to free hostages taken by Chechnya-based terrorists) to push through the abolition of the direct election of regional governors, who henceforth would be appointed by the Kremlin. The highly imperfect but real division of power among the executive branch, the legislature, and the courts was gradually replaced by "sovereign democracy" and "the vertical of power": an inchoate authoritarianism with nationalistic and isolationist overtones. By 2007, there were an estimated 6,000 former KGB officers in the top and middle ranks of the Russian government.[4]

An equally concerted effort was underway in the economy to repossess and control what Lenin used to call the "commanding heights." Some of the key firms in the most profitable segments of the economy—especially oil, gas, and metals—were brought under state control through aggressive acquisition by state-owned companies, while the principal shareholders of others were made to understand that their firms' independent existence (and their personal liberty) was provisional and dependent on the degree of "cooperation" with the Kremlin in matters political and economic. Those who refused to understand

were in danger of raids by tax police, unfair trials, or forced emigration.

The concomitant shift in the values and perception that informed Russia's foreign policy agenda was just as pronounced and went far beyond the negative reaction to the U.S. invasion of Iraq. A Russia beset by external enemies, bent on undermining its "territorial integrity" and "sovereignty" and seeking to claim its natural wealth, was becoming an article of faith and a key propaganda theme. In the same post-Beslan address to the nation in which he announced the abolition of the gubernatorial elections, Putin averred that the Islamic terrorists were but a tool in the hands of those who wanted "to tear a juicy piece out" of Russia and who saw Russia as "a threat" that "must be eliminated."[5] Three weeks later, the Kremlin's main ideologist and a deputy head of the presidential administration, Vladislav Surkov, developed his boss's themes by declaring Russia a "de facto besieged country" and accusing "those who consider the non-violent collapse of the Soviet Union [to be] their success" of trying to annihilate "Russia's statehood" by "detonating our southern borders."[6]

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The abstractions of "Western civilization," "democracy," "human rights," and Russia's integration into the "civilized world" of Western institutions were no longer accepted even as concepts, much less goals. Now they were decried as shameful artifacts of the "weakness" and "chaos" of the revolutionary 1990s. In his 2005 annual address to the National Assembly, Putin declared the demise of the Soviet Union "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century."[7]

A New Agenda

The agenda and conduct of Russia's foreign policy fully reflected this ideological shift. Russia was "rising off its knees," in the ubiquitous propaganda cliché, and the regime's myriad paid propagandists began to emphasize the unbridgeable and expanding chasm between this resurgent Russia and the "West," especially the United States. Across virtually the entire U.S.-Russian strategic agenda—energy security, nuclear nonproliferation, the global war on terrorism, the containment of a rapidly rearming and authoritarian China, and Russia's integration in the world economy—partnership was increasingly replaced with indifference, rigidity, and truculence. In Iran, which was becoming a grave national security concern for the United States, Russia continued the construction of the nuclear power plant in Bushehr and upped dramatically both the quantity and quality of its arms sales to Iran, including tanks and fighter jets.

2007–2009: Authoritarianism and Anti-Americanism

During the third stage of Russia's recent political evolution, there emerged a fully authoritarian state in which the executive branch's control over national politics, justice, and economic policy became unchallenged. The merger of political power and property reached a level unprecedented even in Russia's patrimonial political culture. The censorship of television, from which most Russians get their news, was consolidated to prevent any uncomfortable truths or critical views from reaching viewers. Top opposition politicians and analysts were banned from television screens.

Speaking in November 2007 at a midday rally at Moscow's largest stadium, Putin (by then hailed as the "national leader" by the leading politicians and subservient media) compared the democratic opposition to jackals "looking for crumbs near foreign embassies."[8] The government stoked spymania, whether involving alleged scientific, military, or industrial espionage. In the words of academician Yuri Ryzhov, the Putin Kremlin borrowed wholesale from Soviet propaganda themes and implemented them successfully: the country is in a hostile encirclement, every foreigner is an enemy and a spy, and internal "enemies" (opposition voices) are traitors.[9] As leading liberal political essayist Leonid Radzikhovsky pointed out, along with the boom in oil prices and a narrow, self-selecting *nomenklatura* (although in this iteration composed largely of KGB officers instead of party functionaries), the regime had revived and consistently enforced many of the key elements of the 1970s Soviet sensibility: the bunker mentality, anti-American hysteria, crude nationalist bragging, utter cynicism as a

moral norm, fear, propaganda, and profits from the oil exports as the mainstay of state revenues.[10]

Munich and Beyond

This grievance-based public political culture, assiduously fashioned and fueled by the Kremlin—a culture of loss, wounded pride, frustrated hopes, imperial nostalgia, and perennial vigilance—coincided with a foreign policy of resentment, defiance, and retribution. It was heralded by Putin's ferocious attack on the United States at an international conference in Munich in February 2007. A year later, Russia's deputy chief of staff, Colonel General Anatoly Nogovitsyn, announced that Russia might have to retarget some of its nuclear missiles at the missile defense sites the United States planned to deploy in the Czech Republic (a radar installation) and in Poland (ten missile interceptors).[11] Designed to protect Europe from Iranian missiles (and not to be made operational before Iran had them), this scrawny defensive outfit with a very uncertain future was suddenly imbued by Moscow with near-catastrophic premonitions.

Until then, while railing at the score, Russia had not sought to change the rules of the game. Now it was becoming what is known in international relations as a "revisionist power," acutely unhappy with some key elements of the security arrangements and institutional structures that marked the end of the Cold War: the 1987 intermediate missile force agreement, the 1990 treaty on conventional forces in Europe, NATO, and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. "We have approached the watershed moment," Putin said in Munich, "when we have to think seriously about the entire architecture of global security."[12] Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov later added that Moscow intended to "clear out" the offending European institutions, or, as a Russian news agency put his words, to "break up the old system of international security."[13]

The recovery of the Soviet Union's geopolitical assets emerged as the central, overarching objective of Russian economic, security, and foreign policies. Two of these assets were designated as the most important. The first is parity with the United States: geopolitical, diplomatic, military, and even economic. (At the height of the oil prices boom, Russia promoted the idea of the ruble as the world's other reserve currency.) Russia must matter to the United States, be noticed by it, be as close as possible to the center of its attention and preoccupation. In the words of Dmitri Trenin, one of Russia's most astute and objective foreign policy and security experts, "The most important thing [for Russia] is status. The most important thing is which place at the nations' table you occupy. And that is why there is a most powerful desire to preserve some sort of equal relations with the United States."[14] At the same time, Russia's relations with the United States came to be viewed as a zero-sum game in which Russia loses every time U.S. interests are advanced and vice versa.

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The other fundamental preoccupation of Russian foreign policy is economic, political, and military preeminence in the territory of the former Soviet Union. This superiority is to be translated into an effective veto over those foreign policy, economic, and security choices by the states in the region that the present regime in the Kremlin deems detrimental to its interests: membership in the West's political and military institutions and economic ties that might interfere with Moscow's key sources of revenue, such as the export of oil and gas. When last August, for the first time in post-Soviet history, Russian combat troops and tanks crossed the border of a newly independent state after pro-American Georgia tried recklessly to reassert its sovereignty over the breakaway region of South Ossetia by military means, President Dmitri Medvedev declared the post-Soviet space a "zone of [Russia's] privileged interests" and vowed that Moscow would not "tolerate any longer" post-Soviet states' decisions to join NATO.[15]

Anti-American Propaganda

The Kremlin's valiant defense of Russia against alleged plots from the outside evolved into one of the key legitimizing tools of the regime, and deafening and primitive anti-American propaganda became the staple of the state-owned or state-controlled national media. In the words of a Russian observer, the United States is "used as a bogeyman for domestic political purposes."[16] Presiding over the May 2007 military parade to mark the sixty-second anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War (World War II), Putin likened the unnamed perpetrators

of "new threats" to Russia to the Third Reich because of "the same desire to impose *diktat* on the world."[17] Everyone in Moscow that day understood the evildoer to be the United States.

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Since then, the United States has been alleged by Kremlin-directed propaganda to be behind virtually all of Russia's political, diplomatic, military, and economic setbacks: from the demise of the Soviet Union and the Chechen struggle for independence in the 1990s to the Georgian and Ukrainian "color" revolutions of 2003 and 2004, and Russia's current economic crisis, which Medvedev declared in June 2008 to be the fault of America's "aggressive financial policies."[18] The Russo-Georgian war in August of last year, too, was blamed on the United States. In Putin's words, the United States "deliberately created this conflict to create a competitive advantage for one of the candidates for the U.S. presidency" (i.e., Senator John McCain) and to help solve "the problems in the [U.S.] economy," including "financial problems" and the "mortgage crisis."[19] Every one of these canards was buttressed by prime time "documentaries" on national television channels, including one about the U.S. government engineering the 9/11 attacks to promote its domestic and foreign policy objectives and one about the CIA's plot to dislodge the present Russian regime through an "Orange-style revolution."[20]

It is a foreign policy arising from this domestic context that the "reset button" pressed by the White House seeks to mesh successfully with the U.S. strategic agenda. Of course, nothing in the evolutions of postrevolutionary states like Russia is automatic. For instance, to take the most obvious case of discontinuity, Russia's deepening economic crisis may bring about abrupt domestic policy shifts, which, in turn, are almost certain to prompt adjustments in foreign policy, making it more accommodating—or still more confrontational and unyielding.[21] At the moment, however, this evolution and this context are our best guide to gauging Russia's response to the "button agenda."

Iran: The Benefits of the Status Quo

Russia is undoubtedly sincere when it says that it finds the prospect of a nuclear-armed Iran very troubling. Yet policymaking is about choices, and in the Kremlin's strategic calculus, the benefits of opposing the United States on the Iranian issue thus far have outweighed this concern significantly, making progress on the issues of vital importance to the United States unlikely.

Fraught though it is with obvious risks, the status quo appears to be very much in Russia's national interests as they are perceived by the present regime. To begin, Iran provides Moscow with an opportunity for reentry as a key player in a vitally important region in which the Soviet Union used to compete intensely with the United States, enabling the recovery of an important asset lost in the Soviet Union's demise. Every time Russia uses its influence to stymie stronger, U.S.-sponsored sanctions in the UN Security Council or is courted by the United States in pursuit of the resolution of the Iranian crisis, another central objective of Russia's foreign policy—parity with the United States—becomes reality. In the zero-sum calculus, which has been the hallmark of the Putin foreign policy vis-à-vis the United States, setbacks for the United States (and of the pro-American Sunni Arab states in the region) are *ipso facto* gains for Moscow. In the words of a Russian expert, Iran presents Moscow with "a unique and historic chance to return to the world arena once again as a . . . global superpower. . . . If Russia firmly stands by Iran in this conflict with the United States, Russia will immediately regain its lost prestige in the Muslim world and the global arena at large . . . and no lucrative proposals from the United States [to Russia] can change this situation strategically."[22] The risks of a policy that benefits Shiite Iran but damages Russian relations with the Sunni majority in the Arab Middle East (with perhaps the sole exception of Syria) apparently are judged acceptable by the Putin Kremlin, which, like most restorationist regimes, does not seem to be interested in longer-term consequences.

The economic benefits, although secondary to geopolitical ones, are very significant. Although the price of oil in the world markets is determined largely by supply and demand, the anticipation by oil traders of potential future shortages matters a great deal. The longer the tension between the United States and Iran continues, the

more Moscow stands to gain from the "risk premium" component of the price, and the more likely the confrontation, the greater the increase. For the world's largest oil exporter, this "surcharge" translates into billions of dollars of additional revenue. Billions more are gained from the sale of nuclear technology and high-tech weapons to Iran, which, in a self-fulfilling prophecy, feels it needs to defend itself from those who find its nuclear ambition unacceptable.

By contrast, an Iran that abandons its nuclear project and, as a result, is rewarded with the lifting of sanctions and the end of isolation—an Iran that is no longer a pariah and is on friendly terms with the United States and the West in general—would deprive Russia of a key source of influence in the world and, especially, in the Middle East. As a prominent Russian analyst put it, such a development "would shift the strategic balance of power in favor of the United States and away from Moscow."[23] No longer threatened by a military strike against its illegal uranium-enrichment facilities, Iran would no longer need to spend prodigiously on Russian weapons. With the conflict between Washington and Tehran subsiding and the supplies of Iranian oil to the world markets secure, Moscow stands to lose even more revenue from the likely decrease in the price of oil.

Economic considerations are even more germane in the case of natural gas, of which Iran holds the world's second largest reserves. So long as U.S. sanctions discourage the Europeans, the Japanese, or the Turks from investing in exploration and pipeline-construction in Iran, Gazprom's position as the single largest supplier of gas to Europe is unchallenged. Conversely, a sharp increase in the flow of Iranian gas to Europe not only is likely to cut into Gazprom's profits but will also make feasible the Nabucco pipeline project, designed to reduce Europe's dependence on Russia's natural gas by importing it from the Caspian region (Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan) through Georgia and Turkey.

Afghanistan: Strategic Ambiguity and Control

Moscow's reaction to the war in Afghanistan, central to the U.S. global war on terrorism, reflects the ambiguity of the Putin-Medvedev regime's strategic interests in the region. On the one hand, Afghanistan is one issue on the "button agenda" that Moscow undoubtedly finds essential to its own security. A Taliban victory in Afghanistan will inevitably lead to a sharp rise in militant Islamic fundamentalism in central Asia and the Russian North Caucasus and might bring with it the lawlessness and terror associated with Chechnya in the 1990s. At the same time, viewing world affairs through the zero-sum lens, a decisive victory by the U.S.-led NATO coalition in Afghanistan would almost certainly be judged by the Kremlin as a net loss, resulting in an enormous boost to U.S. prestige and influence in central Asia and, in Moscow's worst-case scenario, the beginning of the region's strategic realignment away from Russia, perhaps even accompanied by attempts at prodemocracy "color" revolutions and the fall of pro-Moscow authoritarian regimes. Thus, Moscow's long-term preference for Afghanistan appears to be for a stalemate, in which the coalition-supported government controls Kabul and the northwest provinces bordering on central Asia (Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan), while the Taliban is dominant in the southeast, prolonging the war indefinitely, bleeding the U.S. armed forces and its treasury, undermining its stature and sway in the region, and making trouble for the U.S. ally Pakistan.

So far, Moscow's policy has been largely compatible with such an interpretation. It has allowed the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) coalition to ship nonlethal supplies to Afghanistan via the northern (Russian and central Asian) route and recently hinted that it might allow the transportation of troops, weapons, and ammunition as well.[24] At the same time, Russia has used the mounting difficulties of supplying ISAF via Pakistan to send Washington a message: there will be no assistance to ISAF outside Moscow's control. Accordingly, in the middle of a severe and deepening economic crisis, on February 3 of this year, Russia pledged $2.3 billion, ostensibly as an "anticrisis package," to Kyrgyzstan—the largest amount of assistance Russia has granted so far to any of the members of the Moscow-founded Eurasian Economic Community, which includes Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Armenia, and Tajikistan. On the same day, Kyrgyz president Kurmanbek Bakiyev announced his intention to terminate the agreement with the U.S.-led coalition regarding the Manas air base. (Located outside the capital of Bishkek, the 1,000 U.S. troops and much smaller French and Spanish contingents at Manas handle the transport of 15,000 troops and 500 tons of cargo every month to Afghanistan.) Reporting the news, Russian television "jeered" at the "trap" the United States found itself in, the Taliban "jamming" supplies from the south and now the northern supply lines also "compromised."[25]

Arms Control: Fair Wind and Shoals

Signed in Moscow in 1991 by Presidents George H. W. Bush and Mikhail Gorbachev after almost ten years of negotiations, the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I) limited each side to 6,000 strategic nuclear warheads deployed on 1,600 intercontinental land- and submarine-based missiles and strategic bombers. The Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty (SORT), signed by Presidents George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin in Moscow in 2002, committed both sides to reducing their strategic arsenals further to between 2,200 and 1,700 warheads by 2012. Both sides are believed to have already reached the 2,200 mark, yet SORT did not contain its own verification system, relying instead on START's elaborate and intrusive verification procedures to monitor the compliance. With START set to expire in December of this year, Russia insisted on renegotiation, rather than an extension, and the Bush and Obama administrations agreed.

Of the items on the "button agenda," this is the only one that could be said to be greeted with genuine enthusiasm in Moscow because it constitutes a very rare case of genuine parity with the United States. A consensus among the top Russian foreign policy and military experts is that arms control is the "sole sphere" in which Moscow is thus far certain of being equal to Washington—and, for this reason, it is "extremely important psychologically."[26]

Yet, the same all-consuming passion for parity with America that endows the START renegotiation with a greater probability of success than other bilateral dealings is almost certain to make the negotiations neither easy nor short. To begin, the Kremlin will be tempted to extend this rare show of U.S.-Russian equivalence by prolonging negotiations for domestic political benefit, which at all times and under all regimes—Soviet and post-Soviet alike—was bolstered by such parlays. The temptation will be all the harder to resist when the regime struggles to contain the political consequences of a deepening economic crisis. This consideration alone makes one doubt the negotiations' conclusion by the end of this year, as both sides agreed at the Obama-Medvedev meeting in London in April.

On a more substantive level, there are at least two very formidable obstacles to a speedy denouement. The first stems from Russia being hard-pressed to maintain the aging arsenal of delivery vehicles, while new generations of missiles have been very slow to become operational and repeatedly failed in tests, like the Bulava submarine-based intercontinental ballistic missile. For the United States, which is far ahead in modernizing delivery vehicles, they are a very valuable tool in the global war on terrorism. Armed with conventional instead of nuclear warheads, they are capable of striking precisely, quickly, and devastatingly around the world. Leading Russian expert Alexei Arbatov says that the United States' plans to "conventionalize" some of its nuclear weapons delivery systems are "what the Russian military is most worried about."[27] Indeed, the chief Russian negotiator, Sergei Ryabkov, already announced that Russia would be seeking "more than one ceiling," meaning the limits not only on warheads but also on delivery systems: land-based missiles, submarines, and bombers.[28] These vehicles were limited under START but not mentioned in SORT, and while the Obama White House already seems to accept the limits, the Pentagon and its allies in Congress might oppose the "ceiling" on what became known as the U.S. "conventional strategic forces" and thus jeopardize the new treaty's passage in the Senate.

Second, it might be even harder for the United States and Russia to agree on the fraught subject of missile defense. While not formally part of the upcoming negotiations, the U.S. antimissile effort already has been raised by Russia as a potential deal killer because the glaring weakness in the quality and quantity of Russian conventional weapons and troops makes its nuclear force the most reliable deterrent—and its sole claim to superpower status. "Russia's conventional forces are weak and outdated, while Western militaries are in the midst of a military-technical revolution, acquiring new capabilities of precision warfare that the Russians can only dream about," writes Pavel Felgenhauer, a top Russian military expert. "Safeguarding a credible nuclear deterrent is the main strategic goal of Russian military chiefs, diplomats, and political leaders."[29]

Because of the central place of nuclear weapons in Russia's self-image as a great power, Russia's political and military leaders were reported to be deeply suspicious of President Obama's call for nuclear disarmament this past April. A liberal Russian military expert may have exaggerated only slightly, if at all, when he described Moscow's view of the proposal as "an undoubtedly new and perfidious plan to humiliate Russia."[30] For the same reason, Moscow is almost certain to reject an arms-control agreement that cuts the arsenals to below 1,500 warheads under a new treaty.[31]

Thus, anything that sharply devalues Russia's nuclear potential—and a successfully deployed and operational

ballistic missile defense (BMD) would do just that—will be fought tooth and nail. Felgenhauer suggests that Moscow's main objective in the negotiation is not to impose new controls on U.S. offensive nuclear weapons but to thwart and reverse the development of BMD and its global or local deployment.[32] Indeed, in March, Putin said that offensive and defensive capabilities were "inseparably bound up" and that "Russia will, of course, link the issues of missile defense and everything related to it with strategic offensive weapons."[33]

The Post-Soviet States and the Time Bomb of Georgia

There is a glaring disparity between Washington and Moscow regarding the importance of this item on the bilateral agenda. For the United States, democratic evolution, economic progress, and independence of the post-Soviet states is a long-term goal but hardly a front-burner issue. For Russia's present regime, regional superpower status is a daily preoccupation that shapes both the tactics and strategies of Moscow's relations with Washington. The Putin-Medvedev Kremlin perceives democratization in neighboring states as America's Trojan horse and NATO membership as an outright threat to Russia's vital security and economic interests. Speaking this past March to his top generals, defense minister Anatoly Serdyukov described the "political-military situation" in the "regions neighboring on Russia" as "conditioned by the U.S. administration's ambition to attain global leadership, by the expansion and build-up of the military presence of the United States and their NATO allies." The U.S. "aspirations," according to Serdyukov, "were aimed at getting access to the natural, energy, and other resources of the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States, or post-Soviet states] countries. Processes aimed to squeeze Russia out of the area of its traditional interests have been given active support."[34]

To achieve U.S. recognition of the post-Soviet "space" as Russia's sphere of influence (or, in Medvedev's words, "a zone of privileged interests") is Russia's key foreign policy objective. It is an open secret in Moscow, discussed in expert circles and communicated in "confidence" by Russian officials and unofficial emissaries to Washington, that to the extent any "grand bargain" over Iran between the United States and Russia is conceivable, it will have to be a quid pro quo in which Russia goes along with tougher sanctions on Iran (and perhaps the cancellation of the sale of the S-300 long-range surface-to-air missiles to Iran)[35] for a tacit but firm "understanding" from Washington that the United States will not support (and thus will doom) NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia in the foreseeable future. With such an understanding not forthcoming, the compromise between Moscow and Washington regarding the post-Soviet space is not possible, concluded a leading Russian expert.[36]

Worse yet, with Moscow continuing to denounce the Mikheil Saakashvili regime and with no disengagement between Georgian "armed police" and the South Ossetian "military" along the cease-fire line,[37] exchanges of small-arms fire are almost constant and could easily deteriorate into another full-scale war, which would again deeply divide Moscow and Washington and likely scuttle or freeze whatever progress the sides could have made. Russia's recent veto of a U.S. resolution authorizing the continuing presence of nearly 150 UN peacekeepers deployed on Georgia's border with another breakaway province, Abkhazia, will undoubtedly increase the probability of an armed conflict there as well.

Another "Détente"?

As U.S.-Soviet and U.S.-Russian relations in the last quarter-century plainly show, the substance and extent of U.S.-Russian rapprochement depend first and foremost on the ideology of the regime in the Kremlin and its vision of the country's national interests. From what we know today about the present regime's evolution, values, and strategic vision, as well as the domestic context in which Russian foreign policy is made, the prospects for the items on the "button agenda" are mixed at best. Arms control is the best bet, but, in light of substantive disagreements, it could become hostage to the larger interests and agendas of both sides. In Afghanistan, too, Russia is apt to be helpful but only up to a well-defined point. For the moment, then, a score-card rendering of the chances for success would look something like this, with 1 standing for success and 0 lack of any substantive progress: Iran: 0; Afghanistan: 0.5; strategic arms control: 0.7; post-Soviet states: 0.

Anything more ambitious—a significant rapprochement, deepening cooperation, or even renewed partnership—will have to wait for an ideological and political evolution in Moscow. Until then, the best we can hope for is perhaps a limited, 1970s-style "détente." As realistic expectations are the best antidote to disappointments and the sharp swings in policy they usually produce, it might be helpful for the White House to keep this

parallel in mind. Most of all, as Obama travels to the Moscow summit, we need to remember that, no matter how appealing the words, how reasonable the proposals, and how attractive the messenger, in the contest between the "button" of U.S. intentions and the bear of the values, ambitions, and domestic imperatives that shape Russia's foreign policy, the bear always wins.

The author is grateful to AEI research assistant Kara Flook and associate editor Laura Drinkwine for their help in editing and producing this essay.

Notes

1. Ambassador Strobe Talbott, e-mail message to the author, June 12, 2009. See also Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand* (New York: Random House, 2002), 298–349.

2. This, in turn, raises the issue of the causes of the domestic ideological and political evolution of the Putin regime. While central to the larger issue of Russia's post-Soviet evolution, this matter must be passed over here. For the author's attempts to grapple with it, see Leon Aron, "Institutions, Restoration, and Revolution," in *Russia's Revolution* (Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2006), 236–51, available at www.aei.org/book/874; and Leon Aron, "Putin's Risks," in *Russia's Revolution*, 283–96. For a discussion of possible directions of this evolution in light of the economic crisis, see Leon Aron, "'Who Is to Blame' and 'What Is to Be Done'?" *Russian Outlook* (Spring 2009), available at www.aei.org/outlook/100052.

3. See Leon Aron, "Putin-3," *Russian Outlook* (Winter 2008), available at www.aei.org/outlook/27367.

4. Victor Yassman, "Russia: From Silovik Power to a Corporate State," RFE/RL News Analysis, September 25, 2007.

5. Vladimir Putin, "Obprashchenie Prezidenta Rossii Vladimira Putina" [Address of the President of Russia Vladimir Putin] (speech, Moscow, September 4, 2004), available at http://kremlin.ru/appears/2004/09/04/1752_type63374type82634_76320.shtml (accessed June 17, 2009).

6. Vladislav Surkov, interview by Elena Ovcharenko and Larisa Kaftan, *Komsomol'skaya Pravda*, September 28, 2004, available at www.kp.ru/daily/23370/32473/print (accessed June 17, 2009).

7. Vladimir Putin, "Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation" (speech, Moscow, April 25, 2005).

8. Vladimir Putin, "Vystuplenie na forume storonnikov Prezidenta Rossii" [Speech at the Forum of the Supporters of the President of Russia] (speech, Moscow, November 21, 2007).

9. Yuri Ryzhov and Ernst Chyornyi, "Natsional'nyi proekt: 'Dostupnyi shpion'" [The National Project: "Available Spy"], *Novaya gazeta*, March 13, 2009.

10. Leonid Radzikhovsky, "Dvadtsat' let spustya" [Twenty Years Later], *Ezhednevnyi zhurnal*, February 10, 2009.

11. "Russia Could Aim Rockets at European Missile Shield—Putin," Novosti News Agency, February 14, 2008, available at http://en.rian.ru/russia/20080214/99201375.html (accessed June 12, 2009).

12. Vladimir Putin, "Vystuplenie i discussiya na Myunkhenskoy konferentsii po voprosam politiki bezopasnosti" [Speech and Discussion at the Munich Conference on Security Policy] (speech, Munich, February 10, 2007), available at www.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2007/02/118097.shtml (accessed June 17, 2009).

13. "Glava MID Rossii zayavil of neobkhodimoy lomke staroy sistemy mezhdunarodnoy bezopasnosti" [The Head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Stated the Necessity to Break Up the Old System of International Security], *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, November 9, 2007.

14. "Rossiya i SSHA: zachem my nuzhni drug drugu?" [Russia and the USA: Why Do We Need Each Other?] Ekho Moskvy, April 2, 2009, available at www.echo.msk.ru/programs/dozor/582657-echo (accessed June 17, 2009).

15. Dmitri Medvedev, "Interv'yu Dmitriya Medvedeva telekanalam Rossiya, Pervomu, NTV" [The Interview of Dmitri Medvedev to the Television Networks Rossiya, Channel One, and NTV], August 31, 2008, available at http://kremlin.ru/text/appears/2008/08/205991.shtml (accessed June 17, 2009); and Dmitri Medvedev, "Stenographicheskiy otchyot o vstreche s uchastnikami mezhdunarodnogo kluba Valdai" [Transcript of a Meeting with Participants of the International Valdai Club], September 12, 2009, available at http://kremlin.ru/appears/2008/09/12/1518_type63374type63376type63381type82634_206408.shtml (accessed June 17, 2009).

16. Dmitri Trenin, "The Legacy of Vladimir Putin," *Current History* (October 2007): 348.

17. Vladimir Putin, "Vystuplenie na voennom parade v chest' 62 godovshchiny Pobedy v Velikoy Otechestvennoy voyne" [Speech at the Military Parade to Commemorate the Sixty-second Anniversary of the Victory in the Great Patriotic War] (speech, Moscow, May 9, 2007), available through www.kremlin.ru (accessed November 6, 2007).

18. Michael Stott, "Russia Blames U.S. for Global Financial Crisis," Reuters, June 7, 2008.

19. Vladimir Putin, interview by Matthew Chance, CNN, August 28, 2008.

20. Three "documentaries"—"The Caucasus Plan," "Velvet.ru," and "Zero: An Investigation into 9/11"—were aired in prime time on Channel One, Russia's most-watched state-controlled national television channel, on April 22, 2008, September 11, 2008, and September 30, 2008, respectively. The first documentary claimed that the Chechen fight for

independence was orchestrated by the West; the second reported the CIA's conspiracy to overthrow the Kremlin leadership in an "Orange Revolution"; and the third (made by filmmakers from Italy and France but not broadcast anywhere in Europe, including Italy and France) claimed that the U.S. government was behind the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. For more details, see "Russia: Documentary Alleges West Sought Chechen Secession," RFE/RL, April 23, 2008; and Leon Aron, "The Georgia Watershed," *Russian Outlook* (Fall 2008), available at www.aei.org/outlook/28922.

21. For directions and scenarios of domestic liberalizations, see Leon Aron, "'Who Is to Blame' and 'What Is to Be Done'?"

22. Radzhab Safarov, director of the Iranian Studies Center in Moscow, as quoted in Alissa J. Rubin and Kim Murphy, "Russian Bridge to Iran Has Twists," *Los Angeles Times*, May 4, 2006.

23. Fyodor Lukyanov, "High Stakes for Moscow in U.S. Play for Iran," moscowtimes.com, April 15, 2009.

24. Sergei Lavrov (speech, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC, May 7, 2009), quoted in "Russian Foreign Minister: How to Reset the Relationship," Carnegie E-news, May 7, 2009.

25. Quoted in Pavel Felgenhauer, "A CSTO Rapid-Reaction Force Created as a NATO Counterweight," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, February 5, 2009.

26. "Rossiya i SSHA: zachem my nuzhni drug drugu?" See also Alexander Golts, "Zamakhnulsya na svyatoe" [Besmirched the Sacred], *Ezhednevnyi zhurnal*, April 6, 2009; Fyodor Lukyanov, "Razum vmesto chuvsva" [Intellect Instead of Emotions], Gazeta.ru, April 2, 2009; and Fyodor Lukyanov, "Opasnost' peregruzki" [The Danger of Overloading], Gazeta.ru, March 12, 2009.

27. Philip P. Pan, "Key Item for Obama, Medvedev: New Arms Talks," *Washington Post*, April 1, 2009.

28. Ibid.

29. Pavel Felgenhauer, "Russia Will Retain as Many Nuclear Weapons as Possible," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, April 9, 2009.

30. Alexander Golts, "Zamakhnulsya na svyatoe." See also Alexander Golts, "Enemy Is to the East," moscowtimes.com, April 7, 2009.

31. Pavel Felgenhauer, "Obama and Medvedev Press the 'Reset' Button on Arms Control," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, April 2, 2009; and Pavel Felgenhauer (remarks, "Beyond the 'Grand Bargain': U.S.-Russian Cooperation on Iran," AEI panel discussion, May 13, 2009), available through www.aei.org/event/100055.

32. Ibid.

33. Ellen Barry, "Putin Says NATO Exercises in Georgia Hinder U.S.-Russia Relations," *New York Times*, May 11, 2009.

34. Quoted in Roger N. McDermott, "Medvedev Plays Anti-Western Card to Promote Military Reform," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 24, 2009.

35. Known as SA-20 in the West, S-300 systems can track aircraft and fire at them from more than one hundred miles away. The delivery of the missiles has been delayed, and the buzz in Moscow is that S-300 might be held back by the Kremlin as a bargaining chip in dealing with Washington and Tel-Aviv.

36. Fyodor Lukyanov, "Opasnost' peregruzki."

37. Pavel Felgenhauer, "Wartime Approaching in the Caucasus," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, March 12, 2009.