

Détente 2.0?

Explaining Russia's "Reset" with the United States

Kari Roberts, PhD
Mount Royal University

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Introduction

Разрядка. In Russian, it means *relaxation*; in English, an easing of tensions. This term may be an apt description of present day efforts to polish Russia-US relations. *Détente* was the label given to the mid-Cold War thaw in east-west relations that was the inevitable result of the ramped up rhetoric, untenable arms race and unsustainable economic competition at the height of the superpower standoff. Arguably, both Brezhnev and Nixon saw in *détente* an opportunity to ease the economic pressure both countries were feeling and were able to capitalize on better relations at a time when the Americans and Soviets were feeling the full weight of the Cold War.

Fast forward some forty years later and it is worth asking whether or not there are some interesting parallels between this by-gone era of rapprochement between arch enemies and the recent “reset” of relations between Russia and the United States. The Vladimir Putin/George Bush years were not among the sunnier periods in Russia-US relations. In fact, it is fair to say that the years 2005-2008 marked a considerable backslide in the relationship. Despite a promising first meeting in which President Bush allegedly peered into Putin’s soul and determined him to be trustworthy, the two nations did not see eye to eye on a host of critically important issues. What had been a fairly steady path for the two countries (albeit with a few bumps here and there) took a sour turn. President Putin unapologetically asserted Russia’s interests, and his American counterpart did the same. The rift seemed a lasting one, and only deepened with Russia’s 2008 invasion of Georgia and Washington’s response to it.

But 2008 seemingly ushered in a new order of things: new Presidents, new worldviews, and for these presidents, a new appreciation of shared risks and opportunities. At a June 2010 joint news conference with Dmitry Medvedev, US President Barack Obama chose to note the important symbolism of the reset with a careful nod to Russia’s great patriotic war, repeating words dating back to the historic meeting at the Elbe, “If there’s a fine, splendid world in the future, it will be largely because the United States and Russia get on well together.” True to this sentiment, the two leaders have been working steadily to improve the relationship from missile defense and arms control to the establishment of the United States and Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission. But, are we witnessing a second generation *détente* – *Détente 2.0*?¹ This appears to be a fitting question, given that warnings of a new Cold War between Russia and the United States were becoming fashionable prior to the arrival of the Medvedev/Obama reset.

Despite this reset in Russia-US relations – one that seems to be working, according to US Vice-President Joe Biden² - there is reason to be cautious. While it is true that President Medvedev’s

¹ Gordon Hahn more specifically asks whether there are broad parallels between Medvedev and Mikhail Gorbachev. These will be discussed later. See Gordon M. Hahn, “Medvedev, Putin, and Perestroika 2.0,” *Demokratizatsiya* 18:3 (Summer 2010): 228-59.

² “Vice President Biden’s Remarks at Moscow State University,” March 10, 2011, The White House, Office of the Vice President, <http://www.whitehouse.gov>

foreign policy style marks a significant departure from his predecessor, and that he possesses a different worldview from Putin, underscored by a different set of expectations about the challenges and opportunities the West holds for Russia, there is an undercurrent of economic necessity that prompts Medvedev's overtures toward the United States. The warmer tone in relations is promising and has even been productive; however, it is wise to keep Medvedev's motivations top of mind.

This paper makes two assertions: first, and most critically, that Medvedev's call for a more West-friendly orientation in Russia is chiefly about *capitalizing* on better relations with the United States. It does not, as some have suggested, reflect the more liberal-minded politics of President Medvedev and, relatedly, a new kind of common ground upon which Russia-US relations can be built. Russia's gestures toward the west are motivated by a need to attract western investors to help modernize an aging energy sector infrastructure and to inject capital into a country devastated by cheap oil in 2008/2009. This is not to diminish the important gains made by both countries in strengthening the relationship. Each country is getting what it needs: the United States' key emphasis is on cooperative security measures, joint efforts to combat terrorism, and upholding the arms control regime; for the Russians these are also important concerns, but a key priority is building economic relationships. The secondary conclusion of the paper is that, while the economic impetus behind Russia's desire to improve relations with the US may *resemble* past efforts to do the same during *détente*, we are not in fact witnessing a second generation *détente* because there is no "new Cold War." The Cold War ended in 1991 and it is neither logical nor helpful to fall back on outdated rhetoric or labels every time Russians and Americans disagree.

Before a discussion of the meaning behind the warmer tone in Russia-US relations and what lies behind Medvedev's orientation toward the West, it is first necessary to establish why the reset was needed in the first place. The following sections describe the souring of relations under Putin, why a reset was needed, and how it developed.

The break-up

The temperature of post-Soviet Russia-US relations has fluctuated for nearly 20 years. The post-Cold War relationship is best described as tepid, with the occasional temporary cold front, as the two nations steadily work to navigate an unprecedented relationship. The ebb and flow of dealings between Moscow and Washington throughout the 1990s – unavoidable perhaps, considering the timing - failed to establish the parameters of a permanent working relationship or to agree on priorities and opportunities that could frame the relationship going forward. When Vladimir Putin assumed the presidency, an already wobbly relationship was to be further tested.

Upon his assumption of power in 2000, Putin wasted no time unveiling a more pragmatic approach to Russian foreign policy, which was particularly visible in his dealings with the West. Putin asserted Russia's interests with increasing tenacity and was unapologetic in his defense of Russia's freedom to conduct its domestic affairs – of which western nations had been critical – its own way, without unwanted interference. Despite early signs of a budding friendship between presidents Putin and Bush, relations between the two countries soured in fairly short order. Putin reflected a feeling among the Russian elite that Russia was dissatisfied with its second tier global power status and he would endeavor to do what was necessary to elevate Russia among the world's major powers.

But Putin's ramped up rhetoric, heavy-handed leadership style, and rejection of outside meddling in Russia's political economy did not on their own signal the undoing of the Russia-US relationship, such as it was. The relationship had long been flavored by Russia's desire to regain its power status, its propensity to view its own global role relative to the West, and by conflicting impulses of western engagement and detachment. Add to this major policy disagreements, such as NATO expansion and ballistic missile defense to name just two, that served to exacerbate the above-mentioned pressures, and it is hardly surprising that the Russia-US relationship experienced significant setbacks.

Putin's strident and pragmatic foreign policy is well documented. But it is worth noting that, while some of it can be attributed to personal style, worldview, and the realities of Russia's foreign policy circumstance, it was also influenced by events. It was, by many accounts, a deliberate response to a rejection of Russian overtures to the west, and a failure by the American leadership to acknowledge Russia as a major power with its own set of legitimate security challenges and its own regional spheres of interest. A clear message was sent to the Russian leadership that they faced an uphill battle when it came to asserting Russian interests internationally.

However it is labeled - break-up or outright divorce - the relationship took a downward turn in 2006-2007 and did not rebound until later in 2008. This can be attributed to a multitude of factors, notably the fallout from the color revolutions in Georgia (2002) and Ukraine (2004) and the American response to them; western sympathy for the Rose and Orange revolutionaries and, importantly, subsequent support for Georgia in its 2008 war with Russia sent a message to Russia that it could not count on the west to respect its regional interests or even its right to essential spheres of influence. In fact, after the 2008 war, the White House cut all working level relations between Washington and Moscow, withdrew the agreement on peaceful nuclear energy cooperation from the Senate, and led the successful push for a suspension of the NATO-Russia Council, a key forum for security dialogue.³ Arguably, the situation in Georgia, Russia's military

³ Samuel Charap, "The Transformation of US-Russia Relations" *Current History* (October 2010): 281.

presence there, and its recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent, are among the greatest obstacles in the Russia-US relationship today.⁴

Other important contributors to the growing rift between Moscow and Washington were the arrival of the *siloviki*⁵ into the foreign policy realm creating the perception that Russia's external relations were flavored with a Cold War era mindset that would resist Russian openness to the West. Furthermore, the spectacular 2006 deaths of journalist Anna Politkovskaya⁶ and writer-in-exile Alexander Litvinenko⁷ (and the Kremlin's refusal to extradite the key suspect in the case), as well as the Kremlin's vigorous pursuit of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, and the gas supply and pricing standoff with Ukraine that led to gas shortages in several European countries (the gas supply to Ukraine was eventually formally, albeit temporarily, shut off on New Year's Day 2009), seemed to confirm for the West that any hope of democracy in Russia was dead.⁸ Putin's leadership cast doubt upon whether Russia could truly be a reliable partner to the west.⁹ However, Jeffrey Mankoff wisely notes that this should not really have been a *new* concern; after all, Russia's anti-democratic tendencies were plainly visible under Yeltsin, who famously used tanks to ward off political opposition in 1993.¹⁰ Further adding to the divergence of Russian and American interests was the more strident tone with which Putin asserted Russia's foreign policy interests; this was enabled by the rise in oil and gas prices and accompanied Russia's more independent stance.

⁴ Ibid..

⁵ *Siloviki* refers to Russian officials or politicians with a military or security background. Putin, himself a former KGB and FSB official, appointed numerous individuals with whom he shared this past connection to high profile positions of power, including Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov and Deputy Prime Minister Igor Sechin.

⁶ Politkovskaya was known for her dogged pursuit of the truth in Chechnya and for her voracious criticisms of the Kremlin, accusing Putin's leadership of having blood on its hands; she was found murdered, perhaps coincidentally, on Vladimir Putin's birthday in 2006.

⁷ Litvinenko, a former operative of the Russian Federal Security Service, penned stinging accounts of how Putin and the Russian secret service orchestrated the Moscow apartment bombings that brought Putin to power and prompted the reinvigoration of the war in Chechnya in 1999. Litvinenko famously suffered fatal radiation poisoning following a meeting in London with an official from the Russian Federal Protective Service.

⁸ For a more fulsome discussion of the circumstances surrounding the Russo-American "divorce," see Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy: The Return of Great Power Politics* (NY: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2009), chapter 1.

⁹ For an example of just how bad things got between Russia and the West, see James Sherr, "Russia and the West: A Reassessment," *The Shrivenham Papers, No 6* (Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, January 2008). For example, Sherr outlines the "damaged relationship" and notes that "although Russia may no longer be a global threat, it seeks to be an enabler and a spoiler." (5)

¹⁰ Jeffrey Mankoff, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 19.

Russian foreign policy has taken on certain identifying characteristics over time; chief among them are the presence of pragmatism in decision making, the absence of ideology as a foundational premise, and the persistence of the great power narrative.¹¹ One result of this combination of influences is the widely acknowledged precept that Russia has no permanent allies, only interests and that it conducts its foreign policy on the basis of elite conceptions of its national interest; this is by definition what its moniker “sovereign democracy” implies. Russia does not conduct its foreign policy making in an ideological way, partnering with like minded nations in pursuit of the same global aspirations. Russia is prepared to engage cooperatively with other nations when it suits Russia. This approach was visible under Putin and is arguably present under Medvedev. The president determines the national interest; for Putin this was defined as the need to re-assert Russia’s global power status in combination with the need for economic modernization and development facilitated by Russia’s tremendous bounty of natural resources that has generated tremendous revenue, foreign interest, and leverage *vis-à-vis* its neighbors and trade relationships.¹²

The Kremlin controls the country’s energy resources and assumes that whatever is best for Russia’s oil and gas industry is what is best for Russia – Russia, Inc.¹³ Thus, the country’s relationships depend upon whether there is benefit to Russia in maintaining them. It is quite natural for Russia to do business with countries like North Korea and Iran; the Kremlin is not interested in attaching normative conditions (such as respect for human rights and the rule of law) to its trade relationships in the same way that the European Union, for example, and even the United States (albeit selectively) does. This is difficult for western nations to swallow and has been the source of some tension in recent years, notably surrounding Russia’s reluctance to censure Iran in the United Nations Security Council.¹⁴

Yet no matter how negative the relationship became, at no time was there a return to the Cold War. Russian pragmatism includes a keen awareness of the need to be on speaking terms, even friendly terms at times, with the west. It is that simple. The country’s leaders know that they cannot afford (or sustain indefinitely) a sour relationship with the United States or Europe, for that matter. Putin knew this, despite being unprepared to compromise in a number of areas (Ukraine, Georgia, tolerating the presence of NATO missiles in Poland). Medvedev knows it, too. Putin’s foreign policy tone did adopt a certain swagger emboldened by \$150 oil that Medvedev simply cannot afford presently. Fortifying Russia’s position was that it shared its

¹¹ These are discussed in Kari Roberts, “Jets, flags, and a New Cold War? Demystifying Russia’s Arctic intentions,” *International Journal* 65: 4 (Autumn 2010): 957-976.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Dmitri Trenin, “Russia Redefines Itself and Its Relations with the West,” *The Washington Quarterly* 30: 2 (Spring 2007): 95-105.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

objection to the 2003 invasion of Iraq with many other western powers – traditional US allies. Russia was becoming less tolerant of what it feared was an America in search of global dominance beyond what it deserved. Stephen Cimbala also notes that these conditions led to a more boisterous Russian policy response due to the perception of “malign US intentions.”¹⁵

It may be fair to say that Medvedev brings a fresh approach to Russian foreign policy that, while it may be rooted to some degree in necessity, also stems from a different attitude toward the West. Medvedev is not of the *siloviki*, has a different background – he is a former law professor - a seemingly more affable nature, and uses liberal-minded language (and Twitter!), which seems to appeal to western leaders. His backslapping photo op with California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2010 seemed far less contrived than it might have, had his predecessor been in his place. But then again, if it had been Putin, it may not have occurred at all.

Returning to the theme of Russian foreign policy being rooted in necessity, it is worth remembering that Putin’s second term ended just before the worst of the 2008 global financial crisis, and the plummeting price of oil, which naturally hit Russia hard. Medvedev was left picking up the pieces and immediately began his call for a new era of better relations with the USA – a “reset” in president Obama’s words.

Despite the above-mentioned reference to the tensions in the relationship caused by the Russia-Georgia conflict, President Obama is fixed upon a key goal, and one that he seems to share with Medvedev: to improve the relationship, seemingly almost at any cost. Obama appears unwilling to allow the Georgia situation to derail efforts to cooperate with Moscow in certain areas. The White House seems to understand that it cannot address core threats to American security without engaging the Russians; Russian assistance in stabilizing Afghanistan is essential, as is cooperation on nuclear proliferation or even climate change.¹⁶ In fact, with regard to Afghanistan, Russia has enabled logistical support to NATO’s ISAF mission by condoning a supply line from Riga, Latvia, through Russia and Kazakhstan, through to the Uzbekistan/Afghanistan border as an alternative to a supply line through Pakistan. This kind of cooperation is significant.¹⁷

The Obama Administration seems to have opted to cooperate where they can, and stand firm in areas they must. And the Russians have responded favorably. This has paid off for the US, as they have also managed to get Russian cooperation on Iran since late 2009 (Moscow supported an ill-fated proposal to get Iran to send its uranium to Russia for enrichment, agreed to stronger

¹⁵ Stephen Cimbala, “Smashing Atoms: Post-START Rationality and Cold War Hangover,” *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 23: (2010): 4.

¹⁶ Charap “The Transformation of US-Russia Relations,” 282.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 283.

sanctions against North Korea and subscribed to a new protocol committing Russia and the US to dispose of enough weapons-grade plutonium to power 17,000 nuclear weapons).¹⁸ So the warmer tone in the relationship has borne some fruit for the Americans, too.

It seems both leaders are eager to “relax” the tensions that had built up under their predecessors. In return for Russian cooperation, a number of major business deals in Russia have been announced, notably the Russian purchase of 65 Boeing planes and Pepsi-Co’s decision to invest \$1 billion in Russia.¹⁹ Medvedev embarked upon a major tour in 2010 of California’s Silicon Valley, meeting with Google, Apple, Twitter and even Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger. Just how deep this cooperation goes and how this fits with Medvedev’s agenda will be discussed in the following section, as well as a look at what it means to simply “hit the re-set button” in a relationship that has so much accompanying baggage.

Pushing the (Reset) Button

Both Obama and Medvedev seek to “reset” Russia-US relations. But precisely how should this language be interpreted? On the one hand, it could be deliberately benign in order to relax skepticism and to keep expectations low. If precisely what a reset means is not clear, then it is hard to argue the reset has failed. On the other hand, given the great importance of this relationship to both countries, it may make sense to consider the word choice as more than a surface level attempt to rebuild relations; perhaps it is instead a deliberate way of expressing just how bad the relationship had become and how much work it would take to rebuild it. Yet, the choice of “reset” could have a couple of possible applications: first, the term can apply to the resetting of a broken bone, to the resetting of a stopped clock, or perhaps even to the resetting of a blown circuit breaker. By these definitions, the underlying assumption is that Russia-US relations had gotten so bad that it could be characterized as broken. Or perhaps, given that both leaders are young, with a penchant for social media, interactive technology and modern communications, perhaps we should instead consider the term’s more contemporary definition: to restart a computer that is not necessarily broken but whose performance is suboptimal and can be improved with a simple keystroke.²⁰ Whatever the intention, it may be worth bearing these two possible interpretations in mind. Russia-US relations had deteriorated considerably in the period 2005-2008, causing some analysts to ask whether things were so bad that conditions were

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Robert English questions whether the reset really is as simple as a keystroke. See “A ‘Reset’ for Relations? Understanding Russian Grievances,” *Global Dialogue* 11 (Winter/Spring 2009).

ripe for a new Cold War.²¹ While this was an overstatement of the state of relations, one wonders if improvement really is as simple as the leaders have suggested.

Yet, in his first three years in power, Medvedev's priorities and style have arguably made a difference. While many of his foreign policy principles do not mark a significant departure from Putin,²² his tone has warmed and he has engaged in confidence building measures with Washington, notably efforts to improve relations with NATO, engaging with the Americans on the New START Treaty, supporting sanctions against Iran and the UNSC, and returning to membership talks at the WTO. Medvedev has been firm in his assertion of Russia's spheres of interest and its desire to fix its ailing democracy without external meddling, yet he also announced, in June 2010, that Russia was serious about changing its business practices and reforming its economy. For these to occur, Russia needs foreign investment. In support of this he announced the abolition of capital gains tax for long term investment, a more relaxed visa process for foreign business people working in Russia, and a promise to strengthen the rule of law in the country, presumably to make it a safer place to do business.²³

The Russian president strives to balance national economic interests (which necessitate the pro-western stance) with a desire to remain a sovereign and growing center of power in the world – a goal that has eluded his predecessors. Medvedev wants to convey that Russia is open for business, but this is largely rooted in economic necessity and does not necessarily mark an epochal change in outlook toward the West. Certainly Medvedev has given indications that he understands that Russian democracy and the rule of law are broken and that political reform is needed. But there are also indications - to be discussed in the next section - that his politics are rooted in those of his predecessor. His tone, however, *is* different. Medvedev says the right things, acknowledges Russian weakness in certain areas, and speaks about liberal ideas; this has a comforting effect on external audiences who seek safe relationships – economic and political – with Russia. In April 2010 Medvedev announced formally a plan to launch a shift in Russia's attitude toward the West; as if by decree (but not exactly), Medvedev announced Russia's new orientation toward the west with the expectation that this new openness would enable access to foreign investors who would help modernize Russia economy. The Kremlin-backed initiative

²¹ See Stephen Blank, "The Real Reset: Moscow Refights the Cold War," *World Affairs* (September/October 2010); Stephen Cohen, "The New American Cold War," *The Nation* (10 July 2006); Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War: Putin's Russia and the Threat to the West* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Dmitri K Simes, "Losing Russia," *Foreign Affairs* 86: 6 (Nov/Dec 2007).

²² Medvedev's five foreign policy principles, informally referred to as the Medvedev Doctrine, were announced shortly after his assumption of the presidency. They are: recognition of the primacy of international law; support for a multi-polar world; avoidance of isolation and international confrontation; protecting Russians at home and abroad; and, realizing and protecting Russia's privileged spheres of interest. See Paul Reynolds, "The New Russian World Order: Five Principles," BBC News, Monday, September 1, 2008. <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7591610.stm>

²³ Stuart Williams, "Russia serious about change, Medvedev tells West" AFP (June 18, 2010).

sought ways to harness Russian foreign policy for the purpose of supporting the “long term development of Russia.”²⁴ This was to be done through a more western-friendly foreign policy that would “improve ties with the West and attract greater international investment.”²⁵ Certainly Medvedev’s keen awareness of Russia’s economic realities, tempered with his endorsement of liberal principles (he does show a complex understanding of liberal ideas) goes some distance toward making this happen. And what better way to demonstrate openness to the West, approachability, and an understanding of modern free market economics and democratic politics than to have your picture taken pumping iron with *The Terminator* in California?

Medvedev has also gone out of his way to woo American and foreign investment in Russia by hosting a delegation of US venture funds. This was done in an effort to create understanding and to relax foreign investor fears about engagement with Russia. Medvedev wants to create a Moscow high tech hub – a Russian version of Silicon Valley – and met with western venture fund chiefs to drum up support.²⁶ Presumably this is viewed as a way to help Russia diversify an economy that has been heavily dependent upon oil and gas and which felt the pain of this dependence during the global financial crisis of 2008-2009.

Medvedev’s overtures toward the United States appear to have been met enthusiastically by the Obama White House. And while it is unclear precisely what each country’s expectations are of this reset, the approach seems to be bearing fruit. To date, notable accomplishments on the Russia-US agenda include the aforementioned New START Treaty,²⁷ greater collaboration in the UNSC in support of US priorities regarding Iran, Russia’s return to dialogue with NATO, symbolized by Medvedev’s participation in the 2010 NATO summit meeting,²⁸ the creation of the United States and Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission,²⁹ the Obama Administration’s

²⁴ Stuart Williams, “Russia plans shift to pro-West policy,” *AFP*, 11 May 2010.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Lyubov Pronina, “Medvedev Seeks Investment From US Venture Funds,” *Bloomberg Business Week*, May 25, 2010. <http://www.businessweek.com/news/2010-05-25/medvedev-seeks-investment-from-u-s-venture-funds-update1-.html>

²⁷ Among the treaty objectives, both sides agreed to reduce strategic offensive weapons to “1550 deployed nuclear charges and 700 strategic delivery vehicles within 7 years of the treaty entering into force.” For more on the specifics of the New START Treaty see V. Batyuk, “The Mechanisms of Russian-American Partnership,” *International Affairs* 4 (2010): 93.

²⁸ Russia’s presence at the 2010 Lisbon Summit was significant. Relations between Russia and the Alliance had been rocky to say the least, due to a multitude of factors, notably Russian concern over NATO’s Membership Action Plan for Georgia and Ukraine, and American efforts to suspend the NATO-Russia Council after the 2008 war with Georgia.

²⁹ The United States and Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission is “dedicated to identifying areas of cooperation and pursuing joint projects and actions that strengthen strategic stability, international security, economic well-being, and the development of ties between Russian and American people.” (Fact Sheet, United States Department of State, October 15, 2009) It is co-chaired by Obama and Medvedev and coordinated by Secretary of State Hillary

submission of the agreement on peaceful nuclear energy cooperation with Russia to the US Senate for ratification in 2010,³⁰ and Obama's reaffirmation of US support for Russian ascension to the WTO – one of Russia's key economic objectives.

Medvedev should also be able to get some mileage out of the diplomatic language used now between the two countries: Obama pointedly referred to Russia's importance as a major power in the world noting, "America's most significant national security interests and priorities could be advanced most effectively through cooperation, not an adversarial relationship, with Russia."³¹ This is playing to Russia's need to be a great power, which greatly influences its foreign policy interests.³² When asked about the tone of Russia-US relations recently, Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, noted that he felt significant progress had been made with the Obama Administration, which marked a real change from the Bush era. He noted also that under Obama, the USA had "lifted years-long sanctions on important Russian agencies engaging in military and technical activity, as well as some of our educational and training establishments....it is real, not declarative. It points to some substantial differences from the period of George W. Bush presidency."³³

On the heels of his 2010 California junket Medvedev took care to steer the Washington press conference with Obama toward a discussion of how to improve bilateral economic relations. He acknowledged the work that had already been done to "build confidence between our countries," and to take steps to establish "a more firm construction of our relations" and to make the world safer.³⁴ But he also took care to note that simply to build confidence is not enough – and this suggests that for Medvedev the reset is more than a cosmetic enhancement of the relationship. Medvedev noted that bilateral economic relations needed to change and that this was the key purpose of his visit; he reminded that more was needed and that the US and Russia should

Clinton and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. It has 16 working groups: Policy Steering Group, Nuclear Energy and Nuclear Security, Arms Control and International Security, Terrorism, Drug Trafficking, Business Development and Economic Relations, Energy, Environment, Agriculture, Science and Technology, Space Cooperation, Health., Cooperation in Prevention and Handling of Emergency Situations, Civil Society, Educational, Sport and Cultural Exchanges, and Military to Military Cooperation.

³⁰ This is notable because it had first been submitted in 2008 and then withdrawn by the Bush Administration during the 2008 Russo-Georgia war. The agreement entered into force in January 2011.

³¹ "Remarks by President Obama and President Medvedev of Russia at Joint Press Conference," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, June 24 2010. <http://www.whitehouse.gov>

³² See Kari Roberts, "Jets, Flags, and A New Cold War?"

³³ Ryabkov, "Russia-US: Time to Make up for Lost Ground," *International Affairs* 4 (2010): 36.

³⁴ "The President's News Conference with President Dmitry A. Medvedev of Russia," The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, June 24, 2010. <http://www.whitehouse.gov>

demonstrate they can cooperate on more than just missiles.³⁵ Still among the list of unfulfilled Russian objectives are its desire to join the WTO and the repeal of Jackson-Vanik, which denies unconditional trade relations with countries deemed not to be market economies and that restrict emigration (an exemption for Russia would have to be passed by the United States Congress).³⁶

The pro-western orientation in Russia appears ascendant, but suspicions about US motives and the wounds of the Putin-Bush era linger. As the word “reset” perhaps implies, efforts to tinker with the relationship, to set expectations and opportunities anew are underway. But how deep will this reset go?

Discussion: Détente or Not?

It is true that leaders in both Russia and the United States are speaking a similar language. Both Obama and Medvedev seem to have recognized that previous approaches to their relationship had been counterproductive and both seem eager for change. Gordon Hahn credits Medvedev with seeing the value in warming relations and going some distance to meet the Obama Administration halfway in its desire to “reset” relations.³⁷ There are some analysts who believe that the reset has potential that runs deeper than economic necessity. Gordon Hahn has big expectations for Medvedev noting that he marks such a significant break from his predecessor that this profound new era of Russian politics might be best labeled “Perestroika 2.0.” Like no Russian leader since Gorbachev, Medvedev demonstrates an understanding of democratic ideas, the rule of law, and free market principles. Hahn has been intensely optimistic about the integrity and significance of Medvedev’s reforms, calling his initiatives a “serious reset of Russian domestic policy” that he believes will usher in “major liberalization” in what he calls a “new era of great reforms...that could rival and complete those of the Perestroika era.”³⁸

Medvedev certainly talks the talk: “I do not idealize our party system or even the situation with the elections of the president...Russia was never and still has not become...an effective democracy... we are moving in the right direction.”³⁹ Bolstering Hahn’s evidence for optimism about the reach of Medvedev’s “new thinking” are his reforms to the party system. Threshold rules for small parties in the Duma have been made as well as changes to the selection of regional representatives in the Federation Council, which had previously been largely under

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Jackson-Vanik is contained within Title IV of the 1974 United States Trade Act.

³⁷ Gordon Hahn, “Medvedev, Putin, and Perestroika 2.0,” *Demokratizatsiya* 18:3 (Summer 2010): 228.

³⁸ Ibid., 229.

³⁹ Ibid., 234.

Kremlin control.⁴⁰ These suggest an effort to be more democratic and to give voice and representation to a wider array of political views. Medvedev has granted better presidential access to NGOs, and as a younger and more technologically savvy president than his predecessor, he uses twitter and the internet regularly to communicate with Russians and with the world (he even tweeted skiing plans with Schwarzenegger!) Medvedev has also designated corruption as Russia's public enemy number one in an annual state of the union address.⁴¹

In fact, Putin's very selection of Medvedev to replace him (perhaps temporarily, it is hard to know), was a signal that even Putin himself realized the need to move away from the heavy reliance upon the commodity driven export economy Russia had been privileging,⁴² to a more modernized, diversified and investment-worthy environment in which foreign capital could help drive Russia's growth. Appointing a successor from outside the *siloviki* was an important decision that Hahn feels was an early signal of coming liberalization. Medvedev showed early signs he understood liberal democratic principles such as the rule of law and pointed to western statesmen when asked whom he most admired and what the role of the state should be.⁴³

For Hahn, this represents a thaw in Russian domestic politics, economics and foreign policy which, rather than brushing off as a temporary and perhaps shallow effort to extract immediate political gains, reminiscent of the Khrushchev era, is instead a more meaningful and potentially longer lasting liberalization effort.⁴⁴ But Hahn's assertion that Medvedev's liberalization reforms could actually complete *perestroika* is overlooking some important realities in Medvedev's Russia. It is wise to consider just how meaningful Medvedev's efforts are and how deep they will go. Arguably, it is too soon to arouse the cheering squad in celebration of the completion of *glasnost* and *perestroika*.

There is no doubt that Medvedev has spoken of some welcome and needed reforms. However, just how much democratization Medvedev is prepared to nurture is arguably unclear. Even Hahn acknowledges that the decision to extend the presidential term to six years, which will kick in following the 2012 presidential election, is a step in the opposite direction. And there is no

⁴⁰ Specifically, Medvedev acknowledged the 7% threshold for parties to gain seats in the Duma was too high. His amendments in 2009 aimed to see parties with between 3 and 7 % get awarded seats, as well as a reduction in the number of signatures required to register political parties, and a guarantee of equal access to state media for all parties that win seats in parliament. See Hahn, 237.

⁴¹ Hahn, 238.

⁴² Ibid., 230.

⁴³ Hahn recalls an interview Medvedev gave shortly after taking office in which he mentioned Britain's Margaret Thatcher and US presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan when asked about the state's role in the economy and noted it should be to "regulate social processes, create the conditions for development of business and civic activeness, resolve conflicts that arise, and arrange for the country's defense and security." 233.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 229.

shortage of contradictory messaging when it comes to Medvedev's commitment to democracy. With respect to the much-vaunted reforms to the party system, making the Duma more democratic and giving access to parties and the media the freedom to report on them is a nice idea; however, it may be akin to re-arranging deck chairs on the Titanic. After all, the Duma has very little tangible political power anyway; one wonders what the point is of making these kinds of reforms. With political power concentrated in the hands of the presidency (which was shaped by Yeltsin but further entrenched by Putin's vertical power structure), the Duma is not a relevant institution. Moreover, since post-Soviet Russian presidents have not belonged to or led parties (though Putin and Medvedev were "affiliated" with United Russia), parties themselves remain a weak institution largely outside the corridors of power. To give parties more access to representation in the Duma sounds appealing, but it is really just a hollow façade, failing to give meaningful voice to "fringe" ideas. One wonders if Medvedev isn't building his own contemporary Potemkin Village.

Moreover, the recent re-sentencing of former Russian billionaire Mikhail Khodorkovsky is a serious and disheartening comment on the state of democracy in Russia. Khodorkovsky and his business associate, Platon Lebedev, had been due to be released in 2011 (dangerously close to the 2012 presidential election). Both were serving eight year sentences for tax evasion and fraud but were sentenced to six more years in December 2010 due to new charges of embezzlement and money laundering. They will not be released until 2017.⁴⁵ The charges, in addition to the original convictions back in 2005, are widely considered to be politically motivated. Former United States Press Secretary Robert Gibbs called the new conviction "an abusive use of the legal system for improper ends."⁴⁶

Prior to the verdict announcement, Prime Minister Putin noted on a popular Russian radio show that Khodorkovsky belonged in jail. Medvedev's rebuke was swift, scolding Putin for an inappropriate and premature declaration noting that the rule of law would preside. This apparently had scant impact upon the guilty verdict that many feared was predetermined. Noted Russia analyst and writer Chrystia Freeland observed in the *New York Times* that, "there is nothing accidental about Mr. Khodorkovsky's imprisonment. It is, instead, the clearest possible statement about the rules of Kremlin capitalism...if you are in a sector the states cares about in Russia, you either play ball with the Kremlin or you leave."⁴⁷ The treatment of Khodorkovsky is emblematic of the serious absence of a rule of law in the country. Medvedev may criticize Putin

⁴⁵ See "Yukos Verdict Tests Balance of Ruling Tandem," *Moscow Times*, January 11, 2011. From Johnson's *Russia List 2011 #7* (January 11, 2011).

⁴⁶ Ellen Barry, "Russians react badly to US criticism on protests," *New York Times*, January 7, 2011. From Johnson's *Russia List 2011 #5* (January 7, 2011)

⁴⁷ Chrystia Freeland, "The Raw Face of Capitalism, Kremlin Style," *New York Times*, January 7, 2011. In Johnson's *Russia List 2011 #5*, January 7, 2011.

all he likes about commenting publicly on the trial in advance of a verdict, but until accused criminals are treated fairly and with due process, these are just words. Furthermore, Medvedev has the constitutional power to pardon Khodorkovsky, but has not exercised it.

Further evidence for questioning Medvedev's commitment to the rule of law principles he espouses was the arrest and detention of top opposition leaders at a New Year's Eve rally in 2010 that led to the imprisonment of Boris Nemtsov, a long time leader of the liberal opposition in Russia. His arrest followed his public condemnation of the Kremlin for the Khodorkovsky conviction. He was sentenced to 15 days in prison.⁴⁸ Nemtsov was Yeltsin's deputy PM for a time and he had been participating in an authorized rally; he was on his way home from the rally when he was stopped and questioned. Such events may come at some cost to Medvedev, as they may reinforce already existing concerns among foreign partners, and potential or perhaps reluctant partners, that doing business in Russia is risky.⁴⁹

Other reservations about what genuinely lies beneath Russia's newfound openness to the west are accusations of Russian "foot dragging" when it comes to sanctions on Iran, its provision of technical assistance and weapons systems to the Iranian military, and its promise of future energy sales. From the view of some American conservatives, this is cause for suspicion about just how deep the desire for a reset goes. Add to this concern over Russia's behavior toward Georgia and other former Soviet Republics with large Russian populations, and this raises concerns that Russia may be using an outdated playbook and cannot be trusted. There is some concern in US foreign policy circles that Obama may be "letting Russia off the hook."⁵⁰

Western leaders seem to be so relieved they are dealing with Medvedev and not Putin, that they may risk repeating the same mistakes made by the Clinton Administration in the 1990s. One hopes that president Obama and his advisors have learned a thing or two from the Clinton era of Russia-US relations. Supporting a Russian leader who says the right things about democracy – who talks the talk, but who does not walk the walk – enabled Yeltsin to remain in power (which was preferable to the communist or nationalist alternatives) and to take measures to bolster his own political security at the expense of the fragile democratic process. Certainly Medvedev is not Yeltsin and political and economic realities are not what they were in the early 1990s when Russia's fate was less certain. But, will Russia's new friends again look the other way when Medvedev's words are not reflected in practice? It appears so for now.

⁴⁸ "Frozen Out: Russia marks a new low with the arrest of an opposition leader on flimsy charges," *The Economist* January 6, 2011.

⁴⁹ Freeland, "The Raw Face of Capitalism."

⁵⁰ Herman Pirchner, "The Russian Mind Today: A Geopolitical Guide," *The American Spectator* (December 2010/January 2011).

President Obama has not linked the fate of Russia-US relations to domestic political expectations and seems to respect the Russian government's resistance to outside meddling in its domestic affairs. At the same time, external confidence in Russia is likely to grow if western audiences can be convinced that Russia is a safe place to invest and that business transactions are subject to the rule of law. Efforts to make the Russian system more representative and democratic could go a long way to ensuring that the business climate in Russia is perceived this way. For this to occur, closer relations between Washington and Moscow, as well as real tangible political cooperation, notably with respect to shared national security interests, will also create a firm foundation for investor trust. Thus, Medvedev is making a concerted effort to make improvements in these areas. As even Hahn notes, Medvedev's mandate of closer relations with the west is done in the spirit of facilitating Russia's technological and economic modernization.⁵¹

But, despite efforts by both leaders to improve the relationship, there remain impediments to a full reset, notably some lingering suspicions that date back to the Cold War. Jeffrey Mankoff suggests that perhaps this lingering mistrust is generational and may not be a serious impediment under the leadership of Obama and Medvedev.⁵² Today's elite, in both countries, cut their teeth on the Cold War environment. But, as people retire, and new blood is brought into the foreign policy making circles, it is possible that relations will meaningfully improve. Though he acknowledges some serious impediments to the shuffling off of Cold War mindsets, he simply notes that the fact that Obama and Medvedev did not enter politics until after the Cold War was over, is significant. Mankoff believes this has already contributed to the change in tone of the relationship.⁵³ Naturally, as American policy makers increasingly are able to envision a world in which Russia is not by its very nature a threat, and begin to see in real terms that Russia and the US need each other in a host of foreign policy areas - notably non-proliferation and terrorism - then a better relationship can brew.⁵⁴ And one of things this reset can do is to erode any lingering suspicion and mistrust between them.

To this end, the New START Treaty could not be more aptly named. It has, quite rightly, been perceived as an important catalyst in the resetting of Russia-US relations and enabling the relaxing of tensions that will allow further cooperation (and with hope, the investment in Russia Medvedev seeks), yet it is also a symbol of early improvement in the relationship. Though New START has been criticized for not going far enough, it did require compromises on both sides, notably Russia's concessions on the issue of missile defence (the treaty notes the connection between offensive and defensive weapons, but does not limit future American BMD

⁵¹ Hahn, "Medvedev, Putin, and Perestroika 2.0," 252.

⁵² Mankoff, 2.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

development or upgrading, which would have been Russia's preference).⁵⁵ The Obama Administration also undertook some confidence building measures in its Nuclear Posture Review of 2010, which promises to limit reliance upon nuclear weapons over time and promises not to use nuclear weapons to retaliate against non-nuclear weapons states in compliance with the NPT (though there is a provision to exclude biological attacks from nuclear retaliation consequences).⁵⁶ Stephen Cimbala notes that while the Obama administration stopped short of a "no first use" policy, they did narrow the conditions under which the US would consider using nuclear weapons in response to aggression or conflict. Obama has also abandoned plans to deploy missile defences in Poland and the Czech Republic. These went some distance toward assuaging Russian concerns about nuclear security and arms control efforts that date back to hard feelings over the Bush Administration's abrogation of the ABM Treaty in 2002.

The Nuclear Posture Review coincided nicely with Russia's 2010 Military Doctrine, which marked a noticeable de-emphasizing of nuclear weapons as a response to the security challenges Russia faces.⁵⁷ Ultimately, the greatest challenge Russia faces (terrorism and its war in Chechnya) cannot be addressed with nuclear weapons, and therefore military spending priorities are elsewhere. Nuclear weapons remain an important strategic component of Russian security, but they seem to be more a relic of the Cold War in the eyes of many Russia policy makers and do little to assist Russia in the present day security environment. Certainly its nuclear weapons system and the impression of near strategic parity with the US guarantees it a seat at the table with the big powers - without them there would be no Bilateral Presidential Commission - but the diminished utility of nuclear weapons has been recognized by military officials.⁵⁸

So what should be made of this cooperation on recent arms control cooperation? Cimbala aptly cautions the avoidance of assumptions about the meaning of New START. While common ground is being found and progress is being made, an important fact remains: the warmer relationship is based upon mutual interest, not upon some common worldview or principles. Recall that ideology is not visible in Russian foreign policy making: it is about national interests.

⁵⁵ It should be noted that New START calls for the decommissioning, not the dismantling, of strategic nuclear weapons, but it does call for a subsequent round of talks. There is nothing in the document about tactical nuclear weapons. On the other hand, there are some who feel the Americans made far too many concessions under New START. Stephen Blank argues that the Treaty confirms that the Cold War mindset is alive and well in Russia, as they vigorously rejected any provision for reducing tactical nuclear weapons (Russia has thousands of these) and it does not limit Russia's nuclear modernization projects nor does it include adequate verification of Russia's missile factories, and of missile telemetry (the remote gathering and reporting of missile test data). See Stephen Blank, "The Real Reset," 83.

⁵⁶ Stephen Cimbala, "New START or Not? US-Russian Nuclear Arms Reductions in Perspective," *Comparative Strategy* 29 (2010): 262.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 263.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Cimbala suggests taking the view that Russia's approach is one of political realism in which convergent interests are exploited even though political disagreements remain, especially over NATO enlargement for example.⁵⁹ This is the pragmatic foundation upon which Russian foreign policy has been based for nearly two decades now.

Notwithstanding Russian pragmatism, Russia and the United States have far more in common than they do in disagreement. Yet, the points of disagreement have previously prevented the relationship from taking full flight. For example, Cimbala notes it is possible the US could have enjoyed greater support from the Russians in dealing with some of its key security concerns - Iran and North Korea - had they been willing to entertain more Russia-friendly alternatives to NATO.⁶⁰ Cimbala is right to conclude that success of the reset will be judged not by the number of warheads each side eliminates, but in how well they re-think the grand-strategic relationship. Ultimately, the current world order privileges soft power as much as it does hard power, and "reassurance matters as much as deterrence."⁶¹

The reset of Russia-US relations appears to enjoy the commitment of both leaders. Medvedev and Obama have said many of the right things about the importance of getting Russia-US relations right and of finding ways to ensure that shared interests can trump any disagreements between them. It appears that both leaders have gotten something out of this reset and Medvedev continues his efforts to draw needed foreign interest into Russia's economy. The question of whether this reset will be successful in the long term remains open, but what seems certain is what is implied in these efforts to set the relationship on the right track. The term itself - reset - implies that, while the relationship had stopped working efficiently, there *was* a relationship worth resetting. This implies that both sides observed some value in the relationship and in preventing its further backslide.

Medvedev and Obama seek a reset of Russia-US relations as a means of privileging the power of reassurance and shaping a mutually beneficial relationship of convenience. This reassurance is visible in Medvedev's efforts to promote political reform in Russia and a change to the tone of relations with the West. But western audiences would do well to pay as much attention to Medvedev's actions as to his words; Russia desires to be open for western business and to benefit from warmer coordination with the United States on shared issues of concern. Economic relationships require a basic level of trust and Medvedev is building that trust one block at a time.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 273.

⁶⁰ Cimbala, "Smashing Atoms."

⁶¹ Ibid., 25.

Conclusion

The title of this paper reflects a deliberate attempt to draw attention to a key problem in Russia-US relations: the inability of practitioners and analysts on both sides of the Atlantic to think creatively about Russia-US relations. The assumption is that when the relations get rough, we must be returning to the Cold War. Unfortunately there really does not seem to be any other frame of reference. Perhaps this is due to the fact that expectations were so high in the early 1990s about the endless possibilities for the relationship once Russia became a democracy.

But Russia is not a democracy and arguably does not, meaningfully, intend to become one. The trick now is to figure out what the Russia-US relationship should really be about. Ultimately, as Mankoff notes, since diplomats in both countries cut their teeth on the Cold War,⁶² thinking outside the box seems impossible. Ultimately, the author believes that we are not experiencing *détente 2.0* because *there is no new Cold War*. Instead, the relationship fluctuates: it did indeed sour under Putin and is rebounding under Medvedev. But, while we are not experiencing a Cold War style relaxing of tensions, we are also not experiencing a convergence of principles upon which a foundation of alliance can be based going forward. Understanding the new relationship – the reset – can only be done outside the bounds of the old Cold War mindset. We need to think creatively about what the “new normal” looks like.⁶³

Russia and the United States are two nations with very different pasts (albeit with a shared Cold War experience) and with unique interests that at times converge, and at other times diverge. Perhaps this convergence and divergence of interests is the new normal. Applying Cold War terminology to the relationship every time there is a serious divergence of interests is unhelpful. This paper has argued that the reset should be taken for what it is: a purposeful attempt to derive benefit from cooperation in areas of shared interest, to improve a relationship that had been functioning sub-optimally. It is neither a re-bond from the brink of a new Cold War nor the completion of Gorbachev’s agenda. It is the best way that two former adversaries can navigate an extremely complicated and baggage-laden relationship.

⁶² Jeffrey Mankoff, “Generational Change and the Future of U.S.-Russian Relations,” *Journal of International Affairs* 63:2 (Spring/Summer 2010): 1-17.

⁶³ Richard Sakwa also speculates about the inability to determine exactly what a normal relationship between Russia and the United States would look like in “‘New Cold War’ or Twenty Years’ Crisis? Russia and International Politics,” *International Affairs* 84, no. 2 (2008): 267.

