

by Ariel Cohen, Ph.D.

On July 7, Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev will meet for their first full-fledged summit in Moscow.

The two countries may have a window of opportunity to re-launch their relationship, which has been set back by Russia's intransigent positions and its litany of demands. While some in the U.S. believe that rhetoric alone can revitalize the deteriorating relationship between the two nations, only concrete steps by Russia--such as responding positively to the U.S. initiatives--will prove that the two sides are opening a new page.

Lowered Expectations

For now, however, expectations of a major breakthrough should not be high. There are many indicators that Moscow is not ready for a comprehensive deal with Washington. To date, Russia has continued its policy--begun under ex-president Vladimir Putin--of rapprochement with China and consistent challenges to the central role the United States plays in world affairs. The global economic crisis has done little to change this behavior.

The Obama Administration is anxious to secure Russian cooperation on several pressing issues, such as arms control, non-proliferation, a joint policy on Iran and the Middle East, and energy cooperation. However, today's Russia is a tough customer. While the Cold War may be over, Moscow, bristling with anti-Americanism, is engaged in the pursuit of a sphere of influence and is reaching out to authoritarians from Beijing to Caracas to Tehran.

While pursuing the new realism and being attentive and polite to his Russian hosts, President Obama must not forget that in the last decade Russia has retreated from the partial democratic achievements of the Boris Yeltsin era. Although Putin stepped down as president last year, little has changed under Medvedev, despite his rhetoric to the contrary--probably because the real power is still in the hands of Putin and his allies.

Moscow's Five No's

Over the last few years, Moscow has crystallized a policy of negativity toward the U.S., which includes the following five planks:

1. No to NATO enlargement that includes Georgia and Ukraine;
2. No to U.S. missile defense in Europe;
3. No to a robust joint policy designed to halt the Iranian nuclear arms and ballistic missiles

program;

4. No to the current security architecture in Europe; and

5. No to the U.S. dollar as reserve currency and the current global economic architecture (Western-dominated International Monetary Fund and World Bank).

Moscow's complaints have included allegations that the United States is interfering in Russia's internal affairs by promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law; supporting NGOs; and generally being "preachy," didactic, and heavy handed.

Hitting the Reset Button: At What Price?

The Obama Administration has expressed its desire to "push the reset button" on relations with Russia. Specifically, this has meant:

- * Prioritizing a strategic arms control agreement on an accelerated schedule (before the year's end);
- * Reportedly offering the Kremlin an implicit deal on missile defense in Europe;
- * Downplaying NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia (also because of European resistance); and
- * Offering to speed Russian membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO).

Moscow has responded with minimal rhetorical nods yet continued its policy of push-backs and propaganda. Specifically, this spring the Kremlin has promulgated a national security strategy that fingered the U.S. as a principal threat to Russia. Moscow also declared that it is no longer bound by the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty and questioned its future commitment to the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty.

The Kremlin is also trying to gut the current principal framework for European and Eurasian security--the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE)--by denying it budgetary support and blocking its peacekeeping missions. Russia's actions are the result of its objections to OSCE election observation work and the organization's democracy and human rights mission, which it pursues in accordance with the 1975 Helsinki Agreements.

Last year, Russia violated the decades-old Helsinki principle of the inviolability of European borders by recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the 2008 war with Georgia and signing a "status-of-forces agreement" that permanently deploys over 10,000 Russian troops on Georgian soil in five military bases.

Russia further demanded a linkage between the ongoing arms control talks to a U.S. commitment to halt missile defense in Europe and refused to expand missile defense cooperation by hosting radar or a data link on the Russian territory.

On the economic front, the Russian government rejected WTO membership in 2009, which the U.S. promised to support, instead prioritizing Eurasian economic consolidation through a customs union with Belarus and Kazakhstan--a step to boost its "sphere of exclusive interests."

Medvedev, Putin, and Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin called for the G-8 to make the ruble and the yuan reserve currencies and expand IMF drawing rights, while Vice Premier Igor Sechin suggested that the world move away from the dollar in oil transactions. All of these measures, if enacted, would cause treasuries worldwide to dump their dollar reserves and thereby weaken the U.S. currency.

What Should President Obama Do?

President Obama should offer the Putin-Medvedev administration the option of joining the U.S. and the West in addressing today's major global security and economic challenges--but he should do so on terms that take U.S. national interests into account, as well as the interests of America's allies. Obama should not give in to Moscow's bullying tactics and tough negotiating posture.

Specifically, at the Moscow summit, the Obama Administration should:

- * Pursue a strategic weapons limitations agreement without an artificially imposed timetable while signing a memorandum that would import the START II inspection procedures into the Moscow Treaty on arms control (in force until 2012).
- * Reiterate an offer of ballistic missile defense cooperation with Moscow while pursuing plans to deploy missile defense in Europe at the earliest date possible, as the Iranian threat is likely to grow if the hard-liners win the day in Tehran.
- * Request Moscow's cooperation on robust sanctions against Iran--including the cessation of all military supplies and spare parts, military and dual-use technologies, and curbing gasoline imports--unless Tehran agrees to accept full International Atomic Energy Agency supervision of its nuclear program. The weakened Khamenei-Ahmadinejad regime may be more vulnerable to economic sanctions now that its lack of popular support has been dramatically revealed by massive protests.
- * Uphold the rights of post-Soviet states to sovereignty and territorial integrity. This includes Georgia's future reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as autonomous republics and Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, including in the Crimea. Russian intervention, President Obama should clarify, will be met with robust U.S. policy responses, such as diplomatic and economic sanctions and the boosting of U.S. military presence in Georgia and Azerbaijan. The U.S. should oppose Russian actions aimed at expanding a "privileged sphere of influence," a quasi-imperialist notion that has no place in 21st-century diplomatic discourse.
- * Expand cooperation on matters of common interest, such as the recent agreement on transit of military supplies to Afghanistan. If Russia is serious about stopping the Iranian nuclear program, it can share intelligence on Tehran's activities with the U.S.

* Provide real incentives for cooperation. If Russia reconsiders its anti-American stance and is serious about a new chapter in U.S.-Russian relations, the Obama Administration should be prepared to offer real incentives, such as U.S. support for Russian entry into the WTO, repealing the obsolete Jackson-Vanik Amendment, and the resubmission of the 123 Nuclear Agreement to Congress.

* Boost private and non-profit sector cooperation by expanding business relations and improving media independence, civil society, the rule of law, and court reform. Specifically, property rights protection and the rule of law should be elevated in U.S.-Russian bilateral relations, as without fundamental changes both Russians and foreigners will continue to suffer from arbitrariness and corruption in the economic, civil, and political spheres. These changes can be made through joint projects of U.S. and Russian business and trade associations, law schools, media outlets, and NGOs.

* Request an end to anti-American propaganda in the state-controlled media. Present a specific list of anti-American TV programs and the most odious mouthpieces. The current government-sponsored campaign has already caused high levels of anti-Americanism among the Russian population, including youth, and needs to be stopped. As Russia has a hyper-centralized regime, this decision needs to be done at the presidential and prime-ministerial level.

New Plan Needed?

The U.S. should approach the upcoming summit with low expectations. So far, Russia has primarily responded to Obama's outstretched hand with a clenched fist; it is unlikely that things will change dramatically overnight.

One should hope for the best. The world would be a better place if Russia and the U.S. were able to cooperate on the key issues currently challenging the international community. However, if the Kremlin rejects Obama's overtures, the U.S. and Russia will face a continuation of the friction and bickering that have characterized U.S.-Russian relations over the last five years and are not in either side's interest. If such tensions persist, the Obama Administration should design a "Plan B"--one plan that upholds U.S. and allied interests in the face of Moscow's continued adversity.

Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies and International Energy Security in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.

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