

U.S – RUSSIAN RELATIONS UNDER THE OBAMA-MEDVEDEV PRESIDENCIES: THE RESULTS OF ‘RESET’

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Introduction

U.S. – Russian relations have always been at the forefront of academic debates, particularly since the advent of World War II. For better or worse, the people who have not experienced the worst phase of the Cold War were obliged to bring about *rapprochement* to this often complicated relationship. ‘Hope’, ‘Yes We Can’ and ‘reset’ slogans made their way into our lives and greatly enriched our diplomatic vocabulary. A new promising era seemed to be underway with the Presidents Barack H. Obama and Dmitri A. Medvedev since they were both encouraging prospects of *rapprochement* and engagement.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the relations between the two states during Obama – Medvedev presidencies, the hurdles that the two presidents had to overcome and their willingness to do it. Furthermore, special attention will be placed upon Russia’s view on the international system since 1992 and its impact during Medvedev’s presidency.

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A reference will also be made on the NATO expansion and Medvedev's task of coping with the challenges posed by the previous Russian administration when dealing with the U.S. Finally, in this paper conclusion will be made on whether the 'reset' did produce results and, if positive, whether it signaled the beginning of a new era in U.S. – Russia relations.

Medvedev's 'inherited' foreign policy

Many in the West, particularly in the United States, perceived Medvedev as a pro-Western leader. Giving him credit for foreign policy achievements, however, one will notice that it was during Medvedev's tenure that the five-day war with Georgia took place; a gas war with Ukraine also left part of Europe without heat (in the middle of winter); Russia extended its military presence in Armenia; through its 'Gas for Fleet' agreements Russia extended its naval presence in the Crimea and, last but not least, Medvedev did pay visit to the South Kuril Islands further deteriorating relations with Japan.¹

The abovementioned developments may have not necessarily been in line with the Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation 2008, which stated: 'to promote good neighborly relations with bordering states, to assist in eliminating the existing hotbeds of tension and conflicts in the regions adjacent to the Russian Federation',² however it did fully comply with the need to follow a 'pragmatic foreign policy determined by its [Russia's] national interests'.³

¹ F. Lukyanov, 'Medvedev's Foreign Policy: Period of Stabilization', *Russia in Global Affairs*, 17 February 2012, available at: <http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/redcol/Medvedevs-Foreign-Policy-Period-of-Stabilization-15453> (accessed: 18 November 2012)

² 'The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation', *President of Russia, Official Web Portal*, 12 July 2008, available at: <http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2008/07/204750.shtml> (accessed: 19 November 2012)

³ Ibid.

The pragmatic foreign policy Medvedev followed was driven by the legacy of the period since 1993 that he has inherited. Russia's foreign policy strategy has been modernized in its geopolitical aspects between 1993 and 2000 and that was largely due to NATO's enlargement. As a result, Russia launched the concept of multi-polarity.¹

The years 2000 to 2004 still found Russia both fervently supporting a strengthened multipolar international system and perceiving it in realistic terms. It was Vladimir Putin himself who emphasized the anarchical self-help order of the international system and he declared this position in his State of the Nation Annual Address Speech in 2002:

*“No one is particularly waiting for us. [...] We ourselves will have to fight for a place under the “sun””*²

NATO expansion however was not considered an imminent threat. Instead, economy topped the agenda and the acknowledgement by the administration that Russia was facing a stern economic situation strengthened the worries that Russia might be excluded from the top 'clubs'.

Putin once again argued that only an economically strong Russia will be taken seriously by other nations and, thus, paved the way to a *geo-economic Realism* in Russia's foreign policy thinking.³ While economy still comprised a huge part of Russia's foreign policy priorities, the following years found the state increasingly skeptical about a further change of the Cold war stereotypes.

It was primarily due to the unilateralism and democracy promotion of the West, more specifically the United States, unpredictability of

¹ *Thorun Christian*, Explaining Change in Russian Foreign Policy: The role of Ideas in Post-Soviet Russia's Conduct Towards the West (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), pp. 29-30.

² *Ibid.* p.30.

³ *Ibid.* p.31.

the international system and persistence of the Cold war stereotypes still in articulation in western political milieu.¹ It was thus not by coincidence, that Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov argued that ‘the paradigm of contemporary international relations is rather determined by competition in the broadest interpretation of the word, particularly when the object of competition is value systems and development models’.²

Hence, during this period (2004-2007) Russia saw a new threat, that of imposing democracy in its own acclaimed ‘backyard’, which lead it to adopting a *cultural geostrategic Realism*. In this context, the *Realism* can be pointed out as a common denominator of the Russian foreign policy concept. As Lilia Shevtsova and David J. Kramer put it, Russia-Georgia war and the subsequent annexations of South Ossetia and Abkhazia did happen on Medvedev’s watch which ‘reflects its continuing neo-imperialist tradition [...]. It should have been obvious to all much earlier that Medvedev’s liberal, pro- Western image was more fiction than fact’.³

A “difficult” legacy

In order to understand and evaluate whether the ‘reset’ produced any results, a special attention should be paid to the hurdles and the environment that existed during the previous presidencies of George W. Bush and Vladimir V. Putin. US-Russia “honeymoon” did not last long,

¹ Ibid. p.31.

² S. Lavrov, ‘The Present and the Future of Global Politics’, *Russia in Global Affairs*, vol. 5, no.2 (April-June 2007) 8-21, p.10, available at: http://eng.globalaffairs.ru/number/n_8554 (accessed: 19 November 2012).

Thorun Christian, *Explaining Change in Russian Foreign Policy: The role of ideas in Post-Soviet Russia’s Conduct Towards the West* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p.32.

³ L. Shevtsova and D. J. Kramer, ‘Medvedev the Phony’, *Foreign Policy*, 7 May 2012, available at: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/05/07/medvedev_the_phony?page=0%2C1 (accessed: 21 November 2012).

even though shared agendas on the fight against terrorism did bring about a certain semi-*rapprochement* mood among various Russian and American circles.

For example, one should notice that it was during the Bush-Putin presidencies that British PM Tony Blair argued that Russia should be granted a better position when it expresses its concerns within NATO and proposed the creation of Russia-North Atlantic Council.¹ Among the high ranking American officials, the idea of Russia's WTO entrance and the Jackson-Vanik termination by 2002 was very much present and the US Senate Committee on Foreign Relations did vote to write off \$3.5 billion if Russia allocated some of its income to eliminate nuclear and chemical weapons.²

Russia did declare its intentions to dismantle its military bases in Cuba and Vietnam, a declaration President Bush fully endorsed by arguing that the United States and Russia are "no longer adversaries".³ However, US-Russia 'honeymoon' did not last long and distrust, double-standard and *realpolitik* palettes colored the intricate painting of the US -Russian relations.

Relations between the two states became eventually strained and the President's Bush 'soul-searching'⁴ on Vladimir Putin this time did not achieve the desired effect. Shifting geopolitical considerations and imbalances led Russia to adopt a conscious foreign policy, contaminated with distrust and skepticism.

¹ Rogov Sergei in Melville Andrei and Shakleina Tatiana, *Russian Foreign Policy in Transition Concepts and Realities* (Central European University Press, 2005), p.367.

² Ibid, p.368.

³ Ibid, p.361.

⁴ During a summit meeting in Ljubljana, President Bush described President Putin as an honest and trustworthy man by noticing "I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be very straight forward and trustworthy [...] I was able to get a sense of his soul".

For example, Russia has always been concerned when it came to North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and plans of its enlargement. It was precisely during Putin's tenure that the Baltic States (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) joined NATO on March 29, 2004. Tensions involving Estonia and Latvia and their discriminatory policies against ethnic-Russian minorities within their respective borders, as well as their refusal to attend commemorative ceremonies of the end of World War II were clear indications that Russia's eastern 'backyard' was in real danger.¹

Furthermore, the decision of President Bush to terminate Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002 under the pretext that 'the United States is prohibited from defending its homeland against ballistic missile attack [...] We are also prohibited from cooperating in developing missile defenses against long-range threats with our friends and allies'.² The announcement that the United States will move forward with their program of installing anti-ballistic missile defense systems in Poland and a radar station in the Czech Republic under the pretext of protecting against aggression acts by Iran and North Korea, only re-enforced Russia's concerns and was given a cold shoulder by the President Putin.³

Furthermore, it should be noted that unrealistic policy of the United States' vis-à-vis Iraq and the ousting of Saddam Hussein contributed significantly to this overgrowing suspicion. Putin objected to the

¹ Olikier Olga, Crane Keith, Schwartz H. Lowell, Yusupov Catherine, *Russian Foreign Policy Sources and Implications* (RAND Corporation 2009), pp.11-11.

² "Announcement of Withdrawal from the ABM Treaty", White House press release, 13 Dec. 2001, available at:

<http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/12/20011213-2.html> (accessed: 28 November 2012).

³ Gottemoeller, Rose (5 June 2007). *Talk of the Nation*. Interview with Robert Siegel. NPR. available at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10741255> (accessed: 28 November 2012).

war on Iraq for the reason that it “could become a new center, a new magnet for all destructive elements”.¹ In the same terms, the Russian president considered and reacted to “colored” revolutions that took place in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan in 2003, 2004 and 2005 respectively.

The situation worsened as a result of the declarations made by the ‘newcomers’ of possible NATO accession plans. The colored revolutions became therefore *de facto* – as perceived by the majority polled in Russia – a threat to the national security of the Russian Federation because it made Russia more “vulnerable because of the spread of political instability in its periphery”.²

The abovementioned examples lead us to the conclusion that Medvedev and Obama inherited a troublesome relationship, full of distrust and double standards in the context of which the desired ‘reset’ seemed highly unlikely to occur.

“Resetting” reality: factsheet

Social scientists argue that facts and numbers are only preconditions for a more comprehensive understanding and when it comes to various sociopolitical realities, a deeper social science research methodology has to be employed. In our case, indeed, figures do matter and have to be mentioned in order to describe the ‘reset’ in action.

The U.S. president Barack H. Obama and his Russian counterpart Dmitry A. Medvedev seemed to have found a common ground. From the very beginning, the U.S. administration was determined to give the

¹ Myers Lee Steven, “*Putin Says U.S. Faces Big Risks In Effort in Iraq*”, The New York Times, 06 October 2003, available at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/10/06/world/putin-says-us-faces-big-risks-in-effort-in-iraq.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> (accessed: 30 November 2012).

² *Tsygankov P. Andrei*, Russia’s Foreign Policy: Change And Continuity In National Identity, 2nd Edition (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2010), p.172.

U.S.-Russian relationship another “shot”, and the American president made an official visit to Moscow to meet both the President Medvedev and the Prime Minister Putin.

Since the latter, had, in Obama’s words, “ a lot of sway in Russia with one foot in the old ways in doing business and one foot in the new”¹, the talks dealt with many contradictory topics. They included strategic, geopolitical, economical, cultural and military ones.

Although Russia pursued quid-pro-quo policies and attempts of incorporating the US anti-missile plans into the START Treaty², ‘Reset’ or ‘*perezagruzka*’, did in fact produce strategic results and among them was *de jure* the signing of the New START Treaty on April 8, 2010.

According to the New START Treaty, each side had to maintain 1550 deployed strategic warheads, 800 deployed and non-deployed ICBM launchers, 700 deployed strategic delivery vehicles, heavy bombers equipped with nuclear armaments and SLBM launchers. The Treaty presupposed that data exchanges, on-site inspections and notifications about production and movement of certain strategic systems have to be maintained and followed on a permanent basis.³

On the other hand however, one should note that president Obama cancelled – or postponed – missile defense plans in Poland and asked Russia to join NATO radar nets, a set of system against possible Iranian strikes.⁴ Furthermore, renewed military cooperation deals be-

¹“Putin Russia and the West: ”New Start” ,BBC, 17.02.2012, available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBQmHb8eVN4> (accessed: 05 December 2012).

²Ibid.

³U.S.-Russia Relations: ‘Reset’ Fact Sheet, White House press release, 24.06.2010, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet> (accessed: 05 Dec. 2012).

⁴Baron Kevin, Lubold Gordon, “Obama’s *Russian ‘reset’ Worked, Says Pentagon Policy Chief*” , Foreign Policy, 19.09.2012, available at: http://e-ring.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/09/19/obama_s_russian_reset_worked_says_new_pentagon_policy_chief (accessed: 05 December 2012)

tween the two states were signed and a work plan is drafted and is going to be conducted under the Defense Cooperation Working Group of the Bilateral Presidential Commission.¹

Geopolitically, in Obama's eyes Medvedev was seen as a staunch ally against Iran. For instance, Russia supported and voted on sanctions – UN Security Council Resolution 1929 – against Iran's nuclear ambitions on June 2010 and cancelled its billion dollar arms sale agreement with Iran.²

Through P5+1 "robust cooperation" the two states reached an agreement on IAEA's plans to supply Tehran Research Reactor with nuclear fuel in return to its low enriched uranium capabilities.³ Furthermore, it was recognized that Russia played a crucial role in Afghanistan and on that basis Medvedev offered the Northern Distribution Network route agreement to be extended. Much to the US surprise 30 percent of the supplies to Afghanistan cross over and 65 percent of the supplies being routed in the NDN are to be transited through Russian territory.

Moreover, Russia once again joined United States' initiative of condemning North Korea and its nuclear test in May 25, 2009. In fact; Russia joined the United States and was among the signatories of the UN Security Council resolution 1874.⁴

When it comes to the economy, it has to be recognized that the United States has supported Russia's WTO integration. Russia's Deputy

¹ U.S.- Russia Relations: 'Reset' Fact Sheet, White House press release, 24 June 2010, available at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet> (accessed: 05 Dec. 2012).

² "Putin Russia and the West: "New Start", BBC, 17 February 2012, available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBQmHb8eVN4> (accessed: 05 December 2012).

³ U.S.-Russia Relations: 'Reset' Fact Sheet, White House press release, 24 June 2010, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet> (accessed: 05 Dec. 2012).

⁴ Ibid.

Prime Minister Shuvalov met with Larry Summers, Director of the White House National Economic Council and USTR Ambassador Ron Kirk. As a result, a roadmap was adopted which, if fully implemented, may lead to Russia's accession in WTO.

Furthermore, in June 2009 U.S.-Russia Foundation of Economic Advancement and the Rule of Law (USRF) was established in Russia, which will contribute to developing projects that "encapsulate the principles of enterprise, accountability and partnership".¹ It should be noted, that U.S.-Russia trade – although relatively low in comparison to that with many other states – reached an all-time high of 42.9 billion dollars in 2011.²

At the cultural level, important developments occurred as well. Analysts point out that during the Medvedev-Obama presidencies U.S.-Russia Presidential Bilateral Commission was created in order to deal with issues such as civil society, health, military-to-military, space, sports and cultural exchange and nuclear cooperation.

The abovementioned Commission and the issues it addressed, further encouraged both presidents to issue a Joint Statement on People-to-People Connections and the vitality of keeping process of diplomatic, cultural, sports and arts exchange going.³

Last but certainly not least, the two states developed throughout these years an extensive military cooperation. For example, Russian Black Sea task force took part in NATO drills over Spanish coasts which

¹ Ibid.

² 'The "Reset" Theory, Results, Future', McFaul Michael presentation to the Higher School of Economics, 25 May 2012, available at: <http://photos.state.gov/libraries/russia/231771/PDFs/ResetSlides-HSE.pdf> (accessed: 05 December 2012).

³ U.S.-Russia Relations: 'Reset' Fact Sheet, White House press release, 24 June 2010, available at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet> (accessed: 05 Dec. 2012).

marked the first Russian submarine participation in the NATO military exercise. The exchange of military information was certainly improved and Russian paratroopers participated, again for the first time, in counter-terrorism exercises.

Furthermore, bilateral agreements for the removal of HEU from Third world countries including those stored in Kazakhstan and Ukraine to Russia have by far proved successful. Agreements on plutonium stated that the surplus of approximately 17,000 nuclear weapons should be provided and should be under the U.S and Russian disposition.¹

Conclusion

The harmony of U.S-Russian relations has always been the focus of the international affairs. However, during the Obama-Medvedev presidencies important developments occurred and important agreements were reached in geopolitical, strategic, cultural, and economic sphere. It should be considered that both presidents inherited a rather problematic past where international relations sometimes approached to zero-sum game terms.

It is worth remembering that the realism was the most characteristic feature of the Medvedev-Obama presidencies. Medvedev developed his realist legacy in Russian foreign policy, and, Obama moved forward with anti-ballistic missiles in Europe. Both states, however, realized that it is in their national interest that relations between the two reach a higher level of negotiability.

¹The "Reset" Theory, Results, Future', McFaul Michael presentation to the Higher School of Economics, 25 May 2012, available at: <http://photos.state.gov/libraries/russia/231771/PDFs/ResetSlides-HSE.pdf> (accessed: 05 December 2012)

Of course, the two states did not reach an agreement on the US missile defense, but at least the United States and, more specifically the Obama administration, has started, as Medvedev previously insisted, "listening to our [Russia's] arguments".¹ 'Reset has *de facto* worked since agreements were put on paper and actually implemented.

In International politics however, 'Luck' is a significant factor that has always played a crucial role and it was claimed that 'reset' was largely successful, because it touched upon and addressed mutually shared agendas of both governments. In other words, it was pure luck that the agendas of the two governments happened to coincide thus leading to a successful 'reset' of the US-Russia relations.

'Reset' did break the ice and closer relations were achieved. Russia's need for diversification, reforming its economy into a liberal market one, and its thirst for direct foreign capital investment implies that it is in Russia's national interests to cooperate with the West.

On the other hand, it takes two to tango, and the future of 'Reset' is equally dependent on the US goals as well. In conclusion, it can be certainly argued that treaties and alliances are only successful when national interests are aligned. Fortunately both Russia and the United States were on the same page of the story.

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¹ "Putin Russia and the West: "New Start", BBC, 17 February 2012, available at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QBQmHb8eVN4> (accessed: 05 December 2012).