



How the Russian 'Reset' Explains Obama's Foreign Policy

The president's naivete about Vladimir Putin is the root cause of his failure.

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As violent mobs shouting Islamist slogans rampaged against U.S. diplomats across the Middle East and Southeast Asia in the weeks following the fatal Sept. 11, 2012 attack on U.S. officials in Libya, Russian President Vladimir Putin saw a chance to kick the United States when it was down. He did it by expelling the U.S. Agency for International Development, whose work -- advising private groups on democracy, as it has done since the 1990s -- he evidently resented. For good measure, he just cancelled the longstanding Nunn-Lugar program of cooperation on destroying and securing old Soviet weapons of mass destruction. His message: Russia doesn't need any help from the Americans.

These moves by Putin are just the latest in a long string of affronts and rebuffs mocking U.S. President Barack Obama's hope that he could "reset" U.S.-Russian relations. The policy's very name implied that the strains in the relationship were largely America's fault -- that Obama had to rectify U.S. policy. He expected to turn Russia into a cooperative partner by showing greater humility and by accommodating Putin's sensibilities on Iran, ballistic missile defense, nuclear arms treaties, and other matters.

This Russia policy aligned with Obama's general approach to national security. For years, Obama and his national security

team argued that, by and large, America's problems in the world resulted not from aggression or the ideological extremism of hostile actors abroad, but were the bitter fruit of America's history of bullying, selfishness and militarism, especially during the George W. Bush administration. They complained that America had long been acting like a rogue nation, arrogant in defying the rights of others, self-serving in defining its interests in national rather than global terms, and unilateralist in refusing to constrain itself to actions approved by multilateral institutions or endorsed by progressive commentators (the latter often refer to themselves as "the international community"). They contended that the United States should be humble, out of a due sense of shame, and should adopt a "doctrine of mea culpa."

Anne-Marie Slaughter, who served Obama as the head of Policy Planning at the State Department, wrote a February 2008 *Commonweal* article called "Good Reasons to be Humble" in which she said that the United States "should make clear that our hubris ... has diminished us and led to tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths." Current White House adviser Samantha Power, while a Harvard University lecturer, wrote in the *New Republic's* March 3, 2003 issue: "Instituting a doctrine of mea culpa would enhance our credibility by showing that American decision-makers do not endorse the sins of their predecessors."

The Obama administration has had plenty of time to test its diplomatic theories. It was back in July 2009 that the president told the New Economic School in Moscow that the U.S.-Russian relationship required a reset. "There is," he said, "the 20th-century view that the United States and Russia are destined to be antagonists, and that a strong Russia or a strong America can only assert themselves in opposition to one another. And there is a 19th-century view that we are destined to vie for spheres of influence, and that great powers must forge competing blocs to balance one another." Obama called these assumptions mistaken, and added: "In 2009, a great power does not show strength by dominating or demonizing other countries."

What are we to make of this idea that the Obama presidency is a new era, in which the great powers will no longer behave as they have for centuries? Was the president offering this up as an observation of fact? Was it an apology? A promise? A sermon?

Did Obama intend to imply that powerful nations will no longer act selfishly or aggressively? Was he suggesting that his accession to power has transformed international affairs, consigning to history's dustbin the writings of Thucydides, the venerable Athenian historian who, roughly 2,300 years ago, observed that nations, like men, pursue what they perceive as their interests -- sometimes with judgment, sometimes without, and occasionally with tragic results. If so, we can expect Thucydides to have the last laugh.

Obama first spoke of "reset" less than 12 months after Russia invaded Georgia, a U.S. friend and partner. Soon after that, the Russian-built Bushehr nuclear reactor in Iran began operations. As rebels tried to bring down the government of Syria's Bashar al-Assad in early 2011, Russia supplied the Syrian dictator with military equipment by sea. Reuters **reports** that Moscow sold Damascus \$1 billion dollars of military hardware since the uprising began. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton **warned** Russia in June 2012 against sending helicopters to assist the Syrian regime in its attacks against civilians and rebels. In August 2011, Putin, then the prime minister, **accused** the United States of living "like a parasite" on the world economy. At a May 2012 international missile defense conference in Moscow, Russia's top military officer Gen. Nikolai Makarov **denounced** U.S.-NATO plans to build defenses against ballistic missiles launched from the Middle East. Referring to potential Eastern European sites for such defenses, General Makarov made a remarkable threat: "A

decision to use destructive force pre-emptively will be taken if the situation worsens."

In short, in the 39 months since Obama announced that great powers do "not show strength by dominating or demonizing other countries," Russia has exerted itself to defy the United States and NATO and increase its political investment in rogue regimes -- in particular in Syria and Iran. In the three-and-a-half years since the policy's inception, the Obama reset has been a head-shaking disappointment.

Yet throughout the summer of 2012 the Obama administration repeatedly voiced hope that Putin, newly re-elected as Russian president, would help end the carnage in Syria. Despite thousands of civilian casualties in Syria's expanding civil conflict, Obama invoked no interest or principle in favor of supporting the anti-Assad dissidents, though he had cited a "responsibility to protect" the Libyan rebels, who suffered fewer casualties. As the *New York Times* **explained**, Obama's focus in the Syria crisis was on working with Russia and through the United Nations Security Council. He strove to persuade Putin to encourage the Syrian dictator to step down. Though generally friendly to the Obama administration, the *Washington Post's* editors **lamented** its naïveté toward Russia: "Even if Mr. Putin could be persuaded, he probably lacks the means to force out Mr. Assad and his clan. Mr. Obama's apparent faith that Mr. Putin is ready to do business with him is at odds with the strongman's recent behavior..." Obama failed to appreciate Putin's interest in reasserting Russian influence in the Middle East. Russia's predominant interest is in high oil prices and Middle Eastern turmoil serves that interest, yet Obama simply assumed that Russia would cooperate with American efforts to promote Middle Eastern stability.

When Obama offered blandishments to Russia in Europe, he did so at the expense of U.S. allies in Poland and the Czech Republic. Those countries had agreed with President Bush to host American missile defense radars and interceptors. This was controversial there, but the leaders believed that cooperating with the United States served crucial strategic purposes. Poland and the Czech Republic had both been brutalized throughout much of the 20th century, first by the Nazis and then the Soviets. Many Poles and Czechs supported entry into the Western alliance eagerly, indeed passionately, as the guarantee that they would never again lose their independence to Germans, Russians, or anyone else. Because they cherish their American security ties as the key to their countries' future safety and freedom, the leaders of Poland and the Czech Republic aimed to strengthen those ties through their missile-defense agreements with the United States.

Obama, however, apparently decided that those agreements were less important than the goodwill he might buy with Russia by cancelling them. Maintaining solidarity with allies that look to America as the leader of the free world has never been an Obama administration priority. In setting aside the missile-defense agreements with Poland and the Czech Republic, the president embarrassed their pro-American leaders, hurt the NATO alliance, showed weakness toward Russia, deemphasized the importance of missile defense, and called America's word into question -- all in all, a multifaceted disservice to U.S. security interests.

The view that the Obama policy is naïve and bumbling has some merit and helps account for some of the wrong steps regarding Russia. But it ignores the larger problem of Obama's negative conception of America's role in the world.

Within the community of progressive American academics -- the community of which Obama and key members of his administration have long been proud members -- the idea of America as leader of the free world commands little respect. The very term "free world" is disfavored, as is the idea of the United States as leader. Rather than see American power

and assertiveness as desirable, progressive faculty members at leading universities commonly look at them negatively, as major sources of international tension. According to this view, building bridges to states that fear American power will earn the United States respect and encourage harmony, but strengthening existing alliances and supporting democratic friends reinforces American influence and aggravates fear abroad of American hegemony. The United States is seen as more the cause of international problems than the answer. It is a theme the late Jeanne Kirkpatrick in 1984 famously referred to as "blame America first."

In his book *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama argued that America has a deplorable history of tolerating or aiding regimes with atrocious human rights records. As president, however, he has been guilty of this offense. Russia has a poor human rights record over recent years. Its officials routinely violate the human rights of their critics, often arranging for those critics to be beaten and even murdered. In April 2012, a U.S. State Department spokesperson announced that Elena Milashina, an investigative reporter for a respected independent Russian newspaper, *Novoya Gazeta*, had been "brutally attacked."

The previous year, Obama's Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasian Affairs Philip Gordon told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that "well-known journalists -- such as Anna Politkovskaya, Paul Klebnikov, and Natalya Estemirova -- have been killed." Politkovskaya had criticized Putin and his handling of the Chechen revolt. Estemirova, too, had investigated extra-judicial killings, kidnappings, and torture in Chechnya. Klebnikov published a list of the 100 wealthiest Russians and investigated corruption generally. Gordon also voiced concern about the suspicious death in prison of a Russian attorney, Sergei Magnitsky, who had accused government officials of tax fraud on a massive scale. Nevertheless, the Obama White House first opposed and then diluted the Sergei Magnitsky Rule of Law Accountability bill, a congressional measure to penalize the Russian officials responsible for Magnitsky's death.

Instead of condemning these abuses, Obama seeks Putin's favor in anticipation of negotiations on further reductions of U.S. and Russian nuclear arsenals, a deal that Putin says would require U.S. concessions on missile defenses. Such concessions would meet with strong objections in the U.S. Senate. Obama showed his eagerness for a new arms treaty when he asked then-Russian President Dmitry Medvedev to defer pressing for missile-defense concessions until after the U.S. presidential elections. In a quiet aside to the Russian leader, Obama **promised** more flexibility than -- a comment that embarrassed the president when, through an open microphone, it was overheard by the press corps.

Obama pursues new arms control agreements so eagerly because he sees them as steps toward "nuclear zero," a world entirely without nuclear weapons -- a grandiose goal he **endorsed** early in his presidency. It was quite a turnabout for a man who criticized U.S. policy during the Cold War because he said opposition to communism blinded successive U.S. presidents to the human-rights violations of regimes with which they cooperated in pursuit of security. Now, in pursuit of nuclear zero, he refuses to acknowledge the significance of the Putin regime's human-rights abuses.

To be sure, State Department officials, continually asked about official Russian oppression of political dissidents, feel compelled to denounce it. When Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a wealthy businessman and outspoken critic of Putin, was sentenced to prison for business-related crimes, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton herself criticized the proceedings. She said his conviction "raises serious questions about selective prosecution -- and about the rule of law being overshadowed by political considerations." The case, she **noted**, harmed "Russia's reputation for fulfilling its human rights obligations."

But Obama persists in treating Putin as an enlightened potential partner -- in particular, on Syria and on nuclear arms control.

Why? Obama's multilateral foreign policy **assigns high importance** to the legitimacy the U.N. Security Council supposedly bestows on American actions in the world. Acknowledging Putin as an untrustworthy and brutal authoritarian would not serve Obama's interest in claiming that Security Council approval -- that is, Putin's approval -- is the acid test of international legitimacy.

Taking human rights lightly has been a hallmark of the Obama administration. Even prominent progressives who had supported his election denounced the way he downplayed human rights in his outreach to the authoritarian regimes of Russia, China, Saudi Arabia and the Palestinian Authority. A February 2012 Amnesty International **editorial**, for example, asked "Will President Obama ignore human rights in China?" and answered in the affirmative. And Freedom House President David J. Kramer recently **wrote** in the *Washington Post*:

“ The decision to halt USAID work in Russia is just the latest in what has been an especially bad year for human rights in that country, though you wouldn't know it from the virtual silence of Western leaders. Since Vladimir Putin's formal return to the Russian presidency in May, there has been an across-the-board crackdown on civil society and the opposition. Beyond the show trial of members of the punk rock band Pussy Riot, authorities have raided the homes of government critics and their family members, conducted criminal investigations and prosecutions of opposition figures and their spouses, and used brutal force against protesters.

Meanwhile, aside from spokesmen's statements of concern, President Obama and most of his European colleagues have said next to nothing.

Human rights activists were especially disappointed when Obama cold-shouldered the anti-regime protesters in Iran at the time of the brutally suppressed Green Revolution demonstrations following the rigged elections of June 2009.

The unwillingness to make human rights a prominent issue in his Russia policy, therefore, is of a piece with the president's general de-emphasis on human rights abroad. A key reason, it seems, is that Bush was famous for his "Freedom Agenda" and Obama did not want to sound themes closely associated with his predecessor. But it also bears noting that progressive academics generally disdain the human rights rhetoric that both Democratic and Republican administrations have used since World War II. According to the left progressive critique of U.S. history, such talk is mere sanctimony and hypocrisy because America has wrought so much harm around the world, and mistreated people so badly at home, that it lacks the moral authority to stand up for the human rights of others.

Obama has never opposed human rights in principle -- on the contrary. But especially at the outset of his presidency, he seemed to believe America owed bows, apologies, and confessions to its many victims across the world and therefore had no right to put itself forward as a standard-bearer for human rights. Obama's new attitude undoubtedly played a role in persuading authoritarians that the cost of violating human rights would be relatively low during his presidency. Putin seems to have received that message loud and clear.

Obama's Russia policy combines a jaundiced view of American history with naïve regard for Putin. The policy has been vain in all meanings of the word. No reset has occurred. Obama administration officials sometimes defend the reset on the grounds that Russia was generous in granting transit privileges for supplies into Afghanistan, but that is rather small beer.

Weigh that against the various ways Russia is at cross purposes with America and with humane ideals. Russian officials defend Iran's clerical regime, ensuring it does not have to face crippling economic sanctions as it pursues nuclear weapons. Putin is instrumental in allowing Syria's murderous dictator to cling to power. Russian military officers talk of nuclear weapons and missile defense as if the Cold War never ended. Putin is forfeiting Russia's hopes for sustainable prosperity. Under him, Russia functions merely as an extraction economy, dependant almost entirely on sales of oil and gas. His regime's corruption and brutality not only oppress the citizenry -- they frighten away international investment that might otherwise make good use of Russia's impressive human capital. Putin crushes political dissent in Russia as if he were a KGB apparatchik, which is of course just what he was.

Obama can't seem to understand why, now that his predecessor is no longer in office, Russia is not more friendly and cooperative. He does not view Putin's Russia as a complex, troublemaking, declining power with great potential to damage its own people, its neighbors, U.S. allies, and America itself. Rather, he is intent on chasing the Russian president in the hopes of signing yet another outmoded arms control treaty that can be misrepresented as moving the world another step closer to the dubious fantasy of nuclear zero. To facilitate the chase, he must downplay the Putin regime's violations of human rights. This he does with no apparent appreciation of the way that promoting democracy in Russia could not only uphold American principles but also serve American interests.

The one thing that can be said for the administration's Russia policy is that it truly reflects Obama's understanding of world affairs and of America's proper place therein. This is not good news.

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