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Russia

Russia has the potential to be richer, more powerful, and more self-assured in 2025 if it invests in human capital, expands and diversifies its economy, and integrates with global markets.

—Global Trends 2025: A Transformed World¹

They [Americans] are living beyond their means and shifting a part of the weight of their problems to the world economy ... They are living like parasites off the global economy and their monopoly of the dollar ... If over there [in America] there is a systemic malfunction, this will affect everyone. Countries like Russia and China hold a significant part of their reserves in American securities ... There should be other reserve currencies.

—Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin,
August 1, 2011²

The basic fact of the current relationship is that many Russians think, with good reason, that the United States has essentially reneged on key parts of its settlement with post-Soviet Russia. As a result, what most marks Russia's orientation to the world, and to the United States in particular, is a thick and toxic narrative of grievance. The key to a successful reset policy is for the United States to address these grievances, which are intelligible only in terms of the Cold War settlement.

—Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry,
“The Unravelling of the Cold War Settlement”³

Russia is claiming openly that all these countries belong to the Russian zone. But the west should remember something ... In old Soviet slang, “zone” meant prison.

—Vytautas Landsbergis, Lithuanian MEP
(and former leader of Lithuania)⁴

Introduction

Few capitals around the globe could rival Moscow's enthusiasm to welcome the departure of George W. Bush from the White House, herald the end of US hegemony and heartily toast the arrival of a post-American world. Ever since, in 1835, Alexis De Tocqueville famously predicted the eventual global dominance of the two continental powers of the US and Russia, bilateral relations between the two nations have been tense, suspicious and characterized by an abiding absence of mutual trust and confidence. The end of the Cold War, the wrenching collapse of the Soviet Union, and subsequent triumphalist "end of history" spread of the US-led West – and NATO, in particular – into the "post-Soviet space" has simply exacerbated long-standing historic rivalries and an acute Russian sense of national humiliation. While some Russians may disagree with Vladimir Putin's lamenting that the implosion of the Soviet Union represented "the greatest geo-strategic catastrophe of the twentieth century," relatively few viewed the subsequent aftershocks and the political, economic and social dislocation uncritically.

Whatever the impact on American power of major events from 9/11 and the Iraq War to the Great Recession, the US remains the leading nation-state in the world. By contrast, Russia has been a European outlier: oppressive, impoverished and resentful. Russia possesses just 2 percent of the world's population and a mere 2 percent of the world's gross domestic product, its economy on a par with that of the Netherlands. Its demographic crisis – combining low fertility rates with diminishing life expectancy, rampant alcoholism, high rates of HIV/AIDS and a collapsing health care system – means that its population is declining rapidly, especially in the eastern part of the state. With the average Russian of fifteen years old now having a shorter life expectancy than a Somali teenager of the same age, depopulation threatens steadily to erode the material base of Russian resources, economic growth and geo-political influence.

Partly as a consequence, a growing gap characterizes Russia's self-perception as a major power in a multi-polar world and the reality of the actual – attenuated – role that it plays in global and regional affairs. Less a neo-imperial power than a post-imperial one where the necessary will to expand and dominate is mostly exhausted, Moscow's occasional bouts of grandstanding – from the invasion of Georgia in 2008 to cyber attacks on Baltic states and energy blackmail threats against former Soviet republics and Europe – excite intermittent international concern. But, unlike China, Russia's future prospects as a world power appear singularly unpromising, as a declining power rather than an "energy superpower." Reliant on its nuclear deterrence to counter-balance other powers, Russia's conventional military forces pose a limited threat to former Soviet republics such as Georgia and Ukraine but represent an increasing global irrelevance.

Given that profoundly unpropitious context, the US could perhaps be forgiven for permanently relegating US-Russian relations to a secondary status in its statecraft. But after a turbulent eight years under George W. Bush that saw bilateral relations with Moscow descend into mutual acrimony and recrimination, Barack Obama made the renewal and improvement of bilateral relations with Russia a key objective of his post-American foreign policy. Aside from its intrinsic benefits and practical achievability, the prospect of better US relations with Moscow offered a number of potential strategic and tactical gains for Washington, from non-proliferation and arms control to Iran and Afghanistan. Moreover, a renaissance in relations with Russia appeared timely.

Perhaps more than in most US bilateral relations under his presidency, Obama's declared policy to "reset" relations with Russia enjoyed some success during his term as president, partly facilitated by a Moscow that – owing to the deep impact of the Great Recession in 2009, which saw Russian GDP decrease by 10 percent that year, and the partial eclipse of the ex-KGB chief and ultra-nationalist Vladimir Putin by the younger and more pragmatic Dimitri Medvedev as president – was less implacably activist, assertive and obstructive during 2009–12. Yet even here, the tangible results of a more empathetic US approach proved limited in number, decidedly ambiguous in quality, and of uncertain duration. Moreover, while selective aspects of the bilateral relationship showed demonstrable improvement over the course of Obama's term, the future of Russo-American relations remained largely in flux by its latter days. A new model of US-Russian cooperation premised on addressing the realities of the twenty-first century, rather than echoing the Cold War, had yet to be constructed by Obama.

For some critics of the Obama administration, on the left and the right, the Russian case provides another unfortunate example where traditional US values have been egregiously compromised for the sake of transient short-term interests. In particular, in the headlong pursuit of improved relations with Russia, Obama is castigated as having betrayed Eastern Europe and ex-Soviet republics by abandoning a promised missile defense system, freezing the Bill Clinton-initiated policy of NATO enlargement (extending to those states that could meet the necessary terms of a "double security" within both NATO and the European Union) and leaving Moscow effectively free to aggressively dominate its "Near Abroad." Administration silence on Russia's internal corruption – the state falling in 2011 to its lowest rating on Transparency International's corruption index, at 154 out of 178 nations – and repression was almost as deafening as that towards Saudi Arabia. Moreover, that silence was – not unlike that towards Saudi Arabia – also revealed to be hypocritical. While the public face of the Obama administration sought zealously to treat Moscow with exaggerated respect, the disclosure by Wikileaks of internal State Department cables in the winter of 2010 suggested a much less sanguine and

positive private view, in which Medvedev was derisively depicted as “Robin” to Putin’s “Batman,” the Russian prime minister was described as an “Alpha-dog,” and a definitive verdict was offered that:

Russia is a corrupt, autocratic kleptocracy centered on the leadership of Vladimir Putin, in which officials, oligarchs and organized crime are bound together to create a “virtual mafia state,” according to leaked secret diplomatic cables that provide a damning American assessment of its erstwhile rival superpower. Arms trafficking, money laundering, personal enrichment, protection for gangsters, extortion and kickbacks, suitcases full of money and secret offshore bank accounts in Cyprus: the cables paint a bleak picture of a political system in which bribery alone totals an estimated \$300bn a year, and in which it is often hard to distinguish between the activities of the government and organized crime.⁵

Among the Wikileaks claims were allegations that: Russian spies used senior mafia bosses to carry out criminal operations, such as arms trafficking; law enforcement agencies such as the police, spy agencies and the prosecutor’s office operated a *de facto* protection racket for criminal networks; rampant bribery served as a parallel tax system for the personal enrichment of police, officials and the KGB’s successor, the Federal Security Service (FSB); investigators looking into Russian mafia links to Spain compiled a list of Russian prosecutors, military officers and politicians who had dealings with organized crime networks; and Prime Minister Putin had amassed “illicit proceeds” from his time in office, which various sources claimed are hidden overseas.

Such unedifying features of contemporary Russia hardly made for an easy partner for Obama’s Washington, with the opaque nature of the Putin-Medvedev relationship complicating assessments of both power politics and policy. Nonetheless, a pragmatic and transactional relationship – encompassing diplomatic, military and economic aspects – developed under the guise of a genuine personal rapport between Obama and Medvedev. With only mild objection from the US administration, Russian reassertion of its military, diplomatic and economic weight in the post-Soviet space advanced from the Kremlin’s recognition of the independence of Georgia’s separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia after the 2008 Georgian war to the seemingly more benign project of a “common economic area” involving the free movement of goods, services and capital in Russia, Belarus and Kazakhstan in 2011–12. Whether the trade-off reached by Obama between promoting American values and securing US interests was on balance reasonable remains to be seen, not least since the future of the “reset” appeared highly uncertain by 2012. But the Russian example, while still illustrative of the limits of strategic engagement for a post-American foreign policy, proved to be a relatively rare and clear – if qualified and contingent – success story of sorts for President Obama’s grand strategy.

Resetting Russian-American relations

Despite its neuralgic nationalism and chronic internal problems, Russia's manifest salience to a post-American foreign policy cannot be denied. As Michael Mandelbaum notes:

Russia's importance comes from its size – it is geographically the world's largest country – its substantial stockpile of nuclear weapons, which rivals that of the United States, its considerable reserves of minerals, especially oil and natural gas, and its location. It is part of the world's three most strategically important regions: the Middle East – the Persian Gulf with its even greater energy reserves lies to Russia's southeast; East Asia, via the country's long Pacific coastline and border with China; and Europe, where Russia has functioned as a great power since the time of the tsar Peter the Great in the seventeenth century.⁶

Since the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, relatively little in the way of elite consensus has emerged over how US foreign policy should approach post-Soviet Russia. The influential book by Edward Lucas, *The New Cold War*, aptly summarized one school of pessimistic thought. Highlighting Moscow's often bellicose pronouncements, suppression of free expression and civil rights, its looming menace to the Baltic states and Georgia, and its habitually zero-sum approach to international relations, Lucas framed Russia as an adamant Western rejectionist in which “bribery and corruption are not part of the system, they are the system.”⁷ A corrupt and kleptocratic regime resistant to Western interests and rejecting Western values such as political freedom, the rule of law, the separation of powers, a free press and individual rights, the ruling monopoly of the United Russia party was, according to former Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev, a “worse version of the Soviet Communist party.”⁸

The Lucas school was framed by the Putin era from 1999–2008, in which Russian recovery from Boris Yeltsin's desultory presidency and the oligarch-dominated 1990s was driven by a petro-boom that allowed the president to deliver economic prosperity – with economic growth at 7 percent or more annually from 2000–07 – while simultaneously rigging the political system, dismembering the independent mass media and taking on the oligarchs that dominated Russia's business world. Through the zealous recruitment of former security and military officials, many with personal ties to him from his years in the KGB at St Petersburg, President Putin's deployment of the *siloviki* assisted his administrating the national economy through a newly centralized system of “managed” or “sovereign democracy.” More interested in extracting rents from their economic holdings than engaging in productive investment or portfolio diversification, the *siloviki* presided over an era of rampant crony capitalism that, while not necessarily in the best interests of the nation, nonetheless produced substantial popularity for Putin as president – assisted by a combination of economic nationalism, post-imperial nostalgia for the

Soviet era, and Putin's "cult of personality" aggressively heralding the overdue return of Russia to great power status.

At the same time, a more tempered interpretation instead stresses not the robustness but the fragility of Russian recovery. Two aspects in particular stand out here. First, as a controversial article by Jeffrey Tayler in *The Atlantic* put it in 2001, whatever the Putin bluster, the reality remains that Moscow's days as a great power are effectively "finished":

Russia's thousand-year history has destined it to shrink demographically, weaken economically, and, possibly, disintegrate territorially. The drama is coming to a close, and within a few decades Russia will concern the rest of the world no more than any Third World country with abundant resources, an impoverished people, and a corrupt government. In short, as a Great Power, Russia is finished.⁹

Second, with the Cold War's demise and the implosion of the USSR, Russia has experienced a national trauma and a transition from imperialism that it has, arguably, handled relatively well. The vast Soviet military industrial complex proved a massive burden for the economy and, as Dmitri Trenin – director of the Carnegie Moscow Centre – documents, by any reasonable standard, Russia achieved one of the most stunning demilitarizations in modern history after 1991.¹⁰ Compared in particular to the protracted and violent post-World War Two transitions from empire of France, the United Kingdom and Portugal, Russia measured up comparatively well. Indeed, as Stephen Kotkin argues, given the scale of the social, economic and political turmoil that transpired after 1991, in retrospect it appears staggering that the mayhem of 1990s Russia – tumultuous as it then seemed – was not infinitely worse.¹¹

Whatever interpretation best persuades, however, one undeniable feature of Russia's international standing was clear as Obama assumed office. By the end of the George W. Bush presidency, Russian-American bilateral relations were in as poor a shape as they had ever been in the post-1991 era. Although the 2000s had begun well enough, with Bush initially keen to re-emphasize great power relations (prior to 9/11 and, subsequently, through the lens of the global war on terror), seeing Vladimir Putin's soul by looking at his eyes, and having an opportunity to share interests in countering Islamist terrorist threats across Central Asia, most of the decade saw periodic bilateral tensions flare over key flashpoints: the legacy of the 1999 Kosovo war and NATO expansion; the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty and missile defense; the Iraq war; the Rose revolution in Georgia and the Orange revolution in Ukraine; and Iran's nuclear program. While there was occasional cooperation on some issues of mutual concern, such as North Korea, disagreements between Washington and Moscow remained marked throughout the decade. Although Moscow ultimately accepted the US unilateral withdrawal from the ABM Treaty of 1972, it refused to countenance Bush administration plans for a defensive anti-Iranian ballistic missile defense shield in Poland and the Czech Republic.

The fallout over the August 2008 war in Georgia capped a steady deterioration in bilateral relations that appeared set on an inexorable path towards an adversarial Cold War-style relationship.

Obama's capturing the presidency offered a new opportunity for a relaxing of the US-Russian relationship. First, the two themes that had largely defined the parameters of bilateral relations previously – nuclear parity and ideological confrontation – had lost much of their impetus by 2008. Obama's campaign, which had emphatically rejected "forward-leaning" ideological assertion by the US and embraced arms reduction and non-proliferation as key strategic priorities, offered a serious opportunity to move beyond past patterns of pathological behavior. Second, by rejecting the emphasis on democracy promotion and human rights of the Bush years (at least during the Bush administration's first term), an Obama administration promised a more pragmatic interlocutor for Moscow, one willing and able to abandon patronizing lectures on Russia's democratic deficit and dysfunctional internal arrangements. Third, although US relations with Russia were at their lowest point for some twenty-five years when Obama assumed office, that very trough offered opportunities for tangible gains for both parties out of their own self-interest. Establishing improved relations with Moscow was not a utopian but an achievable foreign policy goal – one more so, arguably, than reaching a genuine strategic partnership with China or making substantial progress in the Israel-Palestinian conflict and the broader Middle East – that could also potentially provide a useful demonstration effect to other states wavering in their attitude to Washington. Fourth, although Russia did not figure prominently in Obama's foreign policy statements in his election campaign, it did represent a prominent part of the new administration's emphasis on strategic engagement, fresh beginnings and American renewal. As Obama had written in 2007:

Although we must not shy away from pushing for more democracy and accountability in Russia, we must work with the country in areas of common interest – above all, in making sure that nuclear weapons and material are secured. We must also work with Russia to update and scale back our dangerously outdated Cold War nuclear postures and de-emphasize the role of nuclear weapons. America must not rush to produce a new generation of nuclear warheads. And we should take advantage of recent technological advances to build bipartisan consensus behind ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty.¹²

In sum, improved relations with Russia fitted easily and well with a host of other Obama administration concerns, from non-proliferation to counter-terrorism, and offered several prospects for real gains without inflicting major costs or climb-downs on either party. Not least, Russian assistance could potentially prove crucial in key areas of US interest, especially in Afghanistan (where Moscow could offer valuable logistical support and diplomatic pressure on Central Asian republics) and Iran (where Russian decisions would exert a

major influence on diplomacy, possible sanctions and even the prospect of US military action).

Perhaps more so than in most of Washington's bilateral relations – and certainly more so than in his relations with traditional US allies such as France and the UK – Obama (and Hillary Clinton, in particular) therefore assiduously cultivated a very public “reset” of relations with Moscow from his administration's earliest days. Meeting in London during the G20 in April 2009, Obama and Medvedev issued an important joint statement declaring that the two states were both “ready to move beyond Cold War mentalities and chart a fresh start in relations between our two countries.”¹³ In a speech during a summit in Moscow on July 7, 2009, addressing the future direction of US foreign policy under his leadership, Obama reiterated his call for a “reset” in US-Russia relations that would move both parties away from a zero-sum outlook on world affairs that viewed other countries largely as pawns to be moved around on a global chessboard. Underpinning that new relationship between the two great powers, Obama identified five key areas that could form the base for a new foreign policy framework between Washington and Moscow: reversing the spread of nuclear weapons; isolating and defeating violent extremism; increasing global prosperity; protecting human rights; and advancing international cooperation while respecting the sovereignty of states.¹⁴

Missile defense, New START, and Afghanistan

Translating those commitments into tangible policy achievements focused on three areas in particular: ballistic missile defense, arms control and non-proliferation, and Afghanistan.

Missile defense

An initial focus for prompt action by the Obama administration concerned ballistic missile defense, a bone of great contention in bilateral relations during the George W. Bush era. Bush had shown little interest in arms control or disarmament. Not only did the US unilaterally abrogate the ABM Treaty with Russia in 2001, but the Bush administration worked with the nuclear-industrial complex, sympathetic Pentagon officials and security hawks in Congress to develop a new class of “bunker-busting” nuclear weapons designed to destroy hardened or buried weapons-of-mass-destruction facilities (aimed at Iran in particular). The Bush administration had also supported Pentagon efforts to maintain “replacement” nuclear warheads in addition to those officially included in the inventory of the active US nuclear arsenal.

Such an approach worsened relations with Russia, but Moscow was especially troubled by the Bush administration's stance on missile defense.

Bush's 2007 decision to deploy missile defense systems in Central Europe was intended to defend the US against an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) attack from Iran, which analysts believed could occur by 2015. Bush proposed a "Third Site" system – to complement the two existing missile defense sites in California and Alaska – comprising ten silo-based interceptors in Poland and an X-band tracking-radar base in the Czech Republic. Critics of the system charged it with being too partial, since the ICBM threat from Iran to Western Europe and America was less credible than the short and medium-range Iranian threat to south-eastern Europe and Turkey, which were not covered by Bush's system of layered defense.

Consistent with his 2008 campaign commitments, Obama changed course within his first hundred days as president, making a new commitment to arms control and non-proliferation. This was most clearly outlined in his first major speech on arms control and non-proliferation, delivered in Prague, the Czech Republic capital, in April 2009, where the president set out an unequivocal American commitment to seek the peace and security of a world without nuclear weapons.¹⁵

Obama also moved quickly to reverse the Bush administration's decision to construct the anti-Iranian missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic, an initiative that had provoked Moscow into threatening Poland with severe military consequences for its acquiescence in the plan. In its place, Obama proposed a new architecture. A "European Phased Adaptive Approach" (EPAA) substituted the Bush silo-based system with a mobile, adaptable missile shield. Focused on medium-range threats to Europe from the Middle East, this involved fielding sea-based interceptors deployed on Aegis cruisers and versions of the Navy's Standard Missile (SM)-3 to protect US allies in the whole of Europe, as well as Turkey. Only in the longer run would the EPAA focus on intercontinental missiles threatening the United States.

Russia responded favorably to the Obama reversal, both in terms of its substance and also, simply, because Obama implemented what he had previously pledged to do (something that Moscow had not reliably experienced under Bush). In return for Obama's reconfiguring the proposed missile shield, Moscow felt obliged to respond in kind and abandoned its threat to station Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad (a warning provocatively issued by President Medvedev the day after Obama's election, on November 5, 2009), an ominous threat to Eastern Europeans. The revised missile defense plans also increased hopes for the new strategic arms control agreement to replace the START I treaty, which was due to expire on December 5, 2009. Initially, Russia had balked at a new agreement, in the hope of extracting a commitment from the Obama administration to forego entirely any future construction of an anti-ballistic missile system in Europe. But Obama refused to accede to the Russian demand, to the point of threatening to end the talks, leading to the dropping of Moscow's demands and the eventual conclusion of a new treaty.

Once Moscow abandoned the ambitious idea of a European security treaty, a series of NATO-Russia summits and meetings attempted to reach a consensus on missile defense. Having proposed a “sectoral approach,” in which Russia would assume responsibility for protecting north-eastern Europe, by March 2011 Moscow instead insisted that NATO – by which it meant the US – should provide legally binding guarantees that future land-based interceptors aimed at intercontinental ballistic missiles would not be targeted to intercept Russian missiles. The US instead proposed to begin practical cooperation on earlier, shorter-range phases of the missile defense system and to build trust in that fashion. Conscious that strong opposition from Republicans in Congress would preclude the US offering legally binding guarantees, the Obama administration made important progress on a previously divisive issue for Moscow – but the matter of missile defense remained a key, and problematic, issue in bilateral and NATO relations with Russia. Three aspects of the revised system also raised problems.

First, the initial announcement of the realigned system was very poorly timed. Rather than following consultations with key allies such as Poland and the Czech Republic – which one might reasonably have anticipated, given Obama’s unrelenting criticism of the Bush administration’s “unilateralism” – the announcement was made without coordination. Moreover, the fact that it coincided with the seventieth anniversary of the Russian invasion of Poland was, to understate the matter, hardly a triumph of diplomacy.

Second, while its supporters viewed favorably a less American-centric system that covered south-eastern Europe and Turkey, this ignored some of the key reasoning behind the previous administration’s approach. According to a former senior official in the Pentagon under Bush, part of the rationale for the silo-based system was to try to encourage European members of NATO to contribute more to their own collective self-defense.¹⁶ Although NATO’s European members could supply additional components such as radars or interceptors to complete or strengthen the system, the Obama version essentially exempted them from such pressures. The US-supplied EPAA instead provided Europe with a missile defense system for free, an outcome that Secretary Gates would subsequently come to rue in regard to other aspects of Europe’s diminishing defense capacities within NATO.

Third, the dynamics of the negotiations over missile defense captured in miniature some of the broader tensions in Washington-Moscow relations and the reset. Mark Fitzpatrick asserted that:

Although Obama’s decision to realign the defense shield was not made as a concession to Russia, many Russians believe otherwise, not least because Obama’s opponents in the United States have said so. The danger is that Russia will believe this rhetoric and take to heart the lesson that belligerence pays.¹⁷

While Fitzpatrick was arguably wrong on the first aspect – the revised system was, at least in part, a “goodwill” concession to Russia – Moscow’s

analysis did seem to embrace the notion that belligerence could yield positive results.

New START

Securing an arms control replacement to START I offered the second, and major, symbolic achievement, offering a win-win prospect for both parties. Beginning in May 2009, several rounds of talks followed to agree a new treaty. Ironically, while Russia had more to gain from this, Washington acted in a way that suggested it needed the agreement more urgently. By resuming the path of reducing their warheads and calling on other powers to follow suit, Moscow and Washington could rapidly create a symbolic statement of intent to advance Obama's non-nuclear agenda. In substance, as with many prior arms reductions agreements, the extent to which the cuts were substantive rather than cosmetic could legitimately be questioned. Moreover, Moscow evidently had more to gain from the compact than Washington, but the Obama administration viewed passage of the treaty as key for the reset, its non-proliferation agenda and increasing pressure on Iran and North Korea.

The New START treaty replaced the Moscow Treaty of 2002 (SORT), which had been scheduled to run until the end of 2012. Under the New START terms, a limit of 1,550 was placed on the number of offensively deployed warheads, a 30 percent reduction from SORT's maximum allowable: 2,200. New START also placed a limit of 800 deployed and non-deployed strategic nuclear-delivery vehicles (intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles and nuclear-capable heavy bombers), 700 of which can be deployed. The treaty also allowed for satellite and remote monitoring, as well as eighteen on-site inspections per year for verification purposes.

Such headline figures were somewhat misleading, though, with the genuine reductions more modest in scope. Existing deployments were already less than under START I and SORT, thanks to the growing obsolescence of the nuclear arsenals developed during the Cold War. The US reduction would amount to 10 percent over seven years. An additional aspect of the more ambiguous nature of the arms control initiative was that New START placed no constraints on non-deployed nuclear weapons, including those removed from deployed systems under the terms of the treaty. Such weapons – in storage or awaiting dismantlement – amounted to several thousand on both sides. By reducing deployed-launcher levels to 700 while keeping warhead levels high and discounting bomber loads, New START also created an even greater incentive for Russia to field land-based missiles with multiple warheads. Nor did New START address “sub-strategic” weapons, such as Russia's estimated 2,000 deployed tactical nuclear weapons or some 200 gravity bombs at US bases in Europe. The agreement's silence on “tactical” nuclear weapons – as though any nuclear weapon can be purely tactical or “sub-/non-strategic” – was especially

welcome to Moscow, allowing Russia to preserve its estimated 10-to-1 advantage in this category of weapons. If anything, the Russian advantage was even greater, since the Obama administration's Nuclear Posture Review (NPR) of 2010 eliminated the US sea-based nuclear-cruise-missile force without getting anything from Moscow in return.

Even this relatively modest proposal generated significant political opposition in Washington.¹⁸ Strongly backed by Senator John Kerry (D-MA) and Richard Lugar (R-IND), chair and ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee respectively, the Committee voted 14–4 in favor of ratifying New START on September 16, 2010. The measure had support from three Senate Republicans: Lugar, Bob Corker (R-TN), and Johnny Isakson (R-GA). Despite pressures from some Republicans and Democrats such as Ben Nelson (D-NEB) not to do so, Obama made passage of New START a priority for the lame-duck session of Congress after the midterm elections of 2010, knowing that a delay until January 2011 – with the entry of a new cohort of conservative Republican senators and an even more conservative GOP caucus – would almost certainly jeopardize the treaty's ratification. Republican opposition, led by Senator Jon Kyl (R-AZ) centered on three areas: verification, missile defense, and modernization of America's nuclear arsenal.

Undercutting the famous Reagan adage of “trust but verify,” while New START allowed for on-site visits and data exchanges, it abandoned on-the-ground monitoring of Russia's missile-manufacturing facilities and allowed Russia to withhold telemetry of some of its missile tests, undermining Washington's ability to know what nuclear materials were being produced and developed.

The most pressing question related to New START and the Nuclear Posture Review is whether or not they helped the US to meet its most important security challenges, which the NPR – in a striking continuity with the Bush administration – correctly identified as nuclear terrorism and the emerging nuclear powers of Iran and North Korea. The NPR recommended building on efforts like the Proliferation Security Initiative, the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership, the Global Initiative to Reduce Nuclear Terrorism, and the Department of Energy's non-proliferation activities. It also called for hardening US Command, Control, and Communications networks for nuclear weapons and studying the requirements for maintaining the necessary industrial base for follow-on systems to the Minuteman ICBM and Trident SLBM.

To its critics, New START appeared in direct tension, if not contradiction, to the NPR of 2010. First, the NPR had stated that the US could reduce its reliance on nuclear weapons because of new developments in missile defense and conventional military capabilities.¹⁹ But, despite repeated assurances from the administration that the treaty would not limit either category, New START contained both explicit and implicit limitations on both. Regarding missile defense, Article 5 of the treaty expressly precluded any further conversion of ICBM silos for use by defensive interceptors. Although the

Obama administration had developed no plans to convert additional ICBM silos for that purpose, it had been considered by prior administrations and, given the additional limitation on using submarines to launch missile-defense interceptors, the limitation could prove problematic in the future if it is determined that more interceptors are needed to defend the United States. It may also become problematic if the administration's Phased Adaptive Approach – which had encountered non-trivial technical and cost problems by 2010–11 – is eventually abandoned in favor of the “hedge” announced by Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in September 2009, the two-stage version of the Ground Based Interceptor. Such an eventuality would incense Moscow, which has already threatened to leave the New START treaty if the US increases its missile-defense capabilities. New START also counts conventional Global Precision Strike weapons – supposed, under the NPR, to relieve the US of some its nuclear weapons arsenal – in the same column as nuclear ones.

Second, while the NPR called for maintaining a safe and secure nuclear force capable of performing the national security tasks of deterring attack on the United States and reassuring friends and allies about America's extended deterrent, it also announced a new declaratory policy that undercut US capacities to deter biological attacks that could prove as lethal as and more probable than nuclear attack. As the Graham-Talent Commission on the Prevention of Weapons of Mass Destruction Proliferation and Terrorism noted, while Obama had prioritized arms control and nuclear non-proliferation, the administration displayed “no equal sense of urgency” regarding the most probable source of WMD attack on America: biological weapons.²⁰ More directly, and despite welcome commitments of resources to the nation's nuclear infrastructure, the NPR imposed severe constraints on the modernization and maintenance of the US nuclear stockpile. Unlike all other nuclear states, there can be no new weapons, missions or designs for America's stockpile, only the refurbishment and reuse of existing weapons and components.

Although some on the right – such as Robert Kagan – saw New START as too insignificant to merit partisan rancor,²¹ other hawkish critics viewed the treaty as seriously flawed.²² Not only did New START impose more obvious costs and limits on the US than Russia, it also incentivized China to increase its missile stock to reach, or exceed, parity with the two other powers. Since Russia had no interest in reducing its stock of tactical nuclear weapons, New START arguably represented not the beginning of an ongoing process of arms reduction that Obama had promised, but its outer limit.

Despite the problems and criticisms of New START, the US Senate gave its “advice and consent” to the ratification of the treaty on 22 December 2010, by a vote of 71 to 26. Thirteen Republican senators crossed party lines to vote in favor of the resolution, along with all fifty-six Democratic senators and both Independent senators. Obama signed documents completing the US ratification

process on February 2, 2011, the treaty entering into force three days later. It was expected to remain in force until 2021.

Afghanistan, Central Asia and the “post-Soviet space”

A third area of productive agreement was Afghanistan. Although their interests did not coincide exactly, neither Washington nor Moscow wished to see a return of the Taliban to Kabul. Russian agreement to provide transport routes for NATO supplies and transit routes for the US air-force offered an important alternative to the increasingly dangerous routes through Pakistan, which had been subject to sudden closures by Islamabad and intermittent attacks by Taliban and other Islamist forces. While Russia was hardly invested in NATO's ultimate success in Afghanistan, it nonetheless had a clear interest in regional stability and sought both to assist NATO while simultaneously preparing for what appeared to be an inevitable NATO withdrawal by 2014.

To some extent, then, the Obama administration's emphasis on a “reset” won some important gains from Russia.

Nor, contrary to some of Obama's critics, should this be interpreted as some kind of abject betrayal or “sell-out” of eastern European interests and security. Arguably, the main security problem in the post-Soviet region was never adequately addressed by the Bush administration: the near defenseless state of the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Their security rested on the treaty pledge of NATO Article V that provides for collective self-defense, but most practical measures to ensure this (such as planning and joint exercises) were not undertaken. The Baltic states were thought to have sought specific military guarantees from NATO under Article V of its charter ever since joining the alliance in 2004 – requests that intensified after Estonia came under cyber attack (widely thought to be at Moscow's direction) in 2007 and, especially, after the Russian invasion of Georgia in 2008. The Obama administration instead prompted NATO to do so, with the result that several major military exercises occurred in 2010 in the Baltic, with more scheduled for 2011 and 2012. While the Russians had carried out military exercises in 2009, including ones that practiced invading and occupying the Baltic states, the US response passed without diplomatic incident. Moreover, the December 2010 Wikileaks revelations exposed NATO's plans – “Operation Eagle Guardian” – to send nine ground divisions, British warships and squadrons of US fighters to the defense of Poland and the Baltic states in the event of Russian aggression.²³

Moreover, while the bids of Georgia and Ukraine for NATO membership had effectively been postponed indefinitely after Russia's 2008 war with Georgia – for the most part to the relief of Washington – this owed as much to internal divisions within NATO and the two post-Soviet republics as to Obama administration entreaties. Instead, Western attentions focused on ways to integrate the two nations more closely with the European Union, a less

provocative and destabilizing route to bringing Georgia and Ukraine further into the European orbit.

Compared to the Bush era, Russian-American relations thus went some way to being repaired, and appeared in fairly good shape under Obama during his first two years as president. While the US interest in improving relations is easily enough explained, the shifting Russian approach can largely be accounted for by four factors. First, the 2008 Georgia war had exposed both the limits of Russian bellicosity and the extent to which relations with the US could deteriorate spectacularly and rapidly. Second, sharp shifts in the energy market accompanying the Great Recession revealed just how fragile and exposed the Russian economy was to the price of oil and natural gas. In the oil and gas sectors, it is Western (especially American and British) companies, not Russian ones, which have the technology necessary to reach Russia's increasingly remote reserves. In addition, should Moscow seek to diversify her economy away from oil and gas, Russia will require Western capital and technology even more intensively. As James Sherr aptly put it, "One year before Barack Obama took office, Russia's policy towards the West was based on three foundations: nationalism, resentment and self-confidence. Today, it based on nationalism, resentment, and disorientation."²⁴ Third, the "Obama factor" clearly altered the decision-making calculus for some in the Russian regime. Precisely how far this encompassed Putin was unclear. Nonetheless, Obama's public commitments, evident sincerity, and his administration's delivering on promised changes emboldened a notoriously suspicious governing class to take limited risks for an improved bilateral relationship. Fourth, the seemingly inexorable rise of China posed major challenges to Russian national interests. A position of relative international isolation appeared decreasingly attractive when, for a relatively modest price, better relations with Washington appeared genuinely feasible.

Resetting the reset?

As Eugene Rumer and Angela Stent had anticipated at the outset of the Obama presidency, "The task of pressing the reset button in East-West relations promises to be arduous."²⁵ Russia remains, as ever, a truculent, difficult and frequently reluctant partner for the US. Like other post-Soviet states that enjoyed large hydrocarbon reserves, Russia has both benefited and suffered from the "resource curse." When oil prices were low during the 1990s, Russia's imperfect democracy pursued liberalizing reforms, extending even into the first three years of the 2000s under Putin. As oil and gas prices rose subsequently, the need for reform stalled in the face of huge revenues. Not only did these embolden Russia's cronyist leadership to maintain a firm authoritarian rule while buying-off opposition through raising wages and pensions, but it also permitted it increased leverage over neighboring states that lacked similar resources.

Ukraine, for example – the biggest ex-Soviet republic in population terms, after Russia – relied on cheap Russian natural gas to fuel its heavy industry. Twice after 2006 Moscow cut supplies during the winter amid pricing disputes. Energy subsidies from Russia also sustained the autocratic Alexander Lukashenko in power in Belarus, making the state essentially a vassal of Russia despite Lukashenko's poor relations with Putin and Medvedev. While the “common economic area” with Belarus and Kazakhstan announced in 2011, and building on 2010's customs union, promised a single market of 165 million people (about 60 percent of the former Soviet Union), stimulating foreign direct investment and revitalized industrial links, its economic benefits also appeared likely to combine with political pressures from Moscow to compromise the states' independence. (Putin also tried to entice Ukraine to join the common market with the offer of cheap gas.) Under Obama, no less than previously under Clinton or Bush, post-communist Russia did little to hide or compromise its view that the vast lands of the former tsarist and Soviet empires remain of vital strategic interest and Moscow will not abandon attempts to keep the other republics under its sway.

Moreover, despite Obama's regular assertion of the US and other great powers sharing key interests, the more prosaic and uncomfortable reality remained that – as with China – Russian interests are multiple and only selectively overlapping with Washington's. Moscow's attitude to Tehran is probably the clearest example. In return for Obama's scrapping the Bush missile defense plan, a grateful Moscow adopted a somewhat stronger position on the Iranian issue. Russia was content to participate in the deal, mentioned in Chapter 5, in which Moscow would purchase spent nuclear fuel from Iran and return it at a later date in a processed form unusable for weapons. But its willingness to tighten the economic sanctions regime in principle was not synonymous with endorsing a particular package of enhanced sanctions, which was invariably much less strong.

As with innumerable international challenges, the lenses by which Moscow and Washington view Iran remained quite distinct, the former viewing Iran through a regional prism, the latter through a global one. While the prospect of Iranian nuclear capacity to its south is not welcome to Moscow, nor is it of the core interest that it is to America. A nuclear Iran would represent a major blow to America's global prestige and position, its prohibition being at the heart of American regional and non-proliferation strategies. For Russia, Iran has maintained the potential to create major headaches in its sphere of influence but has thus far eschewed them. Despite being a southern neighbor and a revolutionary Islamic power, Tehran has resisted exploiting Russia's problems with its Muslim regions, such as Chechnya, or in former Soviet republics such as Tajikistan (where the population shares cultural and linguistic ties with Iran), or in disputing the still unresolved status of the Caspian Sea. Equally, trading interests are substantial between the two nations, with Russian exports to

Iran amounting to \$3.3 billion in 2008. Moreover, more cynically, improved Iranian relations with the US and EU would not serve Russian energy interests, potentially undercutting its near monopoly of supply of natural gas to several EU states. As such, partial isolation but limited rather than comprehensive sanctions represents a reasonable outcome for Moscow: while Russia voted with the US for new sanctions on June 9, 2010, its price was to substantially narrow their scope and impact.

Similarly, on North Korea, while China is the key interlocutor, Russia too has a potentially major and constructive role to play in relation to Pyongyang. But, as with Iran, Russian and US priorities do not exactly converge, much less coincide. In the autumn of 2011, for example, Kim Jong-Il met Russian president Medvedev in Siberia, who hailed the North Korean as one of Russia's "partners." Russian trade interests were apparent as Moscow announced that it would work with Pyongyang on a potential 1,100 km pipeline that could ship natural gas from Russia to South Korea, 700 km of this via North Korea. Discussions were also underway about rail links with South Korea to access its burgeoning market. But no progress was made on the resumption of the Six-Party talks, the suspended process in which Russia, China, Japan, the US and the Koreans have discussed Pyongyang's denuclearization. Kim repeated his call for the resumption of talks "without preconditions," a position unacceptable to Washington, Seoul and Tokyo, for whom concrete signs of a willingness to dismantle its nuclear program are requisite prior to resuming talks.²⁶

Even on Afghanistan, where Moscow's cooperation was highly valued by Washington, the outcome arguably reflected more a convergence of interest than a soft power triumph for newly effective US diplomacy. Russia requires stability at least as much as the US in Central Asia. Like Iran, Moscow is deeply concerned by the narcotics traffic from Afghanistan, with heroin a particularly virulent scourge of young Russian lives and increasing drug addiction across Central Asia. Instability in Afghanistan would also destabilize Moscow's authoritarian allies in Central Asia and, indirectly, Russia itself. An Iranian nuclear capability is, marginally, tolerable for Moscow; a Talibanized Afghanistan or Pakistan with nuclear weapons would be far less so. In a move that drew condemnation from Afghan authorities, Russian and US forces conducted their first joint operation to raid an opium factory in northern Afghanistan in 2010. In 2010, the US also lifted a 2005 ban on arms trading with *Rosoboronexport*, Russia's state arms exporter, which had been imposed on the company for alleged dealings with Iran. In May 2011, *Rosoboronexport* agreed to supply military helicopters to the US for use in Afghanistan, signing a contract worth approximately \$375 million with the US army to supply 21 Mi-17 helicopters to boost the capacity of the Afghan air force.²⁷

As these examples suggest, the list of foreign policy concerns for the US and Russia are quite similar in geography and structure but differ considerably in content. At the center of attention for both powers are regional conflicts that

have the potential to spill over into global ones. But their respective priorities are quite different. For Washington, the list of concerns comprises Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan (implicating India), Middle East peace, and North Korea. For Moscow, by contrast, Ukraine, Central Asia and the Caucasus occupy central national concerns. American priorities do figure on the Russian list but appear much further down the hierarchy. The same applies to Russian priorities on America's list of concerns. This asymmetry allows for some cooperation between Moscow and Washington on a selective basis but is poorly suited to a comprehensive agreement on regional policy between the two powers.

By the latter part of 2011, the future of the "reset" appeared uncertain after a series of difficult negative encounters. First, at the end of July, the US Senate passed a resolution reaffirming US support for Georgia's territorial integrity and demanding the withdrawal of Russian troops from South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The Russian Foreign Ministry criticized such action as encouraging a "revanchist" mood in Tblisi, while Putin's comment that, "The future will depend on the people of South Ossetia themselves," appeared to hold out the possibility of Russia annexing South Ossetia after a possible referendum in the territory.²⁸ US intelligence agencies had also concluded that a Russian military intelligence officer was probably involved with the explosion of a bomb near the US Embassy in Tblisi in September 2010.

Second, the US State Department imposed travel bans on sixty-four unnamed Russian officials. The officials were suspected of being involved in the murky prison death of a lawyer, Sergei Magnitsky, who had worked on one of Russia's highest-profile corruption cases. Magnitsky was said to have exposed a fraud scheme by Russian tax administrators that siphoned roughly \$230 million from state coffers. Russia's Foreign Ministry stated that "unfriendly steps" such as the travel restrictions would be met with "adequate measures," while Russian officials threatened to cease cooperating with Washington over Afghanistan, Iran, Libya and North Korea if Congress passed the Sergei Magnitsky sanctions legislation.

Third, Russian leaders continued to challenge the US on the Phased Adaptive Approach missile defense plans. Dmitry Rogozin, the Russian president's Special Representative for Missile Defense Cooperation with NATO, met with Senators Jon Kyl (R-AZ) and Mark Kirk (R-ILL) in July 2011 but the two sides disagreed sharply on what had occurred. Rogozin claimed that the senators had admitted that missile defense was targeted at Russia, not Iran, vividly recalling how:

... I had the impression that I was transported in a time machine back several decades, and in front of me sat two monsters of the Cold War, who looked at me not through pupils, but targeting sights.²⁹

This was denied by the senators, who instead insisted that the problem was an inability of the two sides to come a common definition of the threat from Iran.

It would be naive to imagine that the US and Russia could overcome decades of zero-sum logic about international relations, bipolar competition, nuclear parity and ideological rivalry in a matter of four years. With the Russian economic growth model broken after the Great Recession, with anaemic investment and sluggish growth, a more aggressive and adventurist foreign policy was a probability. Nonetheless, the very fact of engaging in discussions with Moscow enabled the Obama administration to make important – if limited – progress on some key fronts. Both parties remain, understandably, committed to a partial hedging strategy. Despite the presence of numerous weaknesses that threaten the future development of the state, Russia remains one of the few powers left in the world that is capable of both strategic thinking and the use of force. Its seat on the UN Security Council continues to lend it a symbolic power of note, one that Moscow regularly leverages to extract maximum political capital. With Europe possessing neither a coherent strategic vision nor force projection potential (despite defense spending levels second only to the US and some two million Europeans serving in the armed forces), and China still mostly focused on internal development questions, Russia offers Obama's Washington both a potentially valuable partner and – if antagonized – a formidable opponent: less a “super-” than a “spoiler” or “sniper-power.”

Moreover, although Russia has benefited in economic and diplomatic terms from arms sales to China, Venezuela, Syria and other states with either adversarial or ambiguous relations with the US, and engages in periodic sniping with Beijing at Washington's expense – over Iraq, Iran, the debt crisis and the dollar's status as the international reserve currency – there exists little evidence of a “soft balancing” against America.³⁰ Russian apprehension about the growth of Chinese economic, military and political power is extensive (not least among the generally xenophobic *siloviki* populating the Russian regime's higher echelons) and, whatever the periodic populist bluster – such as Putin's remarks about America's parasitical impact on the global economy – Russian elites mostly appreciate that China constitutes a greater potential threat to Mother Russia than does the US.

Conclusion: the limits of strategic engagement with Russia

As John Thornhill notes, “Russians sometimes say it is impossible to predict anything in their country – even the past.”³¹ Evaluating Obama's Russia policy after three years is equally problematic, since the suspicion and mistrust that Moscow still harbors towards Washington has such deep historic roots and contemporary resonance. Even if a post-American world is emerging, the US remains Moscow's foremost foreign policy preoccupation, and prioritizing relations with America and Europe – especially in the face of the threat of

Chinese expansionism, not least in its under-populated eastern region – underscored Russia's reformed foreign policy after 2008.

The divisions and conflicts that occurred under George W. Bush reflected and reinforced a more profound reassessment of the post-Cold War relationship with the US. Where US officials in the 1990s and 2000s had seen themselves – through a combination of self-interested, instrumental and altruistic motives – assisting an historic post-communist transition to liberal democracy, the rule of law and market capitalism, Russian perceptions that the period was one in which American statecraft deliberately weakened a once great power economically while exploiting that weakness to aggrandize its unipolar dominance around the world have only intensified. NATO's expansion was perceived, not unreasonably, as a betrayal of US and European promises made at the Cold War's end, while US support of the "color" revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan over 2003–05 represented unacceptable outside interference in Russia's traditional sphere of influence. Anti-American and anti-Western appeals remain reliable populist staples of Russian politics and culture in a febrile environment where nationalism, chauvinism and xenophobia constitute potent social and political forces.³²

Overcoming this legacy and ending the Cold War for good was never destined to be the work of a single presidential term, but Obama's reset has gone further than any prior post-Cold War US administration to creating the foundations for a constructive partnership between Washington and Moscow. Although a duumvirate leadership, Putin's marginally less direct, though still extensive, foreign policy role as Prime Minister assisted this. Relations between Obama and Medvedev (separated by only five years in age, with Obama turning fifty in 2011 and Medvedev forty-five) were good from the outset, the two establishing a real rapport. Obama's visit to Moscow in July 2009 assisted a warmer bilateral atmosphere, and – ironically, given the professional expertise of Condi Rice on the Soviet Union and Russia – Obama was perceived to be both more genuine and more open to thawing bilateral relations than his predecessor in the White House.

Washington also deftly removed serious irritants in the relationship by reconfiguring prior commitments to install a missile defense shield in Poland and the Czech Republic, more or less putting an end to public hectoring of Russian deficiencies on human rights and democracy, and generally downgrading – without totally abandoning – its engagement in post-Soviet nations. Washington and Moscow cooperated effectively in encouraging the normalization of Turkish-Armenian relations in 2009 and managing the Kyrgyzstan crisis of spring 2010. Most notably, although they missed the December 5, 2009 deadline for replacing the START I treaty, and while ambiguities and tensions remained over the status of European security and missile defense, Obama and Medvedev signed the New START agreement on April 8, 2010. Although this required some fractious bargaining before

gaining confirmation by the US Senate in the lame-duck congressional session following the 2010 midterm elections, the progress was notable for the two presidents' personal involvement, the agreement's rapid completion (in only forty-five weeks, compared to the nine years of START I), and its bolstering Obama's broader non-proliferation efforts. Although twenty-six US senators voted against ratification, making the measure one of the least well-supported or bipartisan in the history of US arms control agreements, the treaty's passage in the context of a corrosively poisonous partisan atmosphere on Capitol Hill represented an important foreign policy achievement for the Obama administration. Moreover US-Russian military cooperation, suspended under George W. Bush, resumed in 2011.

Although Moscow proudly boasts the largest number of billionaires of any city in the world, the reset has done little to encourage the emergence of the cleaner and more transparent business and legal environment that Russia urgently requires if the nation is genuinely to prosper economically. Corruption plagues the state capitalism that, despite Medvedev's attempts at modernization, remains dominant, with the government owning more than half of all shares listed on the Moscow stock exchange and the state-owned Rosneft and Gazprom two of the largest energy companies in the world. Nonetheless, to encourage Russian economic interest in the reset of bilateral relations, the US under Obama pressed hard for Russian membership of the World Trade Organization (now some eighteen years in the negotiating), a necessary prelude ultimately to establishing normal trade relations with the US on the Chinese model. Such positive intentions, even absent complete success, also assisted the broader cooperative environment between the two nations, exemplified by the \$3.2 billion agreement between ExxonMobil with the Russian state oil group, Rosneft, to form an Arctic exploration partnership in August 2011. As Cliff Kupchan, a Russian specialist at the Eurasia Group consultancy in Washington, noted, such a partnership represented nothing less than a "sea-change": "US oil companies were hardly welcome partners for Russian firms during the [George W.] Bush administration."³³

Moreover, while the US approach to Moscow has eschewed assertive rhetoric or – in the eyes of its critics – a sufficient emphasis on human rights, constitutional democracy and the rule of law, Obama's tilt towards Jeffersonian restraint over Wilsonian idealism in this instance has been mostly prudent and paid off politically. Admittedly, the cost of Washington's more pliant diplomacy has been anxieties among Russian democracy activists, and several East European and post-Soviet states (unused to being referred to as "partners" rather than "allies"). At the end of November 2011, the dissident Russian, Boris Nemtsov, called on Obama to publicly label Putin a dictator. Several ex-Soviet capitals are wary that the Obama "reset," especially in conjunction with American and European preoccupation with the effects of the Great Recession, essentially means that the West has *de facto* granted the

Kremlin the regional “zone of privileged interest” it has long demanded, hindering the future for democracy within Russia and other states in the region for years to come. Nonetheless, the diplomatic, military and economic involvement of the US in the region has remained active and, in some respects – such as military planning, joint exercises, and European energy security – been more engaged and committed than that of its Republican predecessor.

In sum, in the context of a constrained internationalism and the limits of engagement, Russia has proven a limited success story of sorts for Obama’s post-American foreign policy. The “reset” with not so much a one-party as a one-clique, corrupt and autocratic Russia has yielded some low-hanging fruit, halting the slide to a fully adversarial resurgence of “Cold War” rivalries and substantially reducing – without fully eliminating – the mutual suspicion, toxic Russian nationalism and extensive distrust of the later Bush years. In some important respects, bilateral relations are in better shape than at any time since the end of the Cold War. But the extent to which such beginnings can be solidified into a genuine strategic partnership remains to be seen. Russian and American interests diverge as much as they converge in critical areas, the reset remains a work in progress, and the temptation to resort to a deep-seated anti-American populism for the Russian political class is ever present (as it is also in nations from China through Turkey to France).

Obama’s embrace of strategic modesty has also consolidated the *de facto*, if not the *de jure*, conditionality of future US military interventions. Russian consent, along with that of China, now represents the key determinant of whether humanitarian interventions (such as that in Libya in 2011) can meet the important test of international legality – a rather dubious and unpromising situation for proponents of the “responsibility to protect,” but one that chimes well with Obama’s lack of enthusiasm for liberal interventionism and an American grand strategy of “leading from behind.” Perhaps more than on most foreign policy challenges during his presidency, the nascent shift effected under Obama paved the way for a more constructive dialogue with a major player on the world stage. But, with Vladimir Putin’s near inevitable victory in the Russian presidential election of March 2012 – with a new six-year term, and potentially extending his leadership to 2024, a longer period in unchallenged charge of Russia than even Josef Stalin’s – Obama may yet encounter a much less cooperative and more truculent Moscow; one that has clearly gone as far it wishes to in terms of compromising either its vital or its more peripheral interests, or its use of the one potent card – nationalism – remaining in its diminished arsenal.