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Prospects for Engagement with Russia

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Mr. Chairman, I appreciate the opportunity to discuss American policy toward Russia with you and your colleagues at this very timely hearing.

Of all the world's major states, Russia is the only one whose relations with the United States have deteriorated in the past five years. It's not a case, moreover, of what the child development specialists call a "failure to thrive" – sickly underperformance without specific ailments. Nor is the problem simply the result of inattention by leaders in both Washington and Moscow who have other pressing things to worry about. The worsening of Russian-American relations has involved real clashes of policy and perspective – and active involvement by policymakers on both sides.

- Although contemporary scholars of international relations believe that our time is marked by an absence of fundamental antagonisms among the great powers, Russian officials are saying, in effect, that they disagree. For them, security – and what they insist is an American drive to weaken them -- is still the core problem of Russian-American relations.
- In his famous speech in Munich two years ago, then-President Putin also complained that the United States "imposes itself on other states, in the economy, in politics, and in the human-rights sphere." On another occasion, he compared American policies to those of the Third Reich.
- Here in Washington, Russia's image has suffered very severe damage as well. Moscow's frictions with its neighbors are widely seen to reflect neo-imperialist aspirations – and are, yes, sometimes compared to the policies of the Third Reich.

Against this backdrop, the Obama administration's aim to press the "reset" button is welcome and needed. Many opportunities are available for re-fashioning the relationship in ways that benefit both countries. But it should probably be said at the outset that neither in coping with modern gadgetry nor in diplomacy is pressing a "reset" button a guarantee of improved performance. In my experience, the "reset" button is something you press when you don't really know what went wrong in the first place – what caused your computer to freeze up, or your daughter's hair-dryer to shut down, or the lights in part of your house to go off.

Sometimes, of course, you don't need to understand what your gadget's problem is in order to fix it. If you're lucky, all it takes to get a computer running smoothly again is to re-boot: turn it off, wait a minute, then turn it on again. At other times, however, you may reset a fuse only to find that it immediately blows again. At that point, you need an expert who can tell you what the trouble is -- and how big the repair bill is likely to be.

There are some reasons to hope that, despite several years of testiness, the resetting of relations between Moscow and Washington can be a relatively smooth process, certainly smoother than many people expect.

- Leaders and policymakers in both countries seem, in general terms, to want warmer, more productive relations.
- They regularly speak of a number of common interests – from nuclear non-proliferation to counter-terrorism to stable international energy markets -- that ought to make it possible for Russia and the United States to cooperate.
- Today, not surprisingly, economic recovery and growth also make the list of goals that could, and should, unite Russian and American policy.

If President Obama and President Medvedev want to show that Russian-American relations are re-booting nicely, it will be easy enough to do so when they meet on the margins of the G-20 summit in London in two weeks.

- They should at that time be able to announce the prompt opening of talks on the extension of the START 1 treaty – or, even better, on a successor agreement that further reduces strategic arsenals.
- They could also re-commit themselves to practical measures that will discourage Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, including diplomatic and military cooperation -- and (if the threat requires) missile defense.
- They might further renew their determination to support a successful counter-insurgency effort in Afghanistan, and encourage other states to join them.
- They can announce an agenda of steps to address the concerns of both sides on issues of European security, including strengthening the OSCE, revival of the CFE Treaty, and consultations on Russia’s proposals to enhance Europe’s “security architecture.”

This is a very substantial but hardly exhaustive list. It’s not difficult to spell out comparable measures in other areas, whether it’s trade and investment, energy cooperation, climate change, or the work of the NATO-Russia Council.

Members of Congress, I might add, can do their part to support the two presidents.

- They should, for one thing, indicate their readiness to graduate Russia and other states of the former Soviet Union from the provisions of the Jackson-Vanik amendment – as soon as possible and without further conditions. In the past this legislation played an extremely honorable and effective role in strengthening American policy toward the U.S.S.R. It plays no positive role in our policy toward Russia today.
- Congress can also make clear that it is ready to support the so-called “123” agreement on civil nuclear cooperation that the Bush Administration sent up to the Hill last summer, only to withdraw it when Russia invaded Georgia. The U.S. definitely needs more tools to provide support for Georgian sovereignty. Among the instruments available for achieving this goal, however, the 123 agreement is not a useful one.

Mr. Chairman, the steps I have described for improving Russian-American relations would amount to a textbook “reset.” But what if the process isn’t so smooth? Perhaps, instead of merely switching things off and starting over, we actually have to inquire into the relationship’s deeper underlying problems? Some thoughtful observers argue that we need to pay closer attention to the way in which Russia views its interests. The Commission on U.S. Policy Toward Russia, chaired by former senators Hart and Hagel, made this point just days ago, and I completely agree with it.

To get a feel for Russian thinking, it’s not necessary to explore the dark recesses of relations with the Bush administration over the past eight years. Even in the past few months, Moscow’s actions and statements have provided ample evidence of an approach to security that is likely to complicate the re-booting of Russian-American relations.

- Consider, for example, the Russian response to President Obama’s suggestion that if the problem posed by Iranian nuclear and missile programs went away, so too would the need for American radars and interceptors to counter them. For many Americans, this linkage is no more than a statement of the obvious – and a constructive, common-sense place to start discussion. Yet Russian spokesmen, including President Medvedev himself, have rejected it.
- Or consider the use of Central Asian airfields by the United States and NATO to transport men and materiel to Afghanistan. For four years, Russian policy has called for the curtailment of such access, despite the negative impact it would have on our counter-insurgency campaign in that country. It’s possible that President Medvedev did not actually demand that Kyrgyzstan shut its base at Manas to Western troops before receiving increased economic assistance. But he did not have to. In deciding to take this step, the government of Kyrgyzstan knew that it was granting an openly-articulated goal of Russian foreign policy.
- Other Russian policies demonstrate the same approach to security. We see it in the regularly repeated demand that Ukraine give up ownership of the gas pipelines on its territory. It shows up in the suggestion that Europe needs new security institutions so as to limit NATO’s ability to carry out the policies of its members.

What ties all these policies together – from missile defense to energy to Afghanistan – is a seeming conviction that Russian interests and those of other states, especially the U.S. and its European allies, are inevitably in conflict.

- This is why, when Russian officials propose to work with us on countering a possible missile threat from Iran, their proposals always involve reliance on Russian radars, usually on Russian territory.
- And it's why, for more than a decade, Russian policy has sought to block the construction of pipelines that would bring oil and gas from Central Asia and the Caucasus to international markets without crossing Russian territory.
- For the same reason, Russia has not tried to block the flow of supplies to Western forces in Afghanistan, except when that flow leads to closer relations between the United States and other post-Soviet states.
- We saw the same pattern this week when President Medvedev addressed the Defense Ministry, explaining his proposals for military reform as a response to the growing threat from NATO.

Russian security, in short, continues to be viewed in unusually prickly zero-sum terms. The result is that real cooperation with other states is generally considered risky and undesirable, even dangerous.

This Russian outlook hardly means that a new American approach cannot succeed. And it certainly does not mean we should not make the effort. Our interests in expanded cooperation with Russia are real, and they call for sustained diplomacy to create a more productive relationship.

Yet the mismatch between our strategic outlook and Russia's does have implications for the way in which we think about this effort. Our goal is not simply the mundane mutual accommodation of interests that our diplomats pursue on a daily basis with other states. Alone among the great powers, Russia presents us with the challenge of trying to get it to conceive its interests in a fundamentally different, less confrontational way.

Some commentators deride this idea, suggesting instead that we can do all the business we need with Russia as we find it (better this, they say, than obsessing about the Russia we wish for). And in any case, they believe, the interests reflected in Russian policy are largely immutable.

Neither of these propositions is correct. Expanded cooperation with Russia is possible even within the prevailing conception of its interests, but far more would be possible if its leaders viewed security in ways more congruent with the outlook of other European states. Is such a transformation possible? Of course. Nothing is more contrary to historical experience – or for that matter, insulting to Russia -- than to suggest that it alone among the world’s major states must remain permanently hostage to outdated, counter-productive conceptions of its interests, goals, and identity.

American policy, then, should pursue practical opportunities for cooperation with Russia. That means advancing its integration into the multilateral institutions of international life where it is ready to contribute to them. (Right now, Russia’s accession to the World Trade Organization is the most important unexploited opportunity.) We should do better in expanding bilateral cooperation as well. (Here, arms limitation talks offer significant possibilities.) And, particularly where Russia’s leaders have themselves acknowledged the legitimacy of the enterprise, we should not miss openings to address the connection between the country’s internal transformation and its place in the world. (On this point, there is no more tantalizing invitation than President Medvedev’s observation that whether Russia enjoys respect abroad depends on whether it observes the rule of law at home.)

In pursuing these cooperative steps, we should not forget the larger goal of our engagement with Russia – a relationship not limited to re-fighting battles of the last decade, or of the last century. That “reset” button remains to be pushed.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

