POLICYBRIEF

MOVING BEYOND THE RESET

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SUMMARY

The reset policy was originally conceived by President Barack Obama's administration as a means of reinvigorating the U.S.-Russian relationship and placing it on more solid and pragmatic ground. President Vladimir Putin's first few months in office, however, witnessed the "resetting of the reset" in which Putin unilaterally canceled several major U.S. assistance programs and generally showed little interest in improving U.S.-Russian relations. As a result, the Obama administration will have to reassess its strategy with Russia and find alternative ways of engaging with the Russian people. Such a strategy will include lowering the profile of the reset policy while pursuing more traditional exchanges that bypass high-level politics and promote direct links between the two countries.

In 2008, an air of optimism surrounded U.S.-Russian relations as both nations turned to a new generation of leaders who had come of age in the post–Cold War era. The United States famously pushed the "reset button," an action that promised the possibility of a new beginning in relations with Russia, in which shared interests would be pursued and disagreements, while duly noted, would not derail the search for common ground. In 2012, when Vladimir Putin returned to power, he essentially pushed the reset button too, but instead of moving forward, he sent U.S.-Russian relations backward, abruptly ending Russia's association with several longstanding programs, such as the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program. As a result, the Obama administration must also reassess its strategy with Russia and find low-profile, sustainable programs that bypass Putin and high-level politics and instead directly engage with the Russian people.

Since returning to the presidency in May 2012, Vladimir Putin has done nothing to build on the broadly recognized gains of the past four years, nor does he necessarily feel compelled to do so. The United States used its reset policy in large part to enhance the credibility of Russian President Dmitry Medvedev and to make him appear to be a more important international player then he actually was. Putin requires no such assistance; on the contrary, he is now the longest-serving leader among the world's major powers—an elder statesman, as it were—with a clear understanding of his foreign policy goals and objectives.

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The order in which Putin met with Russia's major foreign cohorts during his first weeks in office— the Commonwealth of Independent States, the European Union, China, and the United States—in many ways reflects his global priorities. Most notably, Putin seems to be one of the few prominent Russian politicians who actually believe that there is still some value to be gained in increased cooperation among the former Soviet republics. One particularly important position is his steadfast support of the Customs Union between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, an economic project that, despite criticism from skeptics, has led to a significant uptick in trade among the three nations. Putin evidently has great expectations for the Customs Union, including a common currency and greater political integration among its members.

Putin has managed to wrap himself in the Soviet past in a way that no other present-day Russian politician can, projecting an aura of toughness and strength that allows Russia to punch above its weight in global affairs. Russia has, in fact, a relatively weak hand to play internationally, including a declining population, a shrinking military, an economy that is overly dependent on the energy sector, crippling levels of corruption, and a vast, unprotected border. Putin has done little to address these fundamental weaknesses since returning to office, other than to criticize the government (now headed by Prime Minister Medvedev) for failing to implement his presidential decrees and policies. That being said, Russia still possesses some important trump cards that allow it to play on the world stage: nuclear weapons, a strong arms export industry, and the United Nations veto. But most experts perceive Russia as a regional power at best.

So how should the new administration deal with a declining but still relevant Russia? To begin with, the United States should not play into Putin's hand and end up enhancing either his stature or Russia's overall position in world affairs. Thus, the trappings of the reset—a presidential bilateral commission for U.S.-Russian relations that persistently trumpets every single interaction between the two states—should be toned down, if not eliminated outright. If Putin does not care about such top-level exchanges between the two countries, then the best approach would be to push the discussions down a few bureaucratic notches, so as not to make those talks hostage to high-level politics.

A change of style, however, does not mean that the United States should abandon important elements of the reset—in particular, the numerous exchanges between U.S. and Russian citizens. Such links now exist on multiple levels, such as professional, cultural, scientific, and scholarly, as well as occur spontaneously through the Internet. Those connections should be cultivated as a means to bypass Putin and the anticipated political roadblocks. Tourism also represents an excellent avenue for altering Russian perceptions of the United States. One of the fundamental changes in post-Soviet Russia is the right to travel abroad, thus breaking decades of isolation and giving Russians the chance to experience firsthand the United States and other countries.

Although a return to low-key exchange programs lacks the glamor of the presidential reset, such a nuts-and-bolts approach to U.S.-Russian relations may lead to a more fruitful and long-term dialogue. The one new wild card in U.S.-Russian relations is trade. U.S.-Russian trade remains miniscule in comparison with the other major economic relationships of each respective country. With Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization, fresh opportuni-

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ties now exist to expand trade, thereby forging new links that could, in the long run, promote a more stable relationship between the two nations.

Yet even an improved trade picture will not allow the next administration to ignore Russia's human rights record. If one reviews Putin's recent legislative agenda (both passed and proposed laws), the Russian state has laid the groundwork to go after nongovernmental organization activists, protest organizers, slanderers, blasphemers, and traitors. Such an offensive against Russian civil society inevitably will provoke a public response from the U.S. government that, in turn, Putin will treat as another example of U.S. interference in Russian domestic affairs. In reality, the new administration will have to find that admittedly elusive balance between trade and human rights without letting economic interests overwhelm the relationship.

At this stage, neither current levels of trade nor selective human rights interventions (such as the Magnitsky List) give the United States significant leverage over Russia. Indeed, if anyone has some immediate clout on these two issues, it is the Europeans. Every controversial piece of legislation passed by Putin invariably will be contested before the European Court of Human Rights. The most likely result will be fines in individual cases and demands that Russia bring its laws into compliance with the European Convention on Human Rights. The European Commission has also set its sights on Russia, most notably through its investigation of Gazprom for the Russian gas company's violation of European Union antimonopoly regulations. Russia has already tried to slow down this inquiry, but as Google and Microsoft can attest, the European Commission rarely loses such cases.

Obviously, the United States is not about to outsource its Russian policy to foreign institutions, nor should it. However, to exercise real leverage over Russia, the United States must understand that it is not acting alone but instead is working in collaboration with European allies to hold Russia to international trade and human rights standards.

The Obama administration will have several options for responding to Putin's reset of the reset. President Putin cannot necessarily be ignored, especially in those international hot spots where Russia's participation is required. At the same time, the Obama administration will have some leeway in determining the extent to which it wants to engage with Russia, given that the United States clearly has other, more pressing global priorities. The underlying challenge

for the new administration is not to play Putin's game but to find alternative ways to promote links between the two countries, such as through professional exchanges and new opportunities for trade. This strategy lacks the grand vision of the original reset. Nevertheless, it could lay the groundwork for some future date when the momentum for better relations returns.

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