



**OBAMA'S RUSSIA 'RESET':
ANOTHER LOST OPPORTUNITY?**

by **STEPHEN F. COHEN**

An enduring existential reality has been lost in Washington's post-cold war illusions and the fog of subsequent US wars: the road to American national security still runs through Moscow. Despite the Soviet breakup twenty years ago, only Russia still possesses devices of mass destruction capable of destroying the United States and tempting international terrorists for years to come. Russia also remains the world's largest territorial country, a crucial Eurasian frontline in the conflict between Western and Islamic civilizations, with a vastly disproportionate share of the planet's essential resources including oil, natural gas, iron ore, nickel, gold, timber, fertile land and fresh water. In addition, Moscow's military and diplomatic reach can still thwart, or abet, vital US interests around the globe, from Afghanistan, Iran, China and North Korea to Europe and Latin America. In short, without an expansive cooperative relationship with Russia, there can be no real US national security.

And yet, when President Obama took office in January 2009, relations between Washington and Moscow were so bad that some close observers, myself included, characterized them as a new cold war. Almost all cooperation, even decades-long agreements regulating nuclear weapons, had been displaced by increasingly acrimonious conflicts. Indeed, the relationship had led to a military confrontation potentially as dangerous as the 1962 Cuban missile crisis. The Georgian-Russian War of August 2008 was also a proxy American-Russian war, the Georgian forces having been supplied and trained by Washington.

What happened to the "strategic partnership and friendship"

between post-Soviet Moscow and Washington promised by leaders on both sides after 1991? For more than a decade, the American political and media establishments have maintained that such a relationship was achieved by President Bill Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin in the 1990s but destroyed by the "antidemocratic and neo-imperialist agenda" of Vladimir Putin, who succeeded Yeltsin in 2000.

In reality, the historic opportunity for a post-cold war partnership was lost in Washington, not Moscow, when the Clinton administration, in the early 1990s, adopted an approach based on the false premise that Russia, having "lost" the cold war, could be treated as a defeated nation. (The cold war actually ended through negotiations sometime between 1988 and 1990, well before the end of Soviet Russia in December 1991, as all the leading participants—Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, President Ronald Reagan and President George H.W. Bush—agreed.)

The result was the Clinton administration's triumphalist, winner-take-all approach, including an intrusive crusade to dictate Russia's internal political and economic development; broken strategic promises, most importantly Bush's assurance to Gorbachev in 1990 that NATO would not expand eastward beyond a reunited Germany; and double-standard policies impinging on Russia (along with sermons) that presumed Moscow no longer had any legitimate security concerns abroad apart from those of the United States, even in its own neighborhood. The backlash came with Putin, but it would have come with any Kremlin leader more self-confident, more sober and less reliant on Washington than was Yeltsin.

Nor did Washington's triumphalism end with Clinton or Yeltsin. Following the events of September 11, 2001, to take the most ramifying example, Putin's Kremlin gave the George W. Bush administration more assistance in its anti-Taliban war in Afghanistan, including in intelligence and combat, than did any NATO ally. In return, Putin expected the long-denied US-Russian partnership. Instead, the Bush White House soon expanded NATO all the way to Russia's borders and withdrew unilaterally from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, which Moscow regarded as the bedrock of its nuclear security. Those "deceptions" have not been forgotten in Moscow.

Now Russia's political class, alarmed by the deterioration of the country's essential infrastructures since 1991, is locked in a struggle over the nation's future—one with profound consequences for its foreign policies. One side, associated with Putin's handpicked successor as president, Dmitri Medvedev, is calling for a "democratic" transformation that would rely on "modernizing alliances with the West." The other side, which includes ultra-nationalists and neo-Stalinists, insists that only Russia's traditional state-imposed methods, or "modernization

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without Westernization," are possible. As evidence, they point to NATO's encirclement of Russia and other US "perfidies."

The choice of "modernizing alternatives" will be made in Moscow, not, as US policy-makers once thought, in Washington, but American policy will be a crucial factor. In the centuries-long struggle between reform and reaction in Russia, anti-authoritarian forces have had a political chance only when relations with the West were improving. In this regard, Washington still plays the leading Western role, for better or worse.

When President Obama made "resetting" relations with Moscow a foreign-policy priority, he seemed to understand that a chance for a necessary partnership with post-Soviet Russia had been lost and might still be retrieved. The meaning of "reset" was, of course, what used to be called *détente*. And since *détente* had always meant replacing cold war conflicts with cooperation, the president's initiative also suggested an understanding that he had inherited something akin to a new cold war.

The long, episodic history of *détente*, which began in 1933 when President Franklin Roosevelt established diplomatic relations with Soviet Russia after fifteen years of non-recognition, tells us something important about Obama's reset. Each episode

was opposed by powerful ideological, elite and institutional forces in Washington and Moscow; each required strong leadership to sustain the process of cooperation; and each, after a period of success, dissipated or collapsed in a resurgence of cold war conflicts, as did even the historic *détente* initiated by Gorbachev and Reagan in 1985 that promised to abolish cold war altogether.

Many commentators, like the Russia specialist Thomas E. Graham of Kissinger Associates and Peter Baker of the *New York Times*, believe that Obama's reset, a term also adopted by the Kremlin, has been "remarkably successful" and already achieved a "new partnership." Discourse between Washington and Moscow is more conciliatory. Both Obama and President Medvedev, who have met frequently, have declared the revamped relationship a success, citing their personal friendship as evidence. There are also tangible signs. Moscow is cooperating on two top US priorities: the war in Afghanistan and curbing Iran's nuclear-weapons aspirations. In addition, in 2010, a treaty, New START, was negotiated that is designed to reduce US and Russian long-range nuclear arsenals by almost a third.

Nonetheless, Obama's reset remains limited and inherently unstable. This is due in part to political circumstances over which he has had little control. Opposition in both capitals is fierce and unrelenting. Drawing on a traditional Russophobia that attributes sinister motives to every Moscow initiative, American neo-cold warriors have assailed Obama's reset as "capitulation," a "dangerous bargain" and a policy of "seeing no evil." One even likened it to the 1939 Nazi-Soviet Pact. Without a countervailing pro-Russia lobby or a significant US-Russian economic relationship to buffer the reset, it is highly vulnerable to such attacks.

In Moscow, equally harsh attacks are being directed at Obama's designated partner, President Medvedev. According to the leading Russian ultranationalist ideologue, Aleksandr Dugin, "The West stands behind Medvedev.... No one stands behind Medvedev except enemies of Russia." More ominously, in July 2009 a prominent general accused Medvedev of "treason," a charge reiterated in several quarters since March when Medvedev was also accused of "a betrayal of Russia's interests" for not using its seat on the United Nations Security Council to veto authorization of NATO's air attacks on Libya.

Still worse, both Obama and Medvedev are relatively weak leaders. Obama's authority has been diminished, of course, by his declining popularity and by Democratic Party losses in the 2010 Congressional elections. (By then, he had already yielded to demands for a "reset of the reset," restoring democracy-promotion to his agenda and embracing the Georgian leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, who brought America and Russia close to war in August 2008.) Medvedev's authority remains limited by Prime Minister Putin's continuing pre-eminence and the possibility he might reclaim the Russian presidency in the election scheduled for March 2012. Whatever the explanation, neither Obama nor Medvedev is able or willing to aggressively defend their reset or even prevent apparent attempts to disrupt it by members of their own administrations, as even Vice President

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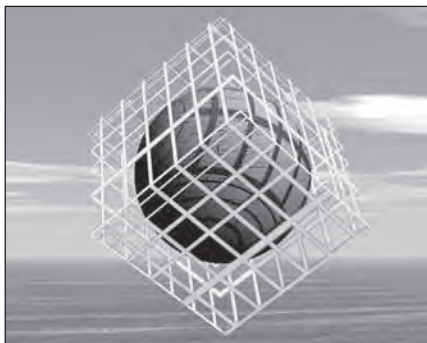
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Joseph Biden seems to have done more than once.

Obama's decision to base his Russia policy on a partnership with the presumed "liberal" Medvedev, in the hope of promoting his political fortunes over Putin's, has further limited support for the reset in Moscow. (Like the US media, Obama and his advisers continue to denigrate Putin as a leader with "one foot in the old ways" and even one who, as Secretary of State Hillary Clinton once remarked, "doesn't have a soul.") This political wager on Medvedev repeats the longstanding White House practice of mistaking a personal friend in the Kremlin—"my friend Dmitri," Obama calls Medvedev—for broad support in the Russian policy class. Indeed, openly backing Medvedev for the Russian presidency in 2012, as Biden did so improperly while in Moscow in March, has revived the Russian elite's resentment over US interference in its internal affairs and reinforced the view that only Putin can be trusted not to "sell out Russia to the West."

The political failings of the reset may be transitory, but the fundamental fallacies of Obama's Russia policy derive from the winner-take-all triumphalism of the 1990s. One is the endur-

Obama gained Kremlin cooperation on Afghanistan and Iran without yielding on the two US policies most resented by Moscow.

ing conceit of "selective cooperation," or seeking Moscow's support for America's vital interests while disregarding Russia's. Even though this approach had been pursued repeatedly since the 1990s, by Presidents Clinton and Bush, resulting only in failure and mounting Russian resentments, the Obama White House sought one-way concessions as the basis of the reset. As the National Security Council adviser on Russia, and reportedly the next US Ambassador to Moscow, Michael McFaul explained, "We're going to see if there are ways we can have Russia cooperate on those things that we define as our national interests, but we don't want to trade with them."

Obama did gain Kremlin cooperation on Afghanistan and Iran without yielding on the two US policies most resented by Moscow—locating missile defense sites close to Russia and continuing NATO expansion in the same direction—but at a high political cost. The disparity further undermined Medvedev's position as well as general support for the reset in Moscow, where it now bears his political "brand." Thus, Putin, who usually leaves the US relationship to his protégé, remarked publicly, "So, where is this reset?"

Indeed, missile defense is a time bomb embedded in the New START treaty and therefore in the reset itself. During the negotiations, Moscow believed the Obama administration had agreed to respect Russian objections to putting antimissile sites in Eastern Europe. But in December 2010, Obama, seeking Senate ratification, personally promised that the agreement "places no limitations on the development or deployment of our missile defense programs," which he pledged to pursue fully "regardless of Russia's actions." In its resolution of ratifi-

cation, the Senate went further, spelling out this intention in detail. Remembering previous violated agreements, Moscow reacted with such suspicion that Medvedev felt the need to vouch for Obama as a president who "keeps his word."

More generally, the unresolved conflict over missile defense exemplifies the futility of "selective cooperation." Medvedev's announcement, in November 2010, that Russia might participate in a NATO version of the project was heralded as another success of the reset. But both he and Putin quickly emphasized that "Russia will participate only on an absolutely equal basis... or we will not participate at all." No one on either side believes, of course, that the US-led alliance will give the Kremlin "equal" control over its antimissile system.

In pursuing the one-way concessions implicit in "selective cooperation," Obama, like Clinton and Bush before him, seems unable or unwilling to connect the strategic dots of mutual security the way Reagan and Gorbachev did in the late 1980s. In effect, Obama is asking Moscow to substantially reduce its long-range nuclear weapons while Russia is being surrounded by NATO bases with their superior conventional forces and

with an antimissile system potentially capable of neutralizing Russia's reduced retaliatory capability. In that crucial respect, the new arms-reduction treaty is inherently unstable. If nothing else, Obama is undermining his own hope of also negotiating a major reduction of Russia's enormous advantage in short-range tactical nuclear weapons, which Moscow increasingly considers

vital for its national defense. Instead, as Medvedev also warned, unless the missile defense conflict is resolved, there will be "another escalation of the arms race" that would, he added on May 18, "throw us back into the cold war era."

The twenty-year-long notion that Moscow will make unreciprocated concessions for the sake of partnership with the United States derives from the same illusion: that post-Soviet Russia, diminished and enfeebled by having "lost the cold war," can play the role of a great power only on American terms. In the real world, when Obama took office, everything Russia supposedly needed from the United States, including in order to modernize, it could obtain from other partners. Today, two of its bilateral relationships—with Beijing and Berlin, and increasingly with Paris—are already much more important to Moscow, politically, economically and even militarily, than its barren relations with a Washington that for two decades has seemed chronically unreliable, even duplicitous.

Behind that perception lies a more fundamental weakness of the reset: conflicting American and Russian understandings of why it was needed. Each side continues to blame the other for the deterioration of relations after 1991. Neither Obama nor the Clinton-era officials advising him have conceded there were any mistakes in US policy toward post-Soviet Russia. Instead, virtually the entire US political class persists in blaming Russia and in particular Putin, even though he came to power only in 2000. In effect, this exculpatory history deletes the historic opportunities lost in Washington in the 1990s and later. It also means that the success or failure of the reset is "up to the Russians" and that "Moscow's thinking must change," not Washington's.

American policy-makers and pundits may care little about history, but it is no arcane matter for their Russian counterparts. For them, the reset was necessary because Washington rejected Gorbachev's proposal for a "new model of guaranteeing security" in favor of a "Pax Americana" and because there was a "new US semi-cold war against Russia in 1991-2008." Putin and Medvedev are personally no less adamant about the prehistory of the reset and who was to blame. Before Obama became president, both Russian leaders repeatedly accused Washington of having constantly deceived Moscow. That acute sense of betrayal remains on their minds. Less than a year ago, Putin admitted having been slow to understand the pattern of US duplicity: "I was simply unable to comprehend its depth.... But in reality it is all very simple.... They told us one thing, and they did something completely different. They duped us, in the full sense of this word."

Medvedev agreed: "Relations soured because of the previous US administration's plans." He even said what is widely believed but rarely spoken publicly by Russian officials, that Washington had not just armed and trained the Georgian military but had known in advance, perhaps encouraged, Saakashvili's surprise attack on South Ossetian civilians and Russian peacekeepers, which began the August 2008 war: "Personally," Medvedev complained, "I found it very surprising that it all began after the US secretary of state [Condoleezza Rice] paid a visit to Georgia. Before that...Mr. Saakashvili was planning to come see me in Sochi, but he did not come."

Not surprisingly, the Russian leadership entered into the reset in 2009 with expectations diametrically opposed to the unilateral concessions expected by the Obama administration. As an unnamed Kremlin aide bluntly told a *Washington Post* columnist, "America owes Russia, and it owes a lot, and it has to pay its debt." A year later, when the head of NATO assured the international media that the reset would "bury the ghosts of the past," it was another example of how little the US-led alliance understands or cares about history.

The "ghost" barring a truly fundamental change in relations is, of course, the twelve-year expansion of NATO to Russia's borders—the first and most fateful broken American promise. Despite assurances of a "NATO-Russian friendship," the Obama administration has not disavowed more NATO expansion and instead reaffirmed US support for eventual membership for the former Soviet republics of Ukraine and Georgia, Moscow's declared "red lines." No state that feels encircled and threatened by an encroaching military alliance—an anxiety repeatedly expressed by Moscow, most recently by Putin in April—will, of course, ever feel itself an equal or secure partner of that alliance.

Still more, expanding NATO eastward has institutionalized a new and even larger geopolitical conflict with Russia. Moscow's protests and countersteps against NATO encroachment, especially Medvedev's statement in 2008 that Russia is entitled to a "sphere of strategic interests" in the former Soviet republics, have been indignantly denounced by American officials and commentators as "Russia's determination to re-establish a sphere of influence in neighboring countries." Thus, Biden stated in Moscow in March, "We will

not recognize any state having a sphere of influence."

But what is NATO's eastward movement other than a vast expansion of America's sphere of influence—military, political and economic—into what had previously been Russia's? No US official or mainstream commentator will admit as much, but Saakashvili, the Georgian leader bent on joining the alliance, feels no such constraint. In 2010, he welcomed the growth of "NATO's presence in the region" because it enables the United States and its allies to "expand their sphere of influence." Of all the several double standards in US policy-making—"hypocrisy," Moscow charges—none has done more to prevent an American-Russian partnership and to provoke a new cold war.

Given that the new NATO states cannot now be deprived of membership, there is only one way to resolve, or at least reduce, this profound geopolitical conflict between the US and Russia: in return for Moscow's reaffirmation of the sovereignty of all the former Soviet republics, Washington and its allies should honor retroactively another broken promise—that Western military forces would not be based in any new NATO country east of Germany. Though anathema to the US policy establishment and weapons industries, this would, in effect, demilitarize NATO's expansion since 1999. Without diminishing the alliance's guarantee of collective security for all of its members, such a grand accommodation would make possible a real partnership with post-Soviet Russia.

First, and crucially, it would redeem one of America's broken promises to Russia. Second, it would recognize that Moscow is entitled to at least one "strategic interest"—the absence of a potential military threat on its borders. (Washington has long claimed this privilege for itself, defending it to the brink of nuclear war in Cuba in 1962.) Third, the demilitarization of NATO's expansion would alleviate Russia's historical fear of military encirclement while bolstering its trust in Western partners. And fourth, this would reduce the Kremlin's concerns about missile defense sites in Eastern Europe, making it more willing to contribute what may be Russia's necessary resources to the still unproven project.

Much else of essential importance both to America and Russia could then follow, from far greater reductions in all of their weapons of mass destruction to full cooperation against the looming dangers of nuclear proliferation and international terrorism. The result would be, that is, another chance to regain the historic opportunity lost in the 1990s.

In 2009, Russia's pro-Western modernizers hoped that Obama's proposed reset meant Washington finally understood the necessity of partnership with Moscow. Two years later, however, Medvedev was still worried that "alternatives await us" in US-Russian relations. A leading pro-Western member of the Russian parliament was more explicit: "In Moscow and in Washington, people have been known to lose opportunities.... We have to hope that this time we won't lose the opportunity."

That both Obama and Medvedev, who personify the reset,

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are under attack in their own countries for “traitorous” policies is an ominous sign. Nonetheless, the political prospects are actually better in Moscow in one important respect: a significant part of the Russian policy class at least understands that the two countries have come not only to another turning point but possibly to the last chance for a post-cold war relationship. Pro-Western Russians can no longer find comfort in their customary association of major policy alternatives with a successor generation of leaders; the youthful Obama and Medvedev are that generation.

No such urgency or even awareness is evident today in the American establishment. Instead, the possibility of greater cooperation with Moscow has accelerated the tendency to equate “the crimes and abuses of this Russian government,” in the words of Senator John McCain, with those of Communist Russia. In the same vein, US cold war-era themes have become more pronounced. Moscow’s initiatives are again presented by media commentators like Charles Krauthammer as “brazen Russian provocations.” (Even Putin’s historic acknowledgment of the 1940 Soviet murder of thousands of Polish officers in Katyn Forest was dismissed by *The Weekly Standard* as a “trivial gesture” designed to “manipulate” foreign opinion.) Dire warnings by Ariel Cohen of the Heritage Foundation and others that Moscow is trying “to play off...the European allies against the United States” have reappeared along with demands that Washington deploy military power to “roll back the Kremlin’s growing regional influence.”

Obama’s proposed reset has also brought more extreme views to the fore. Present-day Russia, Ariel Cohen warns, is even more dangerous than its Soviet predecessor: “This is not your father’s Russia.... Today’s Russian leadership is younger and tougher.” Earlier a *Wall Street Journal* editor published an even more startling revelation: “Russia has become, in the precise sense of the word, a fascist state.” Previously a fringe notion, it has since been taken up by an established American scholar, Rutgers professor Alexander J. Motyl, in the journal of a leading university center of Russian studies.

Lost in this reckless (and uninformed) commentary are the multiple threats to America’s national security lurking in Russia—not only its vast, questionably secure stockpiles of lethal nuclear, biological and chemical materials but also its crumbling infrastructures and growing extremist movements—as well as the flickering chance for cooperation with Moscow to avert them. Veteran pundits in leading American newspapers assure readers that “nuclear war between Russia and America has become inconceivable”; indeed, that the danger of any US-Russian war is “minuscule,” despite the near miss in Georgia in August 2008, when the Bush White House considered sending military forces to support its client state; and that in general “what was needed was not the chimera of arms control” but a “renewal of the arms race.”

Such myopia has inspired an even more reckless view: the worse the situation inside Russia, the better for America. Thus, *Washington Post* columnist George Will, deriding the new nuclear-reductions treaty, reported with satisfaction on the

“emaciated Russian bear.” And a former Bush official, writing in the same newspaper, urged the Obama administration to “refuse to help Russian leaders with economic modernization,” even though modernizing that country’s infrastructures is essential for securing its devices of mass destruction. Motyl went further, hoping for “a destabilized Russia,” deaf to warnings from Moscow that this would be “catastrophic” in a country laden with nuclear weapons and eleven Chernobyl-style reactors.

Political and media myopia, the familiar triumph of ideology over reality, abetted another unwise Washington decision. Despite the Kremlin’s uncertain grip on its own nuclear materials—indeed, despite alarm that uncontrolled wildfires in August 2010 might reach fallout from the 1986 Chernobyl reactor explosion, or even nuclear weapons facilities—the

A fundamental transformation of relations requires bold leadership and a full rethinking of Washington’s triumphalist attitudes.

US Senate voted four months later to ship massive quantities of spent fuel from American-built reactors to Russia for safekeeping and disposal. While Russian environmentalists protested this would turn their country into “an international radioactive waste dump,” and a Moscow military expert warned that no Russian region was “truly safe,” the Obama administration hailed the decision as a victory for its “reset.”

A fundamental transformation of US-Russian relations, from what was essentially a state of cold war to a strategic partnership, requires bold, resolute leadership based on a full rethinking of the entire post-Soviet relationship, especially Washington’s triumphalist attitudes. Given the citadels of vested institutional, professional and personal interests in the failed policies since 1991, centered in Washington but with ample support throughout the nation’s media and educational system, nothing less will result in a full “reset.”

Several factors probably explain why President Obama has not provided any of these essentials. One is his own irresolute nature, also displayed in his domestic policies. (To be fair, the first black US president may be reluctant to assault too many American citadels or orthodoxies.) Nor has President Obama turned out to be a new thinker about security as were Gorbachev and Reagan when they achieved their breakthrough to partnership. Having surrounded himself with advisers tied to the failed Russia policies of the Clinton years, Obama has no one in his inner circle to propose fundamentally different approaches, still less heretical ones, or even much rethinking. As a result, Obama’s reset has been cast in the same fallacies that made it necessary.

But the president is not solely, or even mainly, to blame. The larger failure is that of the entire American policy establishment, including its legions of media opinion-makers, think-tank experts and academic intellectuals. Leaders who had previously enacted major improvements in US-Russian relations, most

recently Gorbachev and Reagan, were influenced by unorthodox ideas advocated over time by dissenting thinkers inside or near the political establishment, however few in number and however much in disfavor, even in danger, they often were.

No such nonconformist American thinking about Russia was in circulation when Obama took office. Nor has it been since, no lessons having been learned from the failures of the last two decades. The triumphalist orthodoxy still monopolizes the political spectrum, from right-wing and neoconservatives to Russia specialists at the “progressive” Center for American Progress, in effect unchallenged in the parties, mainstream media, policy institutes or universities. Even though the United States is mired in three wars and a corrosive economic crisis, while Moscow has regained crucial positions in its own region, from Ukraine to Kyrgyzstan, and developed flourishing partnerships from China to Western Europe, “experts” still insist that, as Clifford Kupchan of the Eurasia Group declared, “the road where Russia needs to go leads through Washington.”

Still worse, in addition to triumphalist fallacies about the end of the cold war, three new tenets of neo-cold war US

Obama’s recapitulations of failed American policies can only severely limit his détente with Moscow, and may destroy it.

policy have become axiomatic. First, that present-day Russia is as brutally antidemocratic as its Soviet predecessor. Evidence cited usually includes the Kremlin’s alleged radioactive poisoning of a KGB defector, Alexander Litvinenko, in London, in 2006, and its ongoing persecution of the imprisoned oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, on whom the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have bestowed the mantle of the great Soviet-era dissenters Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov. Second, that Russia’s nature makes it a growing threat abroad, especially to former Soviet republics, as demonstrated by its “invasion and occupation of Georgia” in August 2008. And third, that more NATO expansion is therefore necessary to protect both Georgia and Ukraine.

All of these assertions are far from the full truth and should be challenged in a critical policy debate, yet there is none. Moreover, one involves another Washington double standard. Moscow’s military defense of Georgia’s secessionist provinces, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and recognition of their independence were more justifiable, historically and politically, than was the US-led NATO bombing of Russia’s ally Serbia in 1999, which turned the Serbian province of Kosovo into an independent (and highly criminalized) state. If nothing else, Washington set the precedent for military intervention in conflicts in multi-ethnic states and for redrawing national boundaries.

The Obama administration has done nothing to discourage such anti-Russian axioms and too much to encourage them. Revising the reset to include so-called democracy-promotion policies—intrusions into Russia’s domestic politics that offended the Kremlin for years while doing more to undermine demo-

cratic prospects than to promote them—has only rearmed US opponents of the reset and further demoralized its Moscow supporters. In January, for example, Obama personally deplored the (brief) jailing of the new US-anointed Russian “democratic leader,” Boris Nemtsov, a former high-level Yeltsin-era official; and in March, Biden instructed his audience at Moscow State University, “Get your system right.” Not surprisingly, Russian officials who had hoped Obama’s policy would exclude such interference in their internal affairs concluded that “those hopes were unfounded.”

Obama’s re-endorsement of Georgian leader Saakashvili, whose ambitions to join NATO contributed to the proxy American-Russian war in 2008, also challenges Moscow’s understanding of the reset, reaffirming the widespread Russian view that the United States thinks it is “the only country in the world with national interests.” Moreover, Washington’s Georgian project is still dangerous. The Kremlin demonstrated that if provoked it will strike hard at a US-client regime on the wrong side of its “red lines,” especially in the North Caucasus region where Islamic terrorism and social turbulence are

threatening Russian statehood. Visiting Tbilisi last fall, even an analyst from the reliably deferential Council on Foreign Relations, Walter Russell Mead, found Saakashvili’s “hotheaded” leadership “unpredictable and impulsive.” Nonetheless, the Obama administration continues to train Saakashvili’s military, even staging demonstrative NATO-Georgian exercises, while remaining

silent about the regime’s brutal repression of street demonstrations in Tbilisi in late May.

Obama’s recapitulations of failed American policies, along with his declared intention to pursue missile defense in Eastern Europe—plans to put interceptor missiles in Romania and related weapons in Poland have already been announced—can only severely limit his détente with Moscow, and possibly destroy it. Given Russia’s overriding importance for vital US interests, the president seems to have no national security priorities. Even the wanton NATO air attacks on Libya are eroding support for the reset in Moscow, where lessons are being drawn that “Russia was essentially deceived” (again) and Obama’s partner Medvedev was “naïve” in trusting the US-backed UN resolution on a “no-fly zone”; that nations without formidable nuclear weapons—first Serbia, then Iraq and now Libya (Muammar el-Qaddafi relinquished his nuclear materials in 2004) risk becoming targets of such attacks; and that NATO’s slouching toward Russia is even more menacing than previously thought.

Obama has already made clear that in his re-election campaign the “successful” reset of relations with Russia will be touted (along with the killing of Osama bin Laden) as his great foreign-policy achievement. As 2012 approaches, it is therefore possible he will finally pursue the kind of real transformation in the relationship carried out by Gorbachev and Reagan twenty-five years ago. To do so, however, will require the serious rethinking and determined leadership Obama has failed to provide thus far. We may continue to hope, but the adage of Russians who have experienced so many lost opportunities in their own politics seems more apt: “An optimist is an uninformed pessimist.” ■