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U.S.–Russia Relations after Manas: Do Not Push the Reset Button Yet

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Vice President Joe Biden suggested at the Munich international security conference that America push “the reset button” on relations with Russia. The Obama Administration, however, needs to proceed with caution and not allow Moscow to pocket gains it has recently made in Eurasia. An improvement in U.S.–Russian relations is desirable, but a “carrots and flowers” approach to the Kremlin will not work.

Since the war with Georgia last August, Russia has been on the offensive across Eurasia. The Kremlin is so concerned with expansion of its sphere of influence that even today’s severe economic crisis—which has seen the ruble plunge 50 percent against the dollar and the Moscow stock market capitalization drop 80 percent—has not slowed its push into the “near abroad.”

Eviction Notice. Washington’s wake-up call should have been the eviction notice served by Kurmanbek Bakiyev, president of Kyrgyzstan, to the U.S. military. With Russian President Dmitry Medvedev at his side, Bakiyev announced in Moscow that he wants the U.S. to leave Manas Air Base, a key military cargo hub at the airport of the Kyrgyz capital Bishkek. The U.S. and NATO have used Manas since the fall of 2001 to ferry troops and materiel in and out of Afghanistan. Yet judging by Joe Biden’s reaction, the Obama Administration does not want to tease the bear or, worse, is not concerned about Bakiyev’s demand, instigated by Russia.

It should be. With the shorter supply route through Pakistan under increasing attacks by the Taliban (a key bridge through the Khyber Pass was

blown up last week), the longer but safer Central Asian supply route is taking on growing importance as a way to keep U.S. and NATO forces in Afghanistan re-supplied. The Kremlin understands the situation quite well—the Soviet debacle in Afghanistan (1979–1989) is fresh in its collective memory.

For years, both Russia and China pressured Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to kick out the U.S. bases. In 2005, Uzbekistan gave in, evicting the U.S. from the Karshi Khanabad air base and leaving Manas in Kyrgyzstan as the only remaining American hub.

This year, Moscow offered the cash-strapped Kyrgyz government at least \$2 billion in credit package at below market rates, with most of the money going toward building a hydropower station while another portion went to debt forgiveness, and \$150 million in grants. This package trumped the \$17 million-a-year lease fees for Manas and \$150 million a year in assistance Kyrgyzstan was receiving from the U.S. Russia also used covert action and influence operations to instigate anti-American street demonstrations and a media campaign, thereby placing pressure on the Kyrgyz regime.

Paratroopers and Bases. Simultaneously, the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Orga-

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nization (CSTO) of the Commonwealth of Independence States announced the creation of a Rapid Reaction Force (RRF). President Medvedev specified that the capabilities of this force were to match those of NATO's RRF. The backbone of the new 15,000-strong RRF will be a Russian paratroop division and a paratroop brigade, strengthened by units from Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. Uzbekistan will participate on an *ad hoc* basis. The RRF not only can be used to fight external enemies but is likely to be available to put down "velvet revolutions" and quell popular unrest, which the authoritarian regimes comprising the CSTO unanimously abhor.

The Russian military also announced the establishment of three military bases in secessionist Abkhazia: a naval base in Ochamchire, the Bombora air base near Gudauta, and an alpine special forces base in the Kodori Gorge. Not only do these deployments violate the terms of the cease-fire negotiated by French President Nicolas Sarkozy after the 2008 Russo-Georgian war, but they extend Russia's power projection capabilities into the Southern Caucasus, threatening the already precarious position of Georgia and the major oil and gas pipelines from the Caspian Sea to Turkey and Europe.

Russia has taken additional steps to secure its clout from Poland to the Pacific. It initiated a joint air-and-missile defense system with Belarus, which may cost billions. It also announced the creation of a \$10 billion stabilization fund for the CIS countries, most of which (\$7.5 billion) Moscow will front. The reason for the spending spree is simple: money and weapons consolidate control over allies.

President Medvedev has announced that the U.S. needs to come to Moscow—not to the capitals of Eurasian independent states—to ask for transit to Afghanistan. Thus, Russia can first create a problem and then provide a solution. However, this is only the best-case scenario. In the worst case, as some analysts in Moscow suggest, Russia would benefit from a U.S. defeat in Afghanistan: first, because it would be a payback for the Soviet fiasco in the 1980s, but second, and more importantly, because such a defeat would highlight the collapse of NATO power and, with it, America's global dominance.

Russia may mistakenly believe that, together with China and Iran, it would be able to pick up the pieces in Afghanistan and prevent the Taliban from extending their influence over allies in Central Asia and the Caucasus. However, radical Islamists—not America—are the long-term systemic threat toward the "soft underbelly" of Russia's south—a threat for which Moscow lacks answers.

Empire Above All? It comes as no surprise that Russia is moving to secure what President Medvedev called "the zone of privileged interests" in his August 31, 2008, speech. This action is consistent with policies formulated almost two decades ago by Yevgeny M. Primakov, leader of the Eurasianist school of foreign policy. Many Eurasianists tend to view America as a strategic adversary.

Primakov was Boris Yeltsin's spy chief and later became a foreign minister and then prime minister. In 1994, under Primakov's direction, the Russian Foreign Intelligence Service published a report calling for Russian domination of the "near abroad"—the newly independent states that emerged from the rubble of the collapsed Soviet empire.

Later, Primakov championed the notion of a multi-polar world, in which U.S. influence would be crowded out by Russia, China, and India. Today, Vladimir Putin and Medvedev are echoing Primakov, calling for a new geopolitical and economic architecture—not only in Europe but throughout entire world—based on massive spheres of influence.

Russia wants to be a regional leader, capitalizing on its military power (and willingness to use it), its unique geopolitical position from the Atlantic to the Pacific, its massive energy resources, and its gas and oil pipelines as a force multiplier. Moscow views China and India as the other regional leaders, thereby pushing the U.S. out of the Eastern Hemisphere. While this scenario is unlikely to succeed, it could still prove highly destabilizing.

Haste Is the Enemy of Wisdom. The Obama Administration's desire to "push the reset button" in relations with Russia is understandable. Were Moscow on board, nuclear disarmament, counter-proliferation, the stabilization of Afghanistan, and sanctions to deter Iran from going nuclear might be easier to achieve. However, this is a big "if," and

haste is the enemy of wisdom when it comes to the 200-year relationship between Russia and America.

The U.S. should look for alternatives to Manas, specifically in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. It should not allow Moscow to pocket its gains in Eurasia, especially in the Caucasus, nor should it abandon the newly independent states to

the vagaries of the Russian “sphere of influence”—privileged or otherwise.

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