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The Obama–Medvedev G-20 Meeting: The Agenda for the First Encounter

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On April 1, President Barack Obama will meet for the first time with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev at the G-20 summit in London. The two world leaders are expected to discuss a broad range of issues on the global and U.S.–Russian bilateral agenda, including U.S. plans for Afghanistan, Iran, and missile defense in Europe.

This engagement will build on Secretary of State Hillary Clinton’s March 6 infamous “reset button” meeting with Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s foreign minister. It also follows visits to Russia by “wise men” such as former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger, George Shultz, and James Baker and the rollout of a new report produced by the Nixon Center and the Belfer Center of Harvard University and signed by former Senators Chuck Hagel, Gary Hart, and former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft.

Russian media praised the report. Fedor Lukyanov, editor of the journal *Russia in Global Affairs*, called the report’s authors “pro-Russian” and the report “more pragmatic” and “very sensible”—unlike the previous Administration, “which combined ideologization [sic] and conceit with a disregard of the real significance of Russia.”¹

These “elder statesmen” are moved by a desire to reach out to Moscow and repair the relationship, which, in the last five years, has frayed. They have received unofficial support from the Obama Administration and intend to help create a public atmosphere conducive to “resetting” relations between the two countries.

The New Kremlin. These elder statesmen may be forgetting, however, that they are not dealing with the sclerotic Brezhnev regime of the 1970s or with the USSR in terminal decline under Mikhail Gorbachev in the late 1980s. Today’s Russian leadership is younger and tougher. It is increasingly anti-American and continues to aggressively challenge its neighbors’ sovereignty, whether it be deploying missile defense in the Czech Republic and Poland or Georgia and Ukraine joining NATO. Moscow wants not only to impose its will on Warsaw, Kyiv, and Tbilisi. Moscow also wants to dismantle NATO and the post-Bretton Woods economic system.²

The Kremlin also continues to call—as it has since the St. Petersburg Economic Summit in June 2007—for revising the global economic architecture. These calls dovetail with the Kremlin’s effort to diversify away from the dollar in energy transactions and its ongoing criticism of the dollar as the principle global reserve currency. Moscow has recently offered proposals to the G-20 for a supranational reserve currency.³

Russia’s actions also revolve around the Kremlin’s goal to expand its “privileged sphere of influence”

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and are consistent with the zero-sum mindset and policies formulated almost two decades ago by Yevgeny M. Primakov, the former prime minister and leader of the Eurasianist school of foreign policy.⁴ The Kremlin's actions today include the construction of five Russian military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and Russian pressure on Kyrgyzstan to give an eviction notice to the Manas Air Force base in the capital Bishkek, a key base used by U.S. and NATO to re-supply coalition forces in Afghanistan.⁵

Washington and NATO's desire to cooperate with Moscow is understandable in view of the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan and Iran's missile and nuclear programs. After the "Yankee Go Home" announcement by the Kyrgyz, Moscow offered to use its cargo planes and air space to re-supply Afghanistan. And it is refusing to compromise on Iran. Despite the economic crisis that is providing a reality check for Moscow, Russia is doing its best to continue to pursue a broad, global, revisionist foreign policy agenda that seeks to undermine what it views as a U.S.-led international security and economic architecture.

Undermining NATO. Moscow's calls for new pan-European security architecture should give President Obama pause.⁶ The concept seeks an absence of "blocs" in European security (i.e., NATO) and security that is not at the "expense" of some countries (i.e., Russia).⁷ It proposes national armed forces to be deployed on a "common perimeter" and a "demilitarized zone" inside the perimeter. To be sure, the Kremlin seeks to marginalize NATO and restrain America's influence.

Beyond Europe, Russia's rulers are obsessed with "multipolarity," which they interpret as striving for a world order in which Russia, China, Iran, Syria, and Venezuela will form a counterweight to the United States.

This is a broad global agenda at odds with vital U.S. interests.

Needed: A Realistic Policy Toward Moscow. It is important, therefore, for President Obama to remain *realistic* before meeting Medvedev and recall Moscow's recent actions on the ground, the foreign and security elite's mindsets, and Russia's long-term goals for revising what it views as a U.S.-led international security and economic architecture. Moreover, haste is ill-advised for the Obama Administration, which has not yet announced all key officials who will be dealing with Russia and Eurasia nor completed a comprehensive assessment of U.S.–Russian relations.

While an improvement in U.S.–Russian relations is certainly desirable, such an improvement will depend on concrete Russian actions. To meet today's challenges and preserve the security of Europe and Eurasia, the Obama Administration should prepare a detailed agenda for the G-20. Specifically, the Obama Administration should use its political capital to maintain and expand transatlantic unity by showing leadership within NATO. It should develop a mechanism for regular consultation with U.S. allies on Russia, with coordinated initiatives toward regional conflicts, institutional enlargement, conventional weapons control, and energy policy.⁸

1. Maxim Yusin, "Missile Defense, Georgia and Ukraine in Exchange for Partnership with Russia?" *Izvestiya Online*, March 18, 2009, pp. 1, 3.
2. See Terry Miller, "New Global Currency Proposal: Good Diplomatic Theater but Bad Policy," *Heritage Foundation WebMemo* No. 2364, March 26, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/tradeandeconomicfreedom/wm2364.cfm> (March 27, 2009).
3. President of Russia, "Russian Proposals to the London Summit (April 2009)," March 16, 2009, at <http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2009/03/213995.shtml> (March 27, 2009).
4. Ariel Cohen, "How the Obama Administration Should Engage Russia," testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, U.S. Senate, March 19, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/tst031909a.cfm>.
5. *Ibid.*
6. "Medvedev Urges EU to Create New Intl-legal Security Architecture," *ITAR-TASS*, February 6, 2009, at <http://www.itar-tass.com/eng/level2.html?NewsID=13556177&PageNum=0> (March 27, 2009).
7. "Rogozin Spells out New European Security Concept," *ITAR-TASS*, November 11, 2008.

President Obama should encourage America's European allies to diminish dependence on Russian energy and diversify their sources of energy, such as adding LNG and non-Russian-controlled gas from the Caspian, nuclear energy and coal, and economically viable renewable energy.

The Administration should maintain European missile defense plans despite the recent setbacks in the Czech Republic. If a "grand bargain" between Moscow and Washington abandons the third site in Poland and the Czech Republic, it would compromise American interests, damage relations with important allies, and open up the United States to extortion.

In talks with Russia, the Obama Administration should support Ukraine and Georgia's territorial integrity. If such warnings, cautioning Russia against the use of force toward its neighbors, are not made, this may be taken as a de facto green light for a new conflict.

If Russia reconsiders its anti-American stance, the United States should be prepared to pursue matters of common interest, such as the recent agreement on military supplies to Afghanistan and the strategic

weapons limitations agreement. It should also be prepared to offer real incentives, such as U.S. support for Russian entry into the World Trade Organization, support for repealing the obsolete Jackson-Vanik Amendment, and resubmission to Congress of the 123 Nuclear Agreement.

However, this is not the time for naïveté. The United States can explore Russia's willingness to rethink its relationship with Iran and prevent it from going nuclear in the very near future. Yet Washington should not bargain away the independence and sovereignty of countries of Eurasia, dismiss concerns over human rights and rule of law in Russia, allow Moscow to rewrite the geopolitical map of Europe with its new European Security Concept, or bargain away the global economic architecture.

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8. Ariel Cohen, "Russian and Eurasia Policy Project: A Realistic Agenda for the Obama Presidency," Heritage Foundation Special Report No. 49, March 27, 2009, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/sr0049.cfm> (March 27, 2009).