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Time to Revise Obama's Russian "Reset" Policy

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In March 2009 in Geneva, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov pressed the "reset button" to restart the frozen Russia–U.S. relationship. Since then, the Obama Administration has hailed the reset as a great accomplishment. However, U.S. concessions on New START, limitations on missile defense, and hands-off policies in Eurasia did not prevent Russia from pursuing policies that are often harmful to U.S. interests.

The New START. According to the Administration, New START is a direct result of its "resetting" of U.S.–Russian relations. The Administration views New START as a part of its "getting to zero" nuclear disarmament agenda while relying on unverifiable treaties to ensure compliance with a comprehensive nuclear weapons ban.

Additionally, the New START limits the U.S. ability to develop and deploy effective missile defenses to protect the homeland as well as America's allies. There are concerns about the inadequacy of the New START verification regime: The degree of verifiability is low and the treaty fails to account for Russia's 3,800-strong tactical nuclear arsenal. Additionally, the treaty appears to exclude rail-based ICBMs and their launchers from coverage and could permit Russia to circumvent the limits the treaty imposes on such.¹

"The Near Abroad." Russia also increased its presence and pressure in Eastern Europe and Eurasia. As a result of the 2008 Russia–Georgia war, Russia recognized the independence of secessionist Abkhazia and South Ossetia, established five mili-

tary bases there, and deployed long-range S-300 missile batteries, which allow aerial control over most of Georgia.

In Armenia, Moscow recently extended the lease of the Gyumri military base until 2044 and made commitments to protect Armenia's borders against Azerbaijan and Turkey. A recent Russian book on the Georgia war describes Gyumri as a staging area for an attack on Tbilisi, Georgia. The Russian–Armenian protocol makes Russia the dominant power in South Caucasus, as the U.S. and NATO are unwilling to commit to a long-term military presence there. This arrangement is similar to the renegotiated lease for the massive Sevastopol naval base in Ukraine as it, too, prevents the country's future membership in NATO. Russia continues to keep a contingent in Transnistria on Moldovan soil.

Russia is also expanding attacks on the authoritarian Belarusian leader Alexander Lukashenko in order to replace him with a more pliant, pro-Moscow (but not necessarily more democratic) president.

To further strengthen its dominance in Central Asia, Moscow used its media muscle in Kyrgyzstan to facilitate the overthrow of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev. The move was payback for his refusal to

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evict the U.S. airbase at Manas airport. Russia now demands to be allowed to deploy an “anti-narcotics” military base in Osh in Fergana Valley, the scene of brutal violence in the summer of 2010.

Winning in Afghanistan is a vital U.S. national interest; the Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan, a major NATO refueling and transportation hub, has been critical to this effort. Nevertheless, the U.S. and Kyrgyzstan may negotiate a deal that would make Russia’s Gazprom a key supplier of jet fuel for Manas.

The U.S. and governments of Central Asia recognize that Russia and China will have clout in the heart of Eurasia. Nevertheless, they have a critical common interest in checking these nations’ influence in the region as well as denying terrorists and drug lords sanctuaries in Central Asia, especially after 2011. This has to be a part of a comprehensive, long-term strategy. The Obama Administration, however, is doing little to secure long-term U.S. presence in the region.

“See No Evil” Is Not a Policy. Despite its laudable support of U.N. Security Council sanctions against Iran, Russia last August fueled Iran’s nuclear reactor in Bushehr. Furthermore, Moscow continues to increase its engagement with terrorism-supporting regimes such as Syria and Venezuela. Presidents Hugo Chavez and Dmitry Medvedev signed an agreement to sell Venezuela a nuclear reactor. And Russia announced that it is planning to provide Venezuela with satellite launch capability—a dual-use technology that can be transformed into medium-range ballistic missile capability.²

Last month the Russian defense minister announced that Russia will supply supersonic P-800 Yakhont ram-jet supersonic anti-ship cruise missiles to Syria. These missiles are a major threat to the U.S. Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean and to

America’s staunchest ally in the Middle East, Israel. By expanding weapons sales and maintaining ties with Hamas and Hezbollah, Russia is trying to muscle its way back into the Middle East through the use of neo-Soviet tactics: arms sales and the support of radicals.

Thus, the Kremlin is exploiting Obama’s “see no evil” approach in Russia’s expansion into former Soviet space and cooperation with anti-Western regimes. Russia has also prioritized its Arctic expansion and persists in its claim to a vast territory in the Arctic Ocean greater than Germany, France, and Italy combined. Moscow declared the Northern Sea Route around the northern edge of Eurasia as its territorial waters and is backing up its claim under the Law of the Sea Treaty with military force.³

Resetting the Reset. The Obama Administration believes that it needs strong international support for its military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as for confrontation with Iran, and North Korea, and, in the long run, possibly China. And in doing so, the White House hopes to bring Moscow to the U.S. side. So far, any such success is minimal.

The Obama Administration’s Russia policy will inevitably produce a massive loss of American influence in Eurasia and jeopardize the security of the U.S. and its friends and allies east of the Oder. Jeopardizing allies while empowering strategic competitors does not equal safety.

Instead, New START should be replaced with an alternative arms control treaty with Russia that would be based on a protect-and-defend strategy.⁴ The U.S. should build alliances to check the influence of America’s geopolitical competitors, be it great powers or transnational actors such as radical, violent Islamist movements.

1. Ariel Cohen, “What Senator Kerry Is Missing on Obama’s Russian Reset,” *The Foundry*, June 23, 2010, at <http://blog.heritage.org/?p=36923>.
2. RIA Novosti, “Russia May Sell S-300 Missiles to Venezuela, Instead of Iran,” October 15, 2010, at http://en.rian.ru/military_news/20101015/160963585.html (October 19, 2010).
3. Ariel Cohen, “From Russian Competition to Natural Resources Access: Recasting U.S. Arctic Policy,” *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* No. 2421, June 5, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/06/from-russian-competition-to-natural-resources-access-recasting-us-arctic-policy>.
4. Baker Spring, “An Alternative to New Start,” *Heritage Foundation Backgrounder* No. 2571, September 21, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/09/An-Alternative-to-New-START>.

Throughout Eurasia, the U.S. should strengthen its ties with pro-Western forces while promoting good governance, individual rights, and the rule of law in order to facilitate foreign investment. Congress is seeking sanctions against those responsible for the murder of crusading lawyer Sergey Magnitsky. The U.S. should also demand justice for assassinated journalist Anna Politkovskaya and release of the jailed businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

Washington should expand its political–military cooperation with the countries of Central Asia while preparing for the new security environment in the heart of Eurasia. It should explore greater economic and political–military engagement in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, including training and arms sales. The U.S. should also bolster economic, military, law enforcement, and government reform assistance to Kyrgyzstan and prevent Russia from controlling Manas.

In the Caucasus, the U.S. should sell modern defensive military equipment to Georgia and Azerbaijan and boost support for trans-Caspian and East–West gas pipelines. The Pentagon should explore possibilities of deploying “lily

pad” military bases in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Central Asian states.

In the High North, the U.S. Coast Guard and Navy need to increase the U.S. maritime presence, improve cooperation with NATO allies, and engage Russia diplomatically. Given that the demand for oil and gas is expected to rise, the U.S. should expand Arctic Ocean mapping and facilitate geological exploration.

Putting American Interests First. The Obama Administration should recognize that the U.S.–Russia reset is happening only in the areas where Russia sees clear national interests (like Afghanistan) or where the U.S. is offering big paybacks, such as in the post-Soviet republics.

The U.S. should review its policies concerning Russia and the post-Soviet republics based on a realistic assessment of Russia’s intention and actions while giving top priority to American national interests.

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