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Reset Regret: Russian Global Strategy Undermines American Interests

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According to the Obama Administration, the U.S. is not competing with Russia for global influence. Unfortunately, Moscow has not received this memo. Instead, Russia attempts to extend its influence to constrain U.S. policy. Russian leaders like Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov habitually invoke a “polycentric” or multipolar model of the world, with Russia working with her partners toward a future where U.S. power is so diminished that it cannot act without Moscow’s permission.

Moscow has continuously promoted in word and deed the idea that there is or should be a multipolar world order that constrains U.S. foreign policies. Moscow’s concept of multipolarity entails an uncontested sphere of Russian influence in the CIS and with key actors in critically important regions: Europe, East Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America.

Anti-American Partnerships. Moscow has formed partnerships with China, Iran, and Venezuela to prevent the U.S. from consolidating a regional order under its auspices. Like the U.S.S.R, its predecessor and inspiration, today’s Russia pursues key allies in the Middle East and Latin America, such as Syria, Iran, and Venezuela, with whom it can jointly frustrate American and Western efforts to consolidate a peaceful regional order. Such partners may resist U.S. policies and actively counter them to distract the U.S., force the U.S. to accommodate Russian interests, or compel an American retreat.

In East Asia, Moscow joins China to advocate “a new Asian security order” based on “mutual trust,

mutual benefit, equality, and cooperation.”¹ According to the two great powers, all states would respect each other’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, not criticize their domestic politics, and support each other on outstanding territorial issues.

To translate: Beijing, Moscow, and their allies will respect Russia’s claims to the Kurile Islands (the Northern Territories) and Georgian territories of Abkhazia/South Ossetia, as well as China’s claims to Xinjiang, Taiwan, and Tibet; China’s territorial claims against Japan regarding the Senkaku Islands; and possibly even China’s claims on the Spratly Islands.

Both countries also support non-alliance principles, equal and transparent security frameworks, and equal and indivisible security. Russia also seeks India’s assent to this formulation and covertly solicits Japan’s endorsement—even as it humiliates Japan over the Kurile Islands, a sure sign of Moscow’s endemic desire to play both sides against the middle and its fundamentally anti-liberal and anti-American orientation. The proposal’s vagueness benefits only Russia and China and squarely denounces the U.S. alliance system in Asia. Ultimately, Russia’s concept of Asian, if not global, multipolarity is self-serving.

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Moreover, the joint proposal resembles Russia's equally self-serving, anti-American, and Anti-NATO proposal for a European Security treaty of 2009–2010. Moscow even applies the same rhetoric to this Asian security proposal that is present in its European Security Treaty draft. At the International Institute for Strategic Studies Shangri-La Dialogue conference in Singapore in 2011, Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov said:

Russian–Chinese proposals are aimed at helping the countries of the region to realize that security is indivisible and at abandoning attempts to strengthen one's security at the expense of others. New regional security architecture should be based on the universal principles of international law, non-aligned approaches, confidence and openness, with due regard to the diversity of the APR and an emerging polycentric balance of forces.²

The Unsavory Clients: Tehran, Damascus, Caracas. In addition to diplomatic support for China, Russia has sold Iran, Syria, and Venezuela large amounts of weapons. Despite the laudable cancellation of the S-300 air defense missiles sale to Iran, Moscow still preserves the option of selling other weapons to Tehran. It signed major energy deals with Tehran in 2010 and this summer has advocated easing sanctions on Iran provided it cooperates with the International Atomic Energy Agency—an institution that has long since demonstrated how easily Iran can deceive it concerning its nuclear program.

Moscow clearly wants to retain ties to Iran, which it regards as the rising great power in the Gulf and Middle East and with whom it wants to collaborate against any Western effort to consolidate a peaceful order. Moscow has sold weapons such as anti-tank missiles to Iran and Syria, and these weapons continue to migrate to Hamas and Hezbollah.

Russia defends Bashar al-Assad's murderous regime despite its bloody repression of its own citi-

zens. This is, among other reasons, because Russia has signed an agreement with Syria to return Soviet naval bases in Latakia and Tartus to Russian control. Therefore, Russia obstructs U.N. resolutions of censure against Syria. French diplomats who negotiated with Russia believe that Moscow most fears the loss of another ally in the Middle East.

Moscow has also sold billions in weapons to Hugo Chávez's regime in Venezuela, including fighter jets, tanks, and whole Kalashnikov assault rifle factories. Chávez used his increasing military power to aid the terrorist group FARC directly and run narcotics from West Africa and Latin America into Central and North America.

The notorious arms dealer Viktor Bout, who now awaits trial in a New York federal court, was caught offering to sell weapons to the FARC. Given Bout's longstanding connections to senior officials of the Russian government, Moscow moved heaven and earth to prevent his extradition from Thailand, where he was arrested, to the U.S. It is quite likely that Bout's weapons would have been earmarked for the FARC and/or similar narco-terrorists throughout Latin America.

Likewise, Russia has been China's largest source of foreign weapons since 1990, even though those sales have declined due to Russian fears about Chinese intentions and anger over Chinese piracy and subsequent sale of weapons in competition with Russia in third-party markets. Nevertheless, arms sales and advanced technology transfers from Russia to China still occur.

What Should the U.S. Do? The optics of Moscow's ties to anti-American states, which build power to challenge the U.S. regionally and support and control extensive terrorist and intelligence networks, clash dramatically with the optics of the Obama Administration's "reset." Tehran, Damascus, and Caracas have an interest in destabilizing their regions and in acquiring advanced conventional—and likely nuclear—weapons. Such proliferation

1. "China, Russia Call for Efforts in Asia–Pacific Security," *China Daily*, September 28, 2010, at http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2010-09/28/content_11361116.htm (August 2, 2011).
2. Speech by Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov to Sixth Plenary Session of the 10th Annual ISSS Asia Security Summit, The Shangri-La Dialogue, Singapore, June 5, 2011, at <http://www.iiss.org/conferences/the-shangri-la-dialogue/shangri-la-dialogue-2011/speeches/sixth-plenary-session/sergei-ivanov/> (August 2, 2011).

makes for a most problematic multipolarity, which piles up obstacles to U.S. interests and security.

Despite the “reset,” it is in U.S. interests to find out to what degree Moscow orchestrates or participates in joint activities among these problematic states, including arms sales from Iran and Syria to Hamas and Hezbollah. Moscow surely knows of the expansion of the Iranian intelligence, military, economic, and political infrastructure in Iraq, as well as Iran’s ties to Venezuela and those two states’ collaboration in uranium prospecting.

U.S. policymakers should reassess the “reset” and develop regional strategies that counter Russia’s (and China’s) agendas. Such policies should increase pressure on Iran, the most anti-American regional power, and cause the Assad regime in Syria and the Chávez government in Venezuela to stop supporting terrorism.

The Trying Times Ahead. A “reset” policy that ignores Russia’s global efforts to undermine the U.S. recalls the ill-fated *détente* of the 1970s. It ran aground on Russian expansionism and wars in the Third World, especially Afghanistan. Despite profound changes since then, Russia’s basic anti-American strategic orientation, “reset” rhetoric aside, seems to be the same. In the trying times ahead, when it comes to global challenges, the U.S. should relearn and practice international balance-of-power politics.

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