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U.S. Policy on Russia for Obama's Second Term

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Since Vladimir Putin's third inauguration as Russian president last May, U.S.–Russian relations have deteriorated sharply. Officials on both sides have moved past the “reset” honeymoon as disagreements over geopolitics and human rights abound.

Spanning two continents and with a veto on the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), Russia is uniquely positioned to play a prominent role in U.S. foreign policy. However, the United States needs a new course of action for the next four years to prevent Russia from negatively affecting U.S. interests across the globe.

Anti-Americanism. The current Russian ruling elite has not overcome the anti-Americanism imbued in their Soviet upbringing. State-controlled media and government officials openly perpetuate

it. Russian politicians have sought a ban on American English “foreign words” in the media, have forbidden Russian nongovernmental organizations from taking U.S. donations, and banned Americans from adopting Russian orphans.¹ Anti-Americanism is part of a concerted effort to secure the regime against dissent, counter Western influence, and undermine already brittle U.S.–Russian relations.

Strategic Disagreements. Differences over Syria and Iran continue to prevent strategic action on two of the world's most pressing issues. Russia has not wavered in its support for Bashar al-Assad's regime, vetoing any meaningful sanctions at the UNSC. While Russian officials do not support an Iranian pursuit of nuclear weapons, their selective commitment to the principle of noninterference in internal affairs of state causes resistance to potent sanctions and opposition to the potential use of force. High-level talks have not solved these issues, and as each one moves to a breaking point, Russia only hardens its resolve.

Russian Diplomatic Assertiveness. Russia's anti-Americanism and its geopolitical ambitions have combined to create a combative foreign policy. Russian measures over the past year include:

- Launching a slander campaign against U.S. Ambassador Michael McFaul on state TV;
- Cancelling the Nunn–Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction Program, which aids in the dismantling of weapons of mass destruction in former Soviet space;
- Expelling the United States Agency for International Development;
- Forbidding U.S. funding of “political” nongovernmental organizations;
- Criminalizing dissent;
- Banning Radio Liberty and the Voice of America from AM/FM broadcasting;
- Passing the DimaYakovlev law, which prohibits Americans from adopting Russian orphans;
- Banning \$500 million a year in U.S. beef and pork imports; and
- Cancelling an agreement on law enforcement and drug control. Moscow seeks to break U.S.

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influence in Russia, no matter the harm to relations or even its own children.

Russian Interests. Russia's recent actions suggest a strategic break from the West and establishment of a Russian "pole" in a multipolar world order in which Russia does not cooperate with the West and justifies domestic crackdown and political stagnation.

As the chairman of the Duma Foreign Affairs Committee, Alexei Pushkov, said, "We are saying farewell to our dependence on 'Power No. 1.'"² Referring to the Sergei Magnitsky Act, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said, "We will consistently and firmly rebut attempts to interfere in our internal affairs and lecture us,"³ conveniently forgetting that the Soviet Union was a signatory to the 1975 Helsinki Accords on human rights.

Russia has also opposed any U.S. influence along its periphery, even when it serves common interests, such as the Manas air base in Kyrgyzstan. Putin has promoted the Eurasian Union, a Russian-dominated organization that aims to control former Soviet states economically. Like Russian and Soviet rulers before him, Putin is establishing a zone of buffer states to protect his centralized, authoritarian regime against the rising China and radical Islam while pushing Russia and its neighbors away from the West.

At the same time, Russia neglects its own strategic interests in which the U.S. could provide important assistance, such as improving health care and higher education, cooperating in science and technology, and developing the rule of law.

U.S. Interests. The Obama Administration believes it can convince Russia to cooperate rationally, ignoring all the evidence to the contrary. It argues that both countries share a mutual interest to stem Islamist terrorism and that Russia has helped the U.S. in Afghanistan by facilitating the Northern Distribution Network for NATO troops.⁴ It takes at face value Russian statements that it wants to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons; meanwhile, Moscow prevents stricter sanctions and calls any potential military strike a costly mistake.

The White House also ignores Moscow's rapprochement with Beijing and Russian military modernization, which includes building new weapons systems that are clearly aimed at the U.S.

The U.S. Policy Conundrum. The Obama Administration unsuccessfully attempted to keep Russia as a partner within the West's orbit. It signed an ill-advised New START arms reduction agreement and would like to conclude further bilateral arms reduction treaties, ignoring the massive Russian tactical nuclear arsenal of up to 8,000 devices.

Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the lifting of the Jackson-Vanik Amendment produced no progress in the bilateral relationship.

The U.S. reduced its profile in the former Soviet states, expecting in vain that Moscow would feel less threatened and increase cooperation. As Putin pushes for a Eurasian Union, Western ties in former Soviet states may be narrowing. The Kremlin decided that the U.S. is weak and in retreat and decided to push back on Syria.

The U.S. also attempted to encourage Russia to become more open and free, but the Kremlin perceives this as an attempt to implement an "Arab Spring" scenario through insidious American tools such as Twitter and Facebook. It accused the State Department of sponsoring the recent mass protests in Russia.

What the U.S. Should Do. The change of the Obama national security team is a good opportunity to reassess ties with Russia and build a relationship that is realistic and serves U.S. national interests well. Specifically, the Obama Administration should:

- **Deploy a missile defense system in Europe and avoid deep defense budget cuts.** The U.S. cannot afford to leave itself or its allies unprotected from emerging ballistic missile threats or ignore

1. *Moscow Times*, "Zhirinovskiy Wants to Ban English Words," January 23, 2013, <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/news/article/zhirinovskiy-wants-to-ban-english-words/474386.html> (accessed February 19, 2013).

2. Thomas Grove, "Russia Scraps Law Enforcement Deal with U.S. in New Blow to Ties," Reuters, January 30, 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/30/us-russia-usa-lawenforcement-idUSBRE90TOMG20130130> (accessed February 19, 2013).

3. Russian Federation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Opening Remarks by S. V. Lavrov, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, at the Press-Conference Devoted to the Results of Activities of Russian Diplomacy During 2012, Held in Moscow, 23 January," January 23, 2013, http://www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/240B78C5F181088344257B040030FE8F (accessed February 19, 2013).

4. Andrew C. Kuchins and Thomas Sanderson, "Central Asia's Northern Exposure," *The New York Times*, August 4, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/05/opinion/05iht-edkuchins.html> (accessed February 19, 2013).

the modernizing Russian military. Despite the pending reductions in force, the U.S. should maintain its space, air, and naval superiority in the European and Eurasian theaters.

- **Enforce Russian compliance with WTO rules regarding the unfounded ban of U.S. beef and pork imports.** No WTO precedent supports Russia's excessive standards for U.S. meat imports.⁵ The U.S. does, however, have scientific support for its position from the World Health Organization and the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization.⁶
- **Re-engage in Eastern Europe and Eurasia.** The U.S. should expand political–military relations and economic ties with key countries such as Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and

Uzbekistan. To balance off Russia (and China), the U.S. should expand broad political, military, economic, and civil society cooperation.

- **Make human rights and democracy a central pillar of U.S.–Russian relations.** The U.S. should call on the European Union to pass a measure similar to the Magnitsky Act, because corrupt Russian officials spend more time and hide more assets in Europe than in the U.S. Such an effort can be combined with U.S. international broadcasting reform and a renewed public diplomacy effort aimed at Russia and Eurasia. The U.S. should also call for the release of political prisoners, including Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the former CEO of Yukos.

Between the Urals and a Hard Place. The U.S. and Russia have convergent interests on key international issues, and cooperation would be beneficial to both. However, continuing Russian anti-Western foreign policy may result in increasing isolation. Russia may also eventually seek China's patronage.

Moscow needs to recognize that the U.S. is not a threat. It should stop conducting itself like an antagonist and return to a partnership with the U.S., which characterized the last quarter of a century.

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5. World Trade Organization, "Indonesia's Port Closure Causes Concern Among Fruit and Vegetable Exporters," March 29, 2012, http://www.wto.org/english/news_e/news12_e/sps_28mar12_e.htm (accessed February 19, 2013).

6. Ibid.