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Obama and the G20 Summit: Time to Rethink U.S.–Russian Relations

Ariel Cohen, PhD

President Obama will be in St. Petersburg, Russia, on September 5–6 for the G20 summit. However, the White House has canceled a bilateral visit to Moscow and a meeting with President Vladimir Putin after Russia granted Edward Snowden, a fugitive former National Security Agency contractor and secret national security documents leaker, temporary political asylum.

Moreover, for the past two and a half years, Russia has been America's major opponent around the world, from Syria to Iran to Europe. Nonetheless, it is possible to improve U.S.–Russian relations, but both sides have work to do.

Russia's Multi-Pronged Challenges to U.S. Interests. In the past two years, Russia has become a problematic partner both diplomatically and domestically. It nixed a concerted international action to remove the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad from power, sold sophisticated missiles to Syria, claimed that the Assad regime is not behind the chemical weapons attacks,¹ refused additional sanctions on Iran, and vehemently opposed NATO missile defenses in Europe. Unsurprisingly, the U.S.–Russian relations are at their lowest point since the end of

the Cold War, while ties with Western Europe also deteriorate despite high trade volume and Europe's dependence on Russian natural gas. Moscow's relations with the Sunni Muslim world have also deteriorated over Syria.

Russia is also expanding a sphere of influence in the former Soviet area by boosting the Customs Union, Common Economic Space, and the Eurasian Union and continuing to occupy Georgian territory.

The Kremlin has also conducted an unprecedented domestic crackdown. Moscow targeted U.S.-supported nongovernmental organizations, banned orphan adoption by American families, and prosecuted political opponents (such as Moscow mayoral candidate Alexei Navalny, who was sentenced in July to five years in prison on trumped-up charges). The authorities may be preparing the third prosecution of Mikhail Khodorkovsky, a former oil tycoon and regime critic who is serving a 10-year sentence. They have also jailed peaceful demonstrators, imposed broad speech restrictions, and jailed two members of the punk-rock group Pussy Riot.

Russian nationalist elites believe that they can create a separate pole in a multipolar world. For them, Russia is a linchpin of anti-American coalition involving China, Iran, Syria, and a number of left-wing Latin American regimes, such as Venezuela, Bolivia, Ecuador, and Nicaragua.²

Thus, Moscow has enthusiastically embraced a 150-year-old Slavophile/Eurasianist position that casts Christian Orthodox Russia in opposition to the West. It simultaneously proffers integration to former Soviet states, including Ukraine, to restore Soviet borders and population size. This expansion would supposedly make Russia not just safer

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The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

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but stronger in its quest to challenge and check the U.S.³

Obama’s Russian Policy After “Reset” Failure. Since January 2009, President Obama has pursued a policy of “reset” with Moscow, which included far-reaching American concessions. The U.S. went out of its way to incentivize Russia by signing the New START strategic nuclear forces agreement, facilitated World Trade Organization membership for Russia, signed the 1-2-3 nuclear cooperation agreement, froze modernization of missile defense in Europe, and ignored Russia’s pressure on its neighbors (such as Ukraine) to join the Customs Union and Joint Economic Space. Washington was also silent when it came to Russia’s domestic oppression. In return for these concessions, the Obama Administration got venom and intransigence from Moscow.⁴

The only gain these concessions produced was Russia’s cooperation on resupply of the NATO contingent in Afghanistan—something that is clearly in the Kremlin’s vital interests. If the U.S. and NATO would not have checked the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, Russian allies and soldiers would have to confront them on the Afghanistan–Tajikistan border, as they did before 9/11—and may do so again after the U.S. withdraws from Afghanistan in 2014.

Time to Rethink U.S.–Russian Relations. August 2013 was a watershed month in U.S.–Russian relations. Moscow’s granting asylum to Snowden and its support of the Syrian regime *after* the nerve gas attack on civilians demonstrate that the “reset” policy clearly and irreversibly failed.

What should the Obama Administration do as the President visits Russia?

To be a leader of the United States and the free world means to be able to multi-task geopolitically, or, as they say, “to walk and chew gum.” America’s engagement in Syria, its commitment to Afghanistan and the greater Middle East, and its pivot to Asia

require a balanced and thought-through policy toward Russia. Thus, the Obama Administration should:

- **Assemble** a new Russian interagency team that is not burdened by the failures of the “reset.” Such a team—consisting of professionals from the State Department, the Defense Department, and the intelligence community, as well as outside Russia experts—should conduct a thorough reassessment of the extant failed policy and learn lessons from what worked (and mostly, what did not) and offer new incentives and sanctions that may bring Russia to be more cooperative in the global arena.
- **Deliver** a speech on U.S.–Russian relations in St. Petersburg, stressing the principles of friendship with the Russian people, cooperation to fight international terrorism, expansion of business ties, protection of human rights and dignity, and expanding democratic freedoms in Russia.
- **Meet** with a wide array of democratic opposition forces while in St. Petersburg, continuing the tradition started by President Ronald Reagan on his visits to the Soviet Union, and expand the criteria for granting political asylum in the U.S. for political opponents and victims of persecution in Russia.
- **Accelerate** granting of licenses to build liquefied natural gas terminals to export American natural gas to Europe, sending the Kremlin a clear message that foreign intransigence and domestic oppression comes at an economic, as well as political, price.
- **Expand** the Magnitsky list—which denies visas to gross and systemic violators of human rights—to include persecutors of Mikhail Khodorkovsky,

1. Associated Press, “Russia: No Proof Syria Govt Behind Chemical Strike,” August 26, 2013, <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/russia-no-proof-syria-govt-behind-chemical-strike> (accessed August 26, 2013).

2. See Ariel Cohen, “The Kremlin’s World,” *The New York Times*, April 5, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/06/opinion/global/the-kremlins-world.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 (accessed August 23, 2013).

3. See Ariel Cohen, “Russia’s Eurasian Union Could Endanger the Neighborhood and U.S. Interests,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2804, June 14, 2013, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/06/russias- Eurasian-union-could-endanger-the-neighborhood-and-us-interests>.

4. The Heritage Foundation, “Reset Regret: Heritage Foundation Recommendations,” Heritage Foundation *WebMemo* No. 3334, August 5, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/08/reset-regret-heritage-foundation-recommendations>.

Alexei Navalny, and the jailed activists of Bolotnaya Square as well as the most notorious Duma authors of recent anti-democratic laws.

- **Broaden** diplomatic, political, military, economic, and rule-of-law engagement with post-Soviet countries of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia—especially with Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. This should include visits to these countries by the President, the Secretary of State, and the Secretary of Defense and visits of leaders of these countries to the White House.
- **Coordinate** joint policy with European nations to formulate a realistic agenda with Russia. The agenda should include promotion of economic

freedom, business ties, transparency, good governance, the rule of law, human rights, and cooperation in medicine, science, and space.

The Ball Is in Moscow's Court. U.S.–Russian relations are on the rocks. America is ready to improve them if Moscow plays ball, and Russia stands to gain if the relations improve. It is up to President Putin to reach out to the U.S. and reverse the current deterioration.

—*Ariel Cohen, PhD, is Senior Research Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies and International Energy Policy in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.*