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Dealing with Russia: The Reset Button

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As is so often the case on the installation of a new American President, US-Russia experts and policy-makers advocate a fresh approach to the US-Russian relationship. But the search for new and wide-ranging options has greater traction this time for two reasons: first, the majority of the intellectual establishment, to say nothing of wider fashionable opinion, had come to despise President George W Bush and therefore his legacy; and, second, because President Obama's administration is open to new ideas. But the emerging expert consensus is flawed.

In the first place, it is over-ambitious. Resetting the nuclear disarmament key is one thing, and may prove fruitful. It would be good if that led to wider cooperation in other spheres in due course. It is right for Washington to understand and follow the evolution of Russian attitudes as closely as may be possible, and to work with as well as on them so far as may be practicable and honourable. But to expect too much now, and to rely too heavily on a Washington-Moscow axis, risks returning to past and outdated frameworks.

US-Russia opinion-formers and experts are not, of course, all of one mind. The question is how far, in the enthusiasm for reinvention, such concerns will be put to one side, even though acknowledged as having weight. There are three particular issues that seem currently at risk of being in soft focus, or even air-brushed from the developing US view: the role of the EU and EU countries; the evolution of former Soviet countries; and the realities of Russia itself.

The European Union

Impatience with the European Union is understandable, whether in Washington or in EU capitals. The spread of opinion within the EU is wide, its collective aspirations in relation to Russia are grandiloquent rather than specific or concrete, and its record in pursuing them irresolute. None of that is surprising, or even necessarily always a bad thing. But it makes it easy for outsiders to choose which strands of opinion within the EU to select as representative, and to ascribe a particular set of choices to the EU as a whole that they would wish the organisation to pursue. The current tendency in significant parts of the Washington establishment appears to be to dismiss as unrepresentative those countries within the EU that have the greatest reservations about the prospects of working closely with Russia, and to urge the case for a close EU institutional relationship with Ukraine – or even Georgia – as a substitute for a path to NATO membership. It is ironic that the

EU countries that are most cautious about where Russia is headed are keenest on thickening up the Ukraine/EU link, while those whose views are more comfortable to the changing consensus in Washington are the least committed to any such development, lest it annoy Moscow.

Understandable impatience with the EU, or Europe in general, increases the temptation for Washington analysts to see policy towards Moscow through bilateral spectacles. No great harm in that, perhaps, in matters which are primarily of bilateral concern. But there will be a price to pay beyond that field for transatlantic institutions as a whole if too much reliance is placed on a Washington-Moscow axis. Russia like other former imperial centres before it, aspires to punch above its weight. It is a truism often neglected that Russia is a European country which claims a world role, not the defunct Soviet Union. It will take time, discussion and experience to manage the search for a closer relationship with Russia. Like it or not, the countries of the EU, both collectively and severally, have a central role to play in what is likely to remain a long-drawn-out process.

Former Soviet Countries

With regard to the other Soviet successor states, Ukraine is central, and like the EU, irritating to tidy minds. Georgia is a similar case in the Caucasus. Both countries have disappointed the hopes placed in them by the last US administration. Moscow's anger with Kyiv and Tbilisi has been enduring and personal. No one in Washington or within the EU would suggest that the question of how Russia's relationship with these two countries, and others like them, will evolve can simply be wished away. But it is striking how quickly sympathies have changed in that regard over the past eight months, even though Moscow's ambition to exercise a determining role in Russia's 'near abroad' has not diminished one jot, and its intention to exclude the United States and its allies has been made repeatedly plain.

We are told from time to time that we must understand the depth of Russian feeling for Ukraine. That is true, but no reason for others to accept that Moscow has a right to dictate to Kyiv, any more than it was right, for instance, for Paris to insist on its rule in Algiers. Sensible policies should, of course, take Russian fears into account – but also the apprehensions of Russia's neighbours. There are valid historical reasons across all the relevant borders for such emotions, and no good reason to be more accommodating to Moscow's anxieties than to those of others.

The Realities of Russia

Russia itself needs to be held in clearer focus if the 'reset button' is to work effectively. In the course of a recent wise and effective analysis of present-day Russian governmental attitudes towards the West, Dmitri Simes described NATO's Kosovo campaign as an attack on a 'Russian client state'. That touched a chord with me for three reasons. First, contrary to a widely received Russian view, Serbia is not a Russian client state and never has been – in the 1990s, Milosevic became a dependant of Moscow, but that is a different matter. Second, there are analogies between the feelings that overcame Belgrade in the later years of the last century and beliefs that the speaker was describing as prevailing in official Russian circles today. Finally, it illustrates the pitfalls that can result as agreed views of recent history change colour.

The Serbs had been dominant in Yugoslavia before the Second World War, but had ceased to be the defining nation after 1945, although they remained the largest of the nationalities, and were spread well beyond the borders of the Serbian Republic. The Serbs have a strong sense of their history, and particularly the nation-forming myths which have evolved out of it. A deep Serb sense of grievance as Yugoslavia collapsed was inevitable, and understandable. It was notable that during the first years after the dissolution of the Soviet Union Russian reactions were different. But as early hopes of Russia's re-emergence from its Soviet inheritance gave way to disillusion in the 1990s and then to growing wealth after the election of Putin as president, a search for a renewed imperial destiny began to assert itself, along with the belief that others would fight Russia's revival as a Great Power by fair means or foul. Once the aspiration was for Russia to become a 'normal country'. Now the accent is on its exceptional nature.

It is right that foreigners should try to understand the evolution of Russian ideas. No one would argue that the West has handled Russia with complete consistency, or that all of its policies, whether under President Clinton or President Bush, have been well judged. But it is also right that we should see a caricature for what it is. Pressing the reset button should not mean moving from trying to understand the ideas and emotions which underpin the attitudes and aspirations of official Russia to accepting them as either true or as framing Western policies. It is one thing to realize that Russia has its grievances, and that present-day official Moscow has its validating account of post-Soviet history, but quite another to accept these things as justified or accurate. That tendency clearly exists, including among Washington actors and opinion formers, and is exacerbated by the wish to turn over a new leaf.

A recent speaker at Chatham House, whose comprehensive presentation of the emerging Washington consensus was given under the traditional rubric of anonymity, said in answer to the question of why his talk had covered all the major players in depth except Russia, that the internal politics were too uncertain. At the least, official Moscow is one source of authority, but it is not the only voice of Russia. What the West, and especially the United States, says and does has a wider effect than on the Kremlin or the Russian White House. Value-free realpolitik is an illusion. It would certainly be a mistake in effect to endorse a particular set of Russian values if you suspect that the music makers behind them may change. One of those values most subject to validation by the United States is that Russia is in some way its equivalent, and that both powers hold sway over particular regions of the world. This is not absolute nonsense, but it remains nonetheless a dangerous illusion, and one which inhibits the development of a Russia ready and able to work with the wider European and Atlantic worlds.

Hope for constructive change under a new US administration is proper. But expectations should be modest. Without a rethink in Moscow, especially regarding Russia's relationship with its ex-Soviet neighbours, there is a limit to what can be achieved. Even if Russia were minded to work actively with the West on extra-European problems, there would be a limit to what Moscow could offer by way of effective help. So the right approach has to be step by step, courteously managed when possible. 'Strategic Partnership' is not on offer, except of course as a diplomatic politesse, where it is already devalued currency.