Comment Piece

Comment on ‘Dealing with Russia: The Reset Button’

The REP Programme paper ‘Dealing with Russia: The Reset Button’ by Andrew Wood was published in May 2009 and can be found here: http://www.chathamhouse.org.uk/research/russia_eurasia/papers/. The following three experts have written short comment pieces in response to this paper.

Comments:

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Ambassador Andrew Wood raised crucial issues regarding the relationship between the US and Russia. His message is especially appreciated today when one can observe an explosion of activity in Washington and Moscow of both traditional realists and the Russian pundits who have made anti-Americanism their profession. The realists being eager to help to ‘Reset’ the relationship are disseminating their reports with recommendations for Obama and the US Congress. The latter are doing the same for the Kremlin. What is striking for observers is the optimism of the anti-American Moscow crowd and their hope that finally our relations are on the right track. For me this unbelievable transformation is enough to start feeling that something is wrong here.

I believe that President Obama deserves credit for trying to close the ‘Cold Peace’ chapter in the US-Russian relationship. I know experts and policy makers on the US side who sincerely wish to start a new era in US-Russian relations. Several of my Carnegie colleagues and other serious analysts are participating in the implementation of this new US policy towards Russia.

I myself represent the liberal Russian community and we believe that only a constructive relationship with the West and the US especially, can help us pursue a reform agenda within Russia. We more than any other political group in Russia depend on positive relations between Russia and the West and we've invested in it a great deal.

However, one can't escape some difficult questions. I will mention only a few: what does the ‘reset button’ policy mean and is it enough to start new cooperation? What are the possible constrains and traps that the US-Russian relationship could encounter in the short term?

Let me give you a short run-down of the factors that could undermine the ‘reset button’ effort.

1. Vagueness. I hope by the time Obama heads for Moscow in early July, it will be clearer. But is it too late? One could argue that the core of the ‘reset button’ policy is the preparation of the post-START agreement, which in the American view, could build mutual trust. If so, this would be a fragile basis for mutual understanding. There are still serious differences between Moscow's and Washington's approaches to the post-START deal. If they fail to reconcile them, is there a 'plan B'? If they reach a deal one could hardly expect the building of mutual trust by reverting to the Cold War practice of counting nukes.
2. The basis of the US approach seems to have a strong Realpolitik flavour. It has already become the Washington mantra: 'We cooperate on the basis of common interests and common threats.' But why did the same Realpolitik approach during Bush-putin times fail? Did anyone in Washington and Moscow analyse the causes of failure? What are the ‘common interests and common threats’ if Russia and America view Iran, Afghanistan and even arms control differently? How can one build a Russian-American relationship based on ‘common threats’ if Russia’s leaders see their primary threat as NATO, NATO expansion, and American influence in the former-Soviet space? I doubt that Washington sees these phenomena as threats to its own security. The US would like Russia to join it in pursuing what Americans see as their national interests. Why should Moscow help Obama with this if the national interest of Russia is containment of the US?

3. ‘Tying up the relationship with Russia to Russian domestic developments’- The Kremlin’s strategy to consolidate Russia is based on Anti-Americanism.

4. Russian leaders continue to insist on the right to have areas of privileged interests. The existence of satellites with limited sovereignty is an essential element of superpower status for the Russian elite in order to preserve their hold over the country. Foreign policy and especially relations with the US - is the instrument that serves the domestic agenda and is the most important means of self-reproduction of the Russian traditional state. Will Obama be ready to recognize the Russian areas of privileged interests? Will he agree that Ukraine is part of ‘Russian national identity’?

Finally, I have to mention the trap that makes any American (as well as European) effort to build constructive relations with Russia rather doubtful. The key problem is that the Russian political elite survives by moving in a ‘grey zone’ trying to be with the West and against the West at the same time. The besieged fortress image is its key survival mechanism. They are not ready to modernize Russia and open it up to the West and this is the key systemic constraint that makes any ‘reset button’ project unsustainable.

There is another cause of imminent failure. The US president naturally expects to make relations better during his tenure. This forces him to think about what is feasible and achievable. This time, non-proliferation looks like an achievable goal. He will try to make a deal here and avoid any irritants,
such as preaching democracy and discussing the value gap with the Kremlin. If he does this, he endangers the deal on other issues and may even provoke confrontation. But by limiting himself to small steps and a Faustian bargaining with the Kremlin, Washington starts to play the Kremlin game. Realpolitik is the best means of survival for the Russian elite and they have learnt how to use the West to legitimize themselves.

Sustainable cooperation with Russia depends on the ability of US leaders to think big and beyond their presidential term. Success will demand an ability to work in three dimensions at least: trying to cooperate with Moscow whenever possible, creating a variety of stimuli to encourage Russia's transformation and exerting pressure on the Russian elite to prevent it from reckless behaviour. Such approaches are possible under one condition only: if the West recognizes that Russia is a challenge to the West and forms a common strategy toward Russia with the goal of creating an environment for its transformation.

Is President Obama ready for this challenge?

I believe that we need to look soberly at the problem and avoid any idealistic view. Russia desperately needs to expand its relationship with the West. But such cooperation must not come at the price of the West's refusal to understand what is happening in Russia itself. More importantly, it must not come at the price of political and moral opportunism on the part of Western political circles under the disguise of the popular mantra 'let's do common interests'.

I am opposed to isolating Russia. But relations with Russia in today's world cannot be reduced to the false dichotomy of isolation or cooperation with (and, thus, the enabling of) an authoritarian regime.

I disagree with the popular idea in DC as expressed by Senator John Kerry that 'our attempts at more constructive relations [with Russia] will fail if we condition them on resolving our differences first.' I believe that a new relationship between America and Russia is all the more doomed to failure if we leave to one side attempts to understand that which divides us. And because President Obama is seen around the world - including in Russian society - as heralding new ways of thinking, I expect that the US will demonstrate new ways of thinking in its understanding of Russia and in its relations with Russia.
Donald Jensen

In no time at all, ‘Setting the Reset Button’ has become the latest slogan describing US policy toward Russia, replacing the now discredited ‘Looking into Putin's Soul’, the never realized, ‘inevitable’, ‘Transition to Democracy’, and the overly romantic ‘End of History’. In its best sense, the phrase understandably reflects the Obama Administration’s desire to make a fresh start with Moscow after the Bush years. At its worst, it reflects the persistence of continuing bad habits in US thinking about foreign policy: our tendency to believe that every problem has a solution; that history and culture do not matter; and, perhaps worst of all, that people in other countries think, and want to live, like we do.

Andrew Wood’s recent Chatham House paper, ‘Dealing with Russia: The Reset Button’, is a much needed antidote to the Reset Contagion sweeping the Potomac. He reminds us that things are not so simple.

Many of the issues on the agenda between Washington and Moscow are not, at root, bilateral at all. They involve the newer and older members of the European Union - whose views on how to deal with Russia often clash - and the national security of states seeking to join the Western alliance. Indeed, some of the Resetters seem to suffer an additional malaise, ‘Blame the Victim Syndrome’, as though the rashness of Saakashvili or the squabbling of Yushchenko and Tymoshenko somehow justify Moscow’s goal - in President Medvedev’s own words - of realizing Russia’s ‘privileged interests’ in the former Soviet space. They do not. Seeking good relations with Moscow, while a laudable goal, is not an end in itself. It certainly should not be pursued at the expense of those who strive to share our values, no matter how much they fall short in practice.

The observation by Mr Wood’s unnamed colleague that Russia’s internal politics are uncertain is a truism. Yes they are. But they are not impenetrable and their murkiness assumes discernible contours when one closely considers Russia’s external behaviour, which is to a significant extent their product. Let me address three of those factors here.

First, Russia’s internal politics are highly patrimonial. Power and money are intermixed as thoroughly as the ingredients in kasha, the traditional Russian dish. At home this means an extraordinarily high level of corruption (Transparency International’s Corruptions Perception Index ranked Russia 147th out of 180 countries in 2008), the hollowing out of political institutions, and the constant division and redivision of property among the elites. The rights of foreign investors in this mix are at best in constant jeopardy, as BP
shareholders know well. Abroad, it means that Russia's foreign policy is often
conducted for the enrichment of its elites, who confuse Russia's national
interest with lining their own pockets. It is true, as is often noted, that the
Kremlin uses firms like Gazprom and Rosneft as arms of the Russian state. It
is also the case that the Russian state is an arm of firms like these and the
people who profit from running them.

Second, the Russian political system is increasingly unstable. The Putin-
Medvedev duumvirate undercuts the logic of Vladimir Putin's political edifice,
which depends on a top leader to balance competing elite interests and
legitimate the system's messy authoritarianism.

While most signs point to Putin still being in charge, the roles that Putin and
Medvedev play are increasingly confused. The blurring of their roles has set
their bureaucratic entourages on edge and undercut the effectiveness of
policymaking, never a Russian strongpoint. This problem has assumed
greater importance in recent months as the bite of the global financial crisis
has deepened and more demands are being placed on the system. Although
the prospects for a coloured revolution seem remote, more than in recent
years the Kremlin needs an external enemy to justify its hard rule at home.
Prime Minister Putin, in particular, has been outspoken in blaming Wall Street
for the financial crisis. Both Russian leaders have called for a restructuring of
the international financial architecture along lines that would reduce the role
of the United States. How long they will coexist is anyone's guess and this
uncertainty at the top means that an abrupt change of foreign policy on some
issues cannot be excluded.

Third, as, Mr Wood properly reminds us, there are many more voices in
Russia than just those that come from the Kremlin. The pressures of coping
with the financial crisis - which has hit Russia especially hard due to its
blending of power and money - have revealed differences within the Russian
elite over the nation's future. For the first time even Vladimir Putin has come
in for some public criticism. Moreover, the spate of recent public protests
outside Moscow has shown that the gap between the Kremlin and the
masses, always present, may be widening. More than at anytime since Putin
came to power, the regime appears brittle and insecure. While the people in
charge may well respond with more conciliatory foreign policies, I suspect the
opposite will be the case, especially in the former Soviet space.

In short, the Russian leadership, today as too tragically often in the past,
defines itself - its country, its right to rule, its right to plunder - by what
philosophers call Alterite, The Other. Russia's identity, in the minds of the
Kremlin’s rulers, is different to that of the Western democracies. It is actualized by reflexively opposing the West. Given such a faith in Russian ‘differentness’ - and sometimes ‘specialness’ - the urge to meddle in international crises often becomes difficult to resist, the need to find an external scapegoat for the Kremlin's troubles a constant quest.

In this context, pushing the Reset Button in our relations with Moscow, just like Realpolitik, are truly illusions. The Obama Administration is right to hope for 'constructive change', but expectations must be 'understandably modest', as Wood says.

Beginning with strategic arms control is a good first step, though the road to an agreement is likely to be more difficult than it appears. Over the longer term, however, the West has a strong interest in Russia's eventual transformation into a more pluralistic, free market society. This does not mean repeating the mistakes of the 1990s, when the US sought to make Russia over into an Eastern version of Illinois or Ohio.

This transformation is certainly not inevitable. But it means undertaking initiatives to strengthen democratic values and the rule of law - especially property rights - that are central to the growth of democratic institutions and, one hopes, a Russian more comfortable with itself and the world. Finding a balance between disapproval, pressure, and continued engagement will be difficult, but excessive acquiescence to Russia's demands would likely be misread in the Kremlin as weakness and lead to further Russian assertiveness.

Andrew Monaghan

Andrew Wood’s paper ‘Dealing with Russia: The Reset Button’ is a stimulating and timely work that, by touching on a number of pertinent points, invites further attention. A worthwhile starting point may be his reflection on the ‘depth of Russian feelings towards Ukraine’ and the ‘evolution of Russian ideas’: what might be termed Moscow’s ‘narratives’. These should indeed be understood in depth but for what they are: narratives. As he notes, it is one thing to realise that Moscow has grievances and recognise the flaws in the Euro-Atlantic community’s policies, but quite another to accept all of Moscow’s ideas and all as equally justified. In fact, it becomes increasingly clear that Euro-Atlantic narratives about the evolving post Cold War world differ significantly from Moscow’s, and there are pitfalls that can result as ‘agreed views of recent history change colour’.
In fact, it appears that the Euro-Atlantic community and Moscow increasingly draw differing conclusions from the same bodies of evidence, for instance regarding NATO and EU enlargement and the US missile defence project. To this list might be added the rather more complex examples of the war with Georgia in August, Moscow’s subsequent recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the gas dispute between Gazprom and Naftohaz in January. Essentially, therefore, there is a growing dissonance between the Euro-Atlantic community and Moscow.

Moscow’s claims of being excluded from the Euro-Atlantic community are one of the important features of this dissonance. This does not coincide with the interpretation of the Euro-Atlantic organisations, particularly in their core frameworks of NATO and the EU. NATO has also established a relationship with Russia, first through Partnership for Peace then the Permanent Joint Council and the NATO Russia Council. EU-Russia relations began in the early 1990s, with the negotiation of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). Other fora include the Council of Europe and G8, and, of course in a different way, the OSCE. As Wood states, nobody would argue that these relationships have been anywhere near perfect, and there have been some important flaws in them and mistakes made on all sides. Nevertheless, Moscow’s argument about exclusion clearly differs substantially from that of the Euro-Atlantic community, not least because there are many in the Western communities who would see Moscow’s actions as the primary reason for the failure of some of these arrangements to bring about significant change.

The Euro-Atlantic community has not succeeded in addressing Moscow’s narratives in either an especially coherent or sophisticated manner. This is in part due to a combined reduction of institutional Russia expertise with the regular turnover of European officials serving to undermine ‘institutional memory’ of the evolution of our relationships and evolving Russian policy. It is also due to the unwillingness of some European states to adopt anything like a critical tone towards Moscow’s narrative in case it shows a “lack of respect” for Russia. Moscow’s activities and approaches contribute to this, both by altering the framework for engagement by pursuing bilateral relationships on the one hand and on the other advocating a political rather than technical agenda: Moscow’s concerns are generally framed in a political way rather than a list of specific technical problems which the Euro-Atlantic organisations could address point by point.

In this context of dissonance, the term ‘engagement’ has become devalued and is too often seen as ineffective chit-chat or simply giving in to Russian
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demands, rather than a more sophisticated effort both to address Moscow's concerns where possible and yet simultaneously maintain an effective and coherent values-based agenda where the Euro-Atlantic community's interests and values differ from those of the Russian leadership. Policy options therefore become too simplified as either 'engagement accepting Moscow's narratives and agenda' or 'containment involving rejecting Moscow's narrative and agenda'.

What is needed is a fresh approach based on what we have learned over the last fifteen years. At the forefront of this learning will be the evolution from the rather optimistic or hopeful assumptions of the 1990s - that Moscow would subscribe more or less completely over time to Euro-Atlantic core values and interests - towards the greater realisation that in many ways Moscow's interests and values do not always do so, and in some cases they differ significantly. A fresh approach based on this realisation requires two related developments - a bolstering of our institutionalised Russia expertise (which should be extended to enhancing expertise on the rest of the component parts of Eurasia) and a systematic rethink about Russia, including what the Euro-Atlantic community seeks to gain from relations and why and how the Russian leadership may approach such a relationship. This should not simply be a review of the current positions, it should be a root and branch overhaul. Conducting such an overhaul and then acting upon it is by no means easy as the EU has found out over the last couple of years. It is also time consuming and expensive. But neither the US nor NATO have conducted such a 'strategic reflection' for a number of years, and though the agenda for both the USA and NATO remains crowded with priorities, a new US administration and work on the new NATO Strategic Concept offer timely opportunities.

In such a strategic reflection, the Euro-Atlantic community should both seek to try to understand the evolution of Russian policy and thinking behind it. Such understanding will enhance the ability to decipher, and, where necessary counter Moscow's narratives, and distil valid agenda from political illusions. In so doing, two approaches should be considered. First, the Russian leadership is currently engaged in a systematic overhaul of its own strategic thinking – reflected in the publication of a number of documents such as the Foreign Policy Concept and National Security Strategy. In so doing it is also making a number of proposals for the reform of the international financial, energy and security architectures. Such a strategic rethink takes place as a dialogue with Russia's surroundings – which gives the Euro-Atlantic community a role and a degree of influence in shaping Moscow's agenda. The opportunity is there, offered by President Medvedev's proposals to participate in such a
discussion, for the Euro-Atlantic community to offer its own initiatives and vision for how the relationship could develop.

Second, the ramifications of a failure to implement an effective policy should be considered. Currently, strategic partnership means little at a time when strategic dissonance prevails. And without such an overhaul of basic assumptions and a greater sophistication in approach to Russia as the basis for attempting to plan how a positive relationship might evolve and what both sides may want from it, a reset is unlikely to bear significant practical fruit. It may only serve to enhance the mutual disappointment that underpins the current dissonance. Indeed, such a failure is likely, over time, to lead to a further deterioration in relations and increasing systematic competition with a Russia that seeks to be a Eurasian ‘hub’ and model. A strategic reflection may be costly in time, effort and resources of course, but it is necessary, because there is a danger that we begin to move further and further from ‘reality’ with Russia - the results of such distancing are likelier to be even more costly.