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## Developing Better Relations with Russia

by John D. Johnson

The Obama Administration has made improving relations with Russia one of its main foreign policy goals and its efforts to date have borne fruit and put U.S.-Russia relations on a positive footing looking toward the future. For its part, NATO also has re-engaged in a concentrated effort to improve relations with Russia since NATO-Russia Council meetings were suspended in 2008 following Russia's military action in Georgia.<sup>1</sup>

As a result of these efforts, since the post-Soviet low in relations with Russia following the 2008 Russia-Georgia War, relations between the U.S., NATO and Russia have steadily improved over the past two and half years. And in spite of lingering mistrust and marked differences on some issues, the U.S., NATO and Russia have created a positive political environment where real dialogue and engagement on a number of shared interests makes possible a "true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia" for the 21<sup>st</sup> century as expressed in NATO's new Strategic Concept.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, as important strategic issues such as counter-terrorism, Afghanistan, Iran and North Korea continue to challenge all sides, and other external powers continue to evolve, cooperation seems as important now as at any other time since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union.

This paper aims to examine recent U.S. and NATO efforts to develop better relations with Russia, identify areas of common interest and disagreement, and provide recommendations for the way forward. This article will, at times, attempt to take into account the Russian perspective, a side that is sometimes overlooked in Western media, in order to highlight where U.S./NATO and Russian views diverge on key issues.

### ***"Reset" in U.S.-Russian Relations***

In February 2009 at the Munich Security Conference, Vice President Biden first announced the administration's "reset" policy saying, "...it's time to press the reset button and to revisit the many areas where we can and should be working together with Russia."<sup>3</sup> In July 2009 at the U.S.-Russia Summit in Moscow, President Obama re-emphasized the "reset" policy saying, "... President [Medvedev] and I agreed that the relationship between Russia and the United States has suffered from a sense of drift. We resolved to reset U.S.-Russian relations, so that we can cooperate more effectively in areas of common interest."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Evolution in Relations for list of Key Milestones in NATO-Russia Relations, Updated November 24, 2010, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_50090.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50090.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Strategic Concept For the Defence and Security of The Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation," November 19, 2010, para 33, <http://www.nato.int/strategic-concept/index.html>.

<sup>3</sup> Remarks by Vice President Biden at the 45th Munich Security Conference, February 7, 2009, <http://germany.usembassy.gov/events/2009/feb-biden-security/>.

<sup>4</sup> Press Conference by President Obama and President Medvedev of Russia, July 6, 2009, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/Press-Conference-by-President-Obama-and-President-Medvedev-of-Russia/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/Press-Conference-by-President-Obama-and-President-Medvedev-of-Russia/).

A tangible example of the “reset” with Moscow is in the reduction of strategic nuclear arms. In January 2011, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed the ratification of a nuclear arms reduction treaty with the U.S., known as the New START Treaty.<sup>5</sup> President Obama signed the ratification documents in February 2011.<sup>6</sup> New START limits the number of U.S. and Russian strategic nuclear warheads to 1,550 (down from the previously agreed to ceiling of 2,200) and limits strategic sea, air and intercontinental delivery systems to 800 (only 700 of which can be deployed at any given time).<sup>7</sup> The New START Treaty is an important bilateral arms control agreement that reduces the number of nuclear warheads in both the U.S. and Russian arsenals and provides for a verification regime of each other’s nuclear warhead stockpiles and capabilities. But more importantly, New START is part of the broader U.S. and NATO efforts aimed at developing better relations with Russia in order to enhance Eurasian security for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In terms of the “reset” bearing fruit, in addition to the New START Treaty mentioned previously, a significant outcome of the July 2009 Summit in Moscow was the creation of the U.S.-Russian Bilateral Presidential Commission.<sup>8</sup> The commission’s working groups cover many important areas of cooperation including: economic development; energy and the environment; nuclear energy and security; arms control and international security; defense, foreign policy and counterterrorism; preventing and handling emergencies; civil society; science and technology; space; health; education; and culture.<sup>9</sup>

Overall, the Obama administration’s approach has been pragmatic in working to improve affairs with Russia. Russia has welcomed the “reset” albeit somewhat cautiously.

### ***NATO-Russia Relations***

In his first major public speech after taking office, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen focused on Russia saying in September 2009 that “...of all of NATO’s relationships with Partner countries, none holds greater potential than the NATO-Russia relationship.”<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Secretary Rasmussen said that NATO should reinforce cooperation against common security threats, rejuvenate the NATO-Russia Council and conduct a joint review of 21<sup>st</sup> century security challenges.

In addition to calling for a “true strategic partnership” with Russia at its November 2010 Lisbon Summit, NATO’s new Strategic Concept attempted to assuage lingering Russian mistrust of the Alliance by stating emphatically that, “NATO-Russia cooperation is of strategic importance as it contributes to creating a common space of peace, stability and security. NATO poses no threat to Russia.”

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<sup>5</sup> “Medvedev signs ratification of nuke pact with US,” *Associated Press*, January 28, 2011, [http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/28/AR2011012801508\\_pf.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2011/01/28/AR2011012801508_pf.html).

<sup>6</sup> Patricia Zengerle, “Obama Signs New START Treaty Documents,” *Reuters*, February 2, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/02/02/us-usa-russia-start-idUSTRE71177U20110202>.

<sup>7</sup> Treaty Between the United States of America and the Russian Federation on Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offense Arms, [www.state.gov/documents/organization/140035.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/140035.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> U.S.-Russia Relations: “Reset” Fact Sheet, June 24, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet>, provides a more comprehensive overview of the “Reset” policy achievements.

<sup>9</sup> Press Conference by President Obama and President Medvedev, July 6, 2009.

<sup>10</sup> “NATO and Russia: A New Beginning,” Speech by NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the Carnegie Endowment, Brussels, September 18, 2009, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions\\_57640.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/opinions_57640.htm).

In a similar cooperative vein, at the November 2010 NATO-Russia Council meeting, parties agreed to develop a comprehensive joint analysis of the future framework for missile defense cooperation (progress of which will be discussed in June 2011) and endorsed the Joint Review of 21<sup>st</sup> Century Common Security Challenges.<sup>11</sup> Specific security challenges endorsed included: Afghanistan (including counter-narcotics), terrorism (including the vulnerability of critical infrastructure), piracy, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and their means of delivery, as well as natural and man-made disasters.<sup>12</sup>

### ***Many Areas of Common Interest; Some Areas of Disagreement***

As the U.S. “reset” policy agenda and NATO-Russia Council Joint Review of Common Security Challenges listed above suggest, U.S. and NATO cooperation with Russia clearly makes sense when one considers the broad array of common interests and security challenges. However, while there is agreement on many areas of common interest, there are other areas where the parties disagree in part and, yet, still other areas where the sides remain far apart.

An attempt to list the areas of common interests drawn, in part, from the previously mentioned strategic documents would look something like this: Afghanistan, arms control, counter-narcotics, counter-piracy, counter-terrorism, cyber security, economic cooperation (e.g., Russia’s Skolkova “Silicon Valley”, modernization initiatives and World Trade Organization accession), energy security, Iran, natural and man-made disasters, North Korea, missile defense, organized crime, proliferation of WMD and their means of delivery, and the resolution of frozen conflicts (e.g., Transnistria in Moldova, South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia, and Nogorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan).<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, if New START is an example of agreement in an area of common interest, then missile defense and frozen conflicts are examples of areas where there is partial agreement or some disagreement.

Missile defense has been called a “game-changer” in the media.<sup>14</sup> In other words, it is an issue that has the potential to become a genuine breakthrough in terms of U.S./NATO and Russia political and security cooperation. However, missile defense probably falls into the category of a common interest but one where the parties disagree in part. First, at Lisbon, President Medvedev proposed a “sectoral approach” to missile defense and aspects of that proposal are still being studied by NATO.<sup>15</sup> Further, President Medvedev called for Russia to be an equal “partner” with NATO in missile defense, but it is not clear that NATO views Russian participation in that light.<sup>16</sup> Finally on missile defense, it’s not clear that Russia’s threat perception of Iran is the same as the U.S.’s assessment of the Iranian ballistic missile threat. Due to differing threat assessments of Iranian capabilities, Russia could, down the road, call into question the validity of

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<sup>11</sup> NATO-Russia Council Joint Statement, November 20, 2010,

[http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news\\_68871.htm?selectedLocale=en](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/news_68871.htm?selectedLocale=en).

<sup>12</sup> NATO’s Relations with Russia, Updated November 24, 2010, [http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics\\_50090.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50090.htm).

<sup>13</sup> Russian President to Visit Silicon Valley Before Meeting Obama, June 18, 2010, *Voice of America News*, <http://www.voanews.com/english/news/europe/Russian-President-to-Visit-Silicon-Valley-Before-Meeting-Obama-96661539.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Simon Saradzhyan, “Missile Defense: Game-Changer in NATO-Russia Relations,” January 25, 2011, *International Relations and Security Network*, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/ISN-Insights/Detail?lng=en&id=126409&contextid734=126409&contextid735=126408&tabid=126408>.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew S. Weiss, “The Kremlin’s Bold Missile Defense Gambit,” January 27, 2011, Rand Corporation, <http://www.rand.org/commentary/2011/01/27/MT.html>.

<sup>16</sup> Warning Of New Arms Race, Medvedev Calls For Cooperation With West On Missile Shield, *Radio Free Europe*, December 1, 2010, [http://www.rferl.org/content/russia\\_medvedev\\_parliament/2234566.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/russia_medvedev_parliament/2234566.html).

the planned land-based missile defense assets in Central and Eastern Europe. Put another way, if Russia does not believe that Iran has the ballistic missile capability to reach Central Europe in 2018, Russia may question the need for NATO to deploy land-based missile defense systems in Poland or in Romania for that matter. Russia also perceives that land-based systems in Central and Eastern Europe could impact the U.S.-Russia strategic nuclear balance, a potential issue during the latter stages of the “Phased Adaptive Approach” for missile defense in Europe.<sup>17</sup>

On the issue of frozen conflicts, there appears to be less political will on the part of Russia to resolve the conflicts than on the side of NATO or the U.S. The U.S. National Security Strategy from 2010 broadly stated U.S. policy vis-à-vis Russia and frozen conflicts when it said, “While actively seeking Russia’s cooperation to act as a responsible partner in Europe and Asia, we will support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Russia’s neighbors.”<sup>18</sup> Each conflict merits its own attention and discussion, but the conflict in Georgia points to a fundamental disagreement between the parties. In August 2008, Russia fought a five-day war with Georgia and later recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In July 2009 at a joint press conference with Russia’s president, President Obama reiterated U.S. support for the inviolability of Georgia’s borders saying, “...Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity must be respected.”<sup>19</sup> This dichotomy illustrates how far apart the two sides are on the issue. Indeed, Russia’s recognition of the two disputed areas suggests the conflict is resolved from their viewpoint. Clearly, greater international involvement is needed and much work remains to be done.

Finally, in spite of recent positive NATO-Russia developments, there remain multiple points of contention. For example, Russia is opposed to NATO’s open door policy toward Georgia and Ukraine, believes a new security architecture for Europe is needed to replace the outdated NATO model (see Russia’s November 2009 proposal for a new European Security Treaty (EST) architecture), and still does not accept Kosovo’s independence from Serbia (an issue that also is viewed by Russia as a precedent for its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia).<sup>20</sup> Meanwhile, NATO is concerned about Russia’s occupation of Georgian territory, Russia’s suspension of its participation in the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty, and Russia’s selective prosecution of businessmen (e.g., former head of oil giant Yukos, Mikhail Khodorkovsky) and opposition leaders.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Fact Sheet on U.S. Missile Defense Policy, A “Phased, Adaptive Approach” for Missile Defense in Europe, September 17, 2009, [http://www.whitehouse.gov/the\\_press\\_office/FACT-SHEET-US-Missile-Defense-Policy-A-Phased-Adaptive-Approach-for-Missile-Defense-in-Europe/](http://www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/FACT-SHEET-US-Missile-Defense-Policy-A-Phased-Adaptive-Approach-for-Missile-Defense-in-Europe/).

<sup>18</sup> National Security Strategy of the United States, May 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2010/05/27/a-blueprint-pursuing-world-we-see/>.

<sup>19</sup> Press Conference by President Obama and President Medvedev, July 6, 2009.

<sup>20</sup> Russia Unveils Proposal For European Security Treaty, November 30, 2009, *Radio Free Europe*, [http://www.rferl.org/content/Russia\\_Unveils\\_Proposal\\_For\\_European\\_Security\\_Treaty/1891161.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/Russia_Unveils_Proposal_For_European_Security_Treaty/1891161.html).

<sup>21</sup> Profile: Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Updated December 30, 2010, *BBC News Europe*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-12082222>.

## ***Recommendations for the Way Forward***

Looking to the future, below are two general recommendations for developing better relations and cooperation with the Russian Federation.

### **1. Continue to build trust on both sides.**

There remains a trust deficit on both sides and that mistrust has proven difficult to overcome after years of Cold War animosity. However, the current positive environment started under the Obama Administration presents an opportunity to engage in regular dialogue like that which is being done under the auspices of the Bilateral Presidential Commission working groups, military-to-military exchanges and other private venues (e.g., Silicon Valley dialogue).

NATO's Strategic Concept stated that "NATO poses no threat to Russia" and that it seeks "...a true strategic partnership between NATO and Russia."<sup>22</sup> However, from Russia's perspective, if this statement is true, then there remain questions about the need for NATO contingency plans for member states who are also neighbors to Russia.<sup>23</sup> Russia's aggressive approach to dealing with its neighbors through force, in the case of Georgia, or through other means (energy in the case of Ukraine) also perpetuates mistrust.<sup>24</sup>

As pragmatic as the U.S. and NATO approaches have been toward Russia, going forward it is just as important that Russia reciprocate positively. Transparency in common approaches to dealing with common interests also is essential to building trust.

### **2. Sustain momentum in areas of common interest.**

The U.S., NATO and Russia share many common interests. Therefore, there are numerous opportunities for collaboration and confidence building where there could be win-win outcomes versus the Cold War zero-sum game mentality.

Afghanistan is a good example. Clearly the U.S. and NATO interest there is to fight terrorism and to create a stable Afghanistan for the future. Russia's interest in Afghanistan is more keenly tied to counter-narcotics, owing to the problems that Afghan-produced drugs create in Russia. According to a recent report from the United Nations' Office on Drugs and Crime, "Russian addicts consume 75 to 80 tons of Afghan heroin each year, and an estimated 30,000 to 40,000 Russians die in drug-related incidents annually."<sup>25</sup> However, Russia also is concerned about the potential that violent extremists in Afghanistan will go elsewhere when the conflict is over or if NATO pulls out of Afghanistan precipitously. As a result, Russia has cooperated with NATO by providing transit routes through Russia for cargo and troops, and has provided

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<sup>22</sup> Strategic Concept For the Defence and Security of The Members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation," November 19, 2010.

<sup>23</sup> Jorge Benitez, "NATO official confirms defense plans for Russia's neighbors," *Atlantic Council*, Dec. 13, 2010, <http://www.acus.org/natosource/nato-official-confirms-defense-plans-russias-neighbors>.

<sup>24</sup> Andrew E. Kramer, "Russia cuts off gas deliveries to Ukraine," *The New York Times*, January 2, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/02/world/europe/02iht-02gazprom.19044537.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Kristin Deasy, "UN Report Tracks Crossborder Impact of Afghan Heroin," *Radio Free Europe*, Oct. 22, 2009, [http://www.rferl.org/content/UN\\_Report\\_Tracks\\_Crossborder\\_Impact\\_Of\\_Afghan\\_Heroin\\_/1858365.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/UN_Report_Tracks_Crossborder_Impact_Of_Afghan_Heroin_/1858365.html).

helicopter support and training to Afghan security forces.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Afghanistan is a case where we see several linked issues or interests; the country is connected to terrorism, drugs and crime. Therefore, it's possible, as we see in Afghanistan, that cooperation in one area could lead to cooperation in other unforeseen areas in the future.

## ***Conclusion***

Overall, the U.S. “reset” policy toward Russia and NATO efforts to re-engage Russia have accomplished both tangible results and created a positive political atmosphere where the parties can work together on common interests looking toward the future. This positive atmosphere presents a real opportunity for dialogue and cooperation. Given the many common security challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and in spite of some differences, collaboration now in areas of common interest is in the best interests of the individual countries involved, and also benefits regional and international peace and security.

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<sup>26</sup> Gregory Feifer, “Russia Goes Back to Afghanistan,” *Radio Free Europe*, October 28, 2010, [http://www.rferl.org/content/gandhara\\_russia\\_in\\_afghanistan/2203631.html](http://www.rferl.org/content/gandhara_russia_in_afghanistan/2203631.html).