

Moscow and Washington: 'Unclenching the Fist' and 'Resetting the Button'

Francis Ikome and Dimpho Motsamai

Dr. Francis Ikome is the
director of the IGD's
Multilateral Programme

Dimpho Motsamai is a
researcher in the IGD's
Africa and Southern Africa
Programme

The détente between Washington and Moscow that facilitated the demise of the Cold War was both cosmetic and short lived. From the Reagan years onwards, relations between the two countries slowly deteriorated, reaching their lowest ebb during the Bush era. What angered Moscow the most was Washington's alleged involvement in the 'Colour Revolutions' in the former Soviet Republics of Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004, respectively, and the Bush administration's endorsement of their candidacies to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), alongside his near-obstinate resolve to install a missile defence system (MDS) in Eastern Europe. Moscow's muscled military rebuff of American protégé, Georgia, over its invasion of South Ossetia marked the height of Russia's anger over American influence in the region.

This coincided with the 2008 presidential elections in America and became a prominent foreign policy issue during the campaign. Both the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, and his Republican counterpart, John McCain, postured as more able to manage an increasingly assertive and non-conformist Russia. It was obvious that irrespective of who emerged victorious in the elections, one of the most urgent foreign policy priorities that the new occupant of the White House would have to contend with was how to manage the sullied relations with Moscow. Although during his campaign, Obama promised to be as tough on Moscow as the Republican candidate John McCain, the Obama presidency inspired hope among many for a major thawing of relations with Russia. This was partly because the Obama campaign had de-emphasised unilateralism and had signalled a predisposition to engage with all global actors that were willing to do the same. Shortly after taking office, the Obama administration was quick to recognise that Russia did not only constitute a priority foreign policy challenge, but also held the key to the realisation of some of the administration's other strategic foreign policy goals (including the successful execution of the war in Afghanistan, the containment of the rather incessantly abrasive regime in Iran, and the revival of nuclear non-proliferation negotiations, to name but a few). To some observers, notwithstanding the Georgian war, prospects for Russia warming up to the new administration in Washington were bright, partly because of the replacement of the hard-nosed, Cold-War era Vladimir Putin by a supposedly more pliable Dmitri Medvedev in the Kremlin. Albeit with Putin, as prime minister, still wielding a lot of power, particularly over Moscow's foreign policy. To others, however, the formal transfer of power from Putin to Medvedev did not bring about even a modicum of foreign policy re-orientation.

During his inaugural speech on 20 January 2009, Obama tried to reach out directly to the Kremlin and other regimes that had been anti-American by admonishing '...we will extend a hand if you are willing to unclench your fist.'¹ The Obama 'unclenching' statement was followed by further overtures by his vice president, Joe Biden, and secretary of state, Hilary

Global Insight aims to
provide members of the
policy community with
concise but trenchant
analyses of topical issues.
Comments and suggestions
are invited.

Clinton, who both spoke of 'resetting the button in relations' between Moscow and Washington; thereby creating expectations of fundamental changes in relations between the two nuclear powers. However, until the recent decision on 17 September 2009 to scrap the Bush-era planned MDS in Eastern Europe, the Obama administration's overture to Moscow was seen largely as political rhetoric, devoid of any substance. If anything, it was accompanied by very disturbing contradictions; not least Biden's visit to Georgia and Ukraine and his rather Bush-like faux pas that Moscow was a 'spent force' that needed Washington more than Washington needed it. This forced Moscow to conclude that it saw more of continuity than change in the Obama administration.

This policy brief, therefore, examines the meaning, potential value addition and the challenges of the Obama administration's 'reset button' concept in improving relations between Washington and Moscow. The brief argues that although the 'reset button' concept holds a lot of promise in improving relations between the two countries, for it to move from mere rhetoric to concrete action both parties must be willing to undertake geopolitical and geostrategic compromises that may not necessarily be popular. The two parties must also endeavour to develop a common understanding of what would constitute a reset or fresh start in their relations, preferably away from Cold War and post-Cold War mind sets. The rest of the brief is organised as follows: part two presents a brief overview of the state of relations between Russia and America before the Obama presidency; part three examines the context and meaning of the Obama administration's 'reset button' concept; part four discusses the challenges and potential benefits of a 'reset' in relations between Washington and Moscow; the last part consists of the conclusion and some policy considerations.

The state of US-Russia relations on the eve of the Obama presidency

By the end of 2008, the US had pronounced the former Soviet region to be unstable, partly because Russia was perceived as becoming progressively more authoritarian not only domestically but in its 'sphere of influence'. As such, the two countries were incapable of discussing and agreeing on even the most basic issues. Differences of opinion were allowed to spiral out of control, pushing many, both in Moscow and Washington to speculate about a Cold War-like nadir.²

Although both Moscow and Washington played a role in the deterioration of relations, the Bush administration's osten-

sible neglect of Russia in its foreign policy priorities was one of the primary explanations of the decline. Officials in the Bush administration saw Russia as relevant only insofar as it could help advance their agenda on issues such as Afghanistan or Iran. The perception was that US-Russia relations in themselves were an afterthought, and the Bush administration therefore saw no express need for a comprehensive policy approach towards Moscow.³ Not only did the administration fail to create an institutional underpinning for the relationship but it proceeded to dismantle the bilateral commission established in the 1990s, replacing it with largely ineffective lower-level mechanisms. It, therefore, seemed that the only concrete basis for relations hinged on the rapport between Bush and Putin which proved to be an insufficient foundation for creating a stable and sustainable partnership.⁴ If anything, the over-personalisation of the relationship contributed to the Bush administration's failure to consolidate improvements in bilateral relations that followed the terrorist attacks of 9/11.⁵

After the attacks, Putin had backed the US in its military response against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. He opened Russian airspace to US military flights, increased assistance to the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, and did not object to Washington establishing supply bases in two former Soviet Central Asian republics.⁶ The immediate post-9/11 solidarity facilitated the quick resolution of disagreements that emerged between the two states. For instance, in December 2001, President Bush withdrew the US from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, about which Moscow expressed dissatisfaction but did so in measured manner. The relationship warmed up considerably such that in May 2002 President Bush signed the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty with Russia in Moscow, and the leaders of the two countries expressed hope for a reinvigorated US-Russia relationship.⁷

However, the immediate post-9/11 goodwill was quickly squandered and the relationship soon deteriorated. By 2006, antagonistic foreign policy pronouncements from both sides became the norm. Former Vice President Dick Cheney's speech in May of that year in Vilnius, Lithuania, set the trend. Cheney referred to the Baltic region as 'the very front lines of freedom in the modern world,' implying both that Russia was not at all free and that there was a new kind of iron curtain separating Russia and the rest of Europe.⁸ The Kremlin countered by describing the speech as a 'completely incomprehensible broadside.' Putin harshly decried US policies in a (now infamous) speech at the Munich Security Conference in 2007 where, among other things, he highlighted what he perceived as the US's monopolistic dominance in global relations and its 'almost uncontained hyper use of force.'⁹ Putin's

Moscow and Washington

speech, laden with Cold War language, also accused NATO of placing military forces close to the Russian border. He equally re-echoed Russia's opposition to plans by the Bush administration to build missile-defence sites in Central Europe when 'there is no need.'¹⁰ Russia threatened to withdraw from the Intermediate Nuclear Forces Treaty and later suspended its participation in the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty, a cornerstone of Euro-Atlantic security.¹¹

Putin's criticism of the US prompted sharp condemnation from Bush administration officials, including Senator John McCain, who described Russia as an autocracy which was increasingly becoming more pronounced. He intimated that it was a trend that would see a Russia foreign policy more opposed to the principles of the Western democracies as its energy policy becomes a tool of intimidation.¹² Furthermore, McCain insisted that Moscow had to understand that it could not enjoy a genuine partnership with the West as long as its actions at home and abroad conflicted fundamentally with the core values of the Euro-Atlantic democracies.¹³ In the same antagonistic vein, the then US Defence Secretary Robert Gates¹⁴ asserted that Moscow's policies 'seem to work against international stability' specifically arms sales to Iran and its use of energy for 'political coercion,' implying that Russia was apprehensive of the development of democracy in its neighbourhood.¹⁵

In the following months, President Bush endorsed Ukraine and Georgia's plans for NATO membership which put further strain on the relationship since Russia perceives NATO's expansion as Western encroachment into its traditional sphere of influence. Although there was an attempt to resolve differences through the signing of the US-Russia Strategic Framework Declaration, the agenda outlined in the document remained largely on paper.¹⁶ By the middle of 2008, co-operation had been seriously undermined, including in directions of significance for both sides such as prevention of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, stabilisation of the situation in Afghanistan, and countering international terrorism. The two sides also had differing approaches to settling a number of international issues, such as those linked with Iran, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Kosovo, and the Middle East.¹⁷ Notably, a major and definite lapse in relations unravelled in the aftermath of Moscow's August 2008 invasion of Georgia which resulted in Moscow's recognition of Georgia's breakaway regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Moscow's assertion of its intention to build military bases there.¹⁸ This resulted in the US withdrawing the US-Russia Civil Nuclear Agreement from consideration in Congress, supporting the suspension of the NATO-Russia Council, and

cutting off all bilateral military ties.¹⁹ Given this situation, it seemed that US-Russia relations had largely reached a dead end; a reality that the Obama administration seems to have inherited and which poses a fundamental challenge to the new administration.

The Obama presidency and the 'reset button' concept: context and meaning

In a bid to begin improving the rather toxic atmosphere that surrounded relations between Washington and Moscow during the Bush-Putin era, the newly sworn-in Obama administration evolved the concept of 'pressing the reset button' on US-Russia relations.²⁰ The concept has been interpreted differently by various role players both within the US itself and between the US and Russia. While some have seen it as amounting to an appeasement of an increasingly assertive Russia, others have seen it as an offer of strategic partnership. Yet others have tagged it as a misleading metaphor for serious diplomatic relations. However, from an Obama administration perspective, it is intended as an opening tactic in redefining and building a comprehensive and more institutionalised American foreign policy towards Russia beyond the Bush-era's ad-hoc, personalised and summit-based interactions. It would seem the ultimate goal of this approach is to create an environment for discussion and co-operation on issues of shared interest, and also to find ways to manage disagreements and develop concrete measures and modalities to this end. In some sense, the concept also symbolises America's recognition of Russia's significance to its other priority foreign policy goals and the realisation that isolating Russia is neither desirable nor feasible. The Obama administration has also recognised that co-operation with the Russians on important security issues can build confidence on both sides and diminish Russian suspicion of disguised US military encroachment. Yet, the divergent trajectory of the two countries since the end of the Cold War, including the emergence of the US as the global hegemon, accompanied by the swift descent of Russia from Cold War superpower to failed state, created an imbalance of power that has continued to complicate the prospect of building confidence and establishing a true alliance.²¹

Obama and his foreign policy officials have used various meetings with Russian officials to sell the 'reset button' concept. The stage was set in a meeting between Secretary of State Hilary Clinton and her Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov in Geneva, Switzerland in March 2009 during which Clinton offered the Russian diplomat a box with the inscrip-

tion 'resetting the button in relations.' This was followed by the meeting between President Obama and Medvedev, in April, 2009 on the margins of the G-20 Summit in London. The two leaders released a joint statement in which they declared that they were 'ready to move beyond Cold War mentalities and chart a fresh start in relations between [the] two countries.' More importantly, they outlined more than 20 areas of co-operation, including trade, arms control and the conflicts in Afghanistan and North Korea.²² The spirit of a new beginning was carried over to a later meeting between Obama and Medvedev as well as between Obama and the powerful Russian prime minister, Vladimir Putin, in July 2009 in Moscow.

Although these encounters were characterised by firmness and seeming reluctance to compromise on core issues by both sides, overall they gave room for at least cautious optimism about prospects of a new beginning in Russia-America relations. However, the 'resetting the button' concept could be anything but a negotiated common policy position between Washington and Moscow. It is essentially an Obama administration policy response to what it perceives as an increasingly unavoidable Russia. Even more significantly, the question has arisen with regard to the direction in which the relations must be reset.

America and Russia agree that the Cold War was costly and, therefore, they cannot afford to have their relations revert to the Cold War era. However, they strongly disagree on resetting relations to the post-Cold War era, partly because of the huge gulf between them over who benefited more from this era. For the US and its allies, the post-Cold War era was most beneficial and preferred, not least because of the social conditions of Russia but also because the era was devoid of any geo-political challenge posed by the defunct Soviet Union. Conversely, for Russia, the end of its challenge to the West was least beneficial because it rendered Moscow completely helpless in the face of Western strides to re-order the institutions and power arrangements of the region without regard to its interests.²³ Indeed, it was an era during which Russia was forced to stop perceiving the West as an enemy; to ungrudgingly accept the independence and freedom of former Soviet Union Republics to choose to forge whatever relations they wished to; and to generally remain indifferent to the direction and choices of countries in its backyard. It was also an era that apparently gave the West license to behave rather patronisingly in Russia, urging it to concentrate on economic development while imbibing lessons gleaned from the West into its political and social thinking. During this period, Russia was also admonished to stop thinking in

political and military Cold War terms and to embrace a neo-liberal economic paradigm, the only caveat being that it was a backward and junior partner that desperately needed time and institution-building to become Western.²⁴ To America and its Western allies, any other thinking outside this frame amounted to a throwback to the Cold War era. The West's rather dichotomous Cold War-Post-Cold War prism derived from two frameworks of thinking that presented Russia as either constituting a global threat that needed to be check-mated; or as a failed state that had an opportunity to redeem itself by adopting Western institutions and values, failing which it was consigned to inexorable decline.²⁵

Understandably, Moscow rejects any discussion that invokes a return to this era since it is perceived not only to have heralded decay and chaos but to have actually precipitated the collapse of Russia's social order and old institutions without facilitating the establishment of new ones. To say the least, the era was catastrophic for Russian power and prestige. It invokes memories of overt and covert Western imperialism and exploitation of Russia's weaknesses by both Western governments and capital. The feelings of Russian nationalists about the post-Cold War era are best captured by the former Russian president, Vladimir Putin's, assertion that 'the dissolution of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical disaster of the 20th century.'²⁶ Moreover, Russia does not subscribe to the idea that the world must be seen exclusively through the two-dimensional prisms of the Cold War and the post-Cold War eras. Rather, its preferred interpretation conjures a world order in which Russia is a major regional power, with a stable, if troubled economy, a functional society, and most importantly, regional interests that must be protected.²⁷

The potential benefits and challenges of the 'reset the button' approach

Besides the lack of consensus on the meaning and direction of a new beginning between America and Russia, the seeming contradictions between Obama's overtures and the actions and utterances of some of his foreign policy officials is yet another serious challenge. The most glaring contradiction could be found in the four-day official visit to Georgia and Ukraine by Vice President Joe Biden, only a few days after President Obama's high profile summit with Russian president, Dmitry Medvedev, in Moscow in July 2009. Although Obama hinted during the July summit that the days of spheres of influence were long gone, Biden's visit to these two countries made a mockery of Obama's claim that the US

Moscow and Washington

seeks a 'strong, peaceful and prosperous Russia.'²⁸ Moscow saw the visit as a subtle act of provocation and as underscoring the lack of seriousness by the Obama administration on redefining relations with Russia.

Even more significant was the interview that Vice President Biden granted at the end of his visit. It was not only the most pointed criticism by an Obama administration official of Russia's current role in the world but it also re-affirmed Moscow's worries that Obama's reset-the-button proposition was a call to return to the much dreaded post-Cold War era. Like the Bush administration, Biden attempted to anchor America's co-operation with Russia essentially on Moscow's weaknesses rather than on the mutual benefits that the two countries could garner from such co-operation. He argued that America seems to underestimate its hold over Russia and that because of Russia's domestic troubles, it was bound to make some very difficult, calculated decisions. He characterised Russia rather dismissively in the following words: 'they have a shrinking population base, they have a withering economy, they have a banking sector and structure that is not likely to be able to withstand the next 15 years, they're in a situation where the world is changing before them and they're clinging to something in the past that is not sustainable.'²⁹ Although Biden cautioned that 'it is never smart to embarrass an individual or a country when they're dealing with significant loss of face',³⁰ the content and tone of his interview was not only embarrassing to Moscow but was also clearly out of step with the spirit of a new beginning. If anything, it only helped to further strengthen Moscow's view that the Obama administration represented more of continuity than change.

Some commentators have rightly observed that economic strength has never been a factor in Moscow's projection of power on the international stage, not even in the midst of the Cold War and, therefore, it would be misleading to assess Russia's actions and reactions exclusively in these terms. Vice President Biden was probably conscious of this when he admonished that 'despite Russia's economic and geopolitical difficulties, Moscow could become more belligerent in the short term unless the US continues to treat Russia as a major player on the international stage.'³¹ It would seem that the Obama administration quickly realised that Biden's interview could seriously compromise its efforts to persuade Moscow to buy into the notion of a new beginning in relations. This explains why the White House moved swiftly to qualify and downplay the rather provocative contents of the interview.

However, it would seem that the most decisive attempt so far to convince Moscow of Washington's seriousness in redefining relations has been the Obama administration's

decision to amend the Bush-era plans for a missile defence system in Eastern Europe. Following what Obama described as an 'unanimous recommendation' from his top military and defence advisers, he announced on 17 September 2009 that he was giving up plans for radar and missile-interceptor bases in Poland and the Czech Republic. He indicated that he will replace them with an alternate plan that would protect the US and its allies against threats from Iran's ongoing ballistic missile defence programme.³² Obama described the new programme as 'being more comprehensive than the previous program. It deploys capabilities that are proven and cost-effective ... it sustains and builds upon our commitment to protect the US homeland against long-range ballistic missile threats. And it ensures and enhances the protection of all our NATO allies.'³³ Although the MDS had no tangible value, it was not only the greatest obstacle to the improvement of relations with Moscow but also contributed the most in thwarting the achievement of key Obama foreign policy goals, including Russia's support of America's war efforts in Afghanistan, the reduction and elimination of nuclear weapons, and the containment of Iran's nuclear ambitions.

Obama's decision is said to have been facilitated by what appears to be the diminished imminence of Iran's nuclear threat. The Pentagon now seems to believe that the Bush-era intelligence that suggested that Tehran was close to completing the development of an intercontinental ballistic missile programme that could produce useable long-range nuclear weapons by 2015 was inaccurate. Rather, new intelligence seems to suggest that Iran is far from that threshold and is therefore, a less immediate threat. In the words of US defence secretary, Robert Gates, the withdrawal of the system is an attempt to 'address the threat that has really emerged versus the threat that we initially postulated.'³⁴ Obama himself has further sought to justify the change by arguing that 'it was a matter of prudence and economy and that the best way to responsibly advance America's security and the security of its allies is to deploy a missile defence system that best responds to the threats that they face and that utilises technology that is both proven and cost effective.'³⁵

More significantly, Obama's decision has been seen as opening a wide-range of new political and military possibilities, not least the prospects of securing Russia's co-operation on key global issues. Some have even reasoned that this single decision has the potential to engender a re-drawing of the map of international politics and that what appeared as brick-wall politics under the Bush administration has now given way to what could be either a more fluid and realistic or more weak and risky era.³⁶ The timing of the decision demonstrates

rather unambiguously that it was intended to send a conciliatory message to Moscow. It coincided with a number of very critical US-led talks in which Moscow's co-operation was to be crucial. These include the United Nations General Assembly Meeting of September 2009 where Obama intended to propose a strong resolution on nuclear disarmament; the talks between Iran, the Permanent Members of the Security Council (P5) plus Germany early in October over Tehran's nuclear programme;³⁷ and the expected re-opening of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) negotiations in December. This will be accompanied by preliminary talks on the renewal of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty from which Russia had threatened to withdraw against the background of tense relations with Washington, partly because of the MDS plan.³⁸

The Kremlin's initial response to Obama's MDS overture could be considered as positive. The chairman of the foreign affairs committee of the Russian State Duma, Konstatin Kosachyov, aligned himself with the popular Western media characterisation of the Obama decision as a step in the right direction, elaborating further that 'the Bush administration didn't understand us at all, but as far as I can judge from today's decision, the Obama administration is beginning to understand us'. He, however, hastened to add that 'this is not yet the end. It is not complete harmony and absolute accord, but is certainly a dialogue, and it is certainly an acceptance of Russia and its arguments as no less significant and serious than the [US's] own national security considerations'.³⁹ The Russian president, for his part welcomed the move as a constructive step in the right direction. In a nationally televised address within hours of Obama's announcement, Medvedev said that the two countries will have a good opportunity to exchange views on all aspects of strategic stability, including anti-missile defence; and that they will proceed to give orders to the respective bodies in the two countries to step up co-operation, including on attracting European and other interested nations. More significantly, Medvedev hinted that Moscow and Washington would work together to forge efficient measures to counter the risks of missile proliferation, 'measures that would allow [us], to take into account the interests and concerns of all parties and ensure equal security for all nations in the European arena'.⁴⁰ The Secretary General of NATO, Anders Fogh Rasmussen, joined the chorus of early plaudits of Obama's decision and proceeded to invite the Russian Federation to increase collaboration with NATO.

It would, however, be naïve to consider these initial reactions as evidence of Moscow's willingness to make meaningful reciprocal concessions to Washington in the immediate future, particularly over possible co-operation in containing Iran's

nuclear threat. In light of the timing of the decision, the expectation was created that Russia would make some concrete commitments to President Obama during the recently ended United Nations' Summit in New York in return for Washington's goodwill gesture. However, this was not the case as neither Moscow's words nor its actions during the summit (with the exception of a vague promise to discontinue the installation of their own missiles in Kaliningrad) suggested that it was in the process of rethinking its policy stances over a number of contentious issues. This response pushed some commentators to speculate that Moscow's attitude would not have been any different even if Obama had not reconsidered the Bush-era missile defence system and even if the expansion of NATO into the former Soviet Union was still firmly on the cards. They have argued that Moscow would want more than just the scrapping of the MDS. Moscow, for example, would want Washington to relax trade restrictions on Russia and to facilitate its membership of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Moscow could also misread Obama's overture as representing the new regime's pliability and could, therefore, hold back on immediately reciprocating as a strategy to extract more concessions from Washington. Moscow sees Iran as being one of its most important negotiating cards which it would want to retain for as long as possible.

More significantly, Medvedev's apparent indifference in New York could be explained by the Kremlin's realisation that Obama's much publicised MDS gesture was less far-reaching and less definitive than Moscow initially thought. For example, clarifications provided by America's secretary of defence, Robert Gates, on the real content of the new plan point to the fact that the plan was more of a re-calibration or deferment of the missiles plan than an outright scrapping. Gates stated rather unambiguously that 'those who say we are scrapping the missiles defence in Europe are either misinformed or misrepresenting the reality of what we are doing'.⁴¹ He intimated further that land-based defence systems were still slated for Eastern Europe, even though they would become operational as late as 2015. He also emphasised that the second phase will involve fielding upgraded, land-based SM-3 defensive missiles and hinted that consultations have begun with America's allies, starting with Poland and the Czech Republic, about hosting a land-based version of the SM-3 and other components of the system. Although Gate's briefing could be viewed as an attempt to reassure Washington's Eastern European allies that there was very little change in Washington's commitments towards them, Moscow was unhappy to learn that a land-based defence system was still under consideration.

Conclusion

Pundits were right in speculating that Russia would be one of the thorniest foreign policy challenges for the Obama presidency. Although Moscow lost the Cold War, and in spite of the numerous domestic economic, social and political challenges that have tended to militate against its desire to regain great power status, it cannot be ignored in any serious consideration of regional and global power politics. The policy of a number of earlier American presidents before Obama to marginalise Moscow only contributed to deepening Moscow's suspicion and distrust of America and its allies. While it is true that the demise of the Cold War may have signalled the end of the era of spheres of influence, Russia does not subscribe to the view that it does not have the right to defend what it perceives as its national interests. Therefore, to the extent that Russia defines its national interest to include its immediate neighbourhood, it brings it into direct conflict with the US and its Western allies who continue to see their security as only attainable through the expansion of NATO to Russia's backyard in the states of the former Soviet Union.

The Obama administration has come to the conclusion that a new beginning in relations between Moscow and Washington is needed. While the 'reset button' concept appeared largely as mere rhetoric, plagued with contradictions in the actions and utterances of senior Obama administration officials, it was given a mantle of legitimacy when Obama decided to re-think the contentious Bush-era MDS plan. Notwithstanding an emerging incongruence in Obama's new security plan and in spite of the rather mixed signals from Moscow, his gesture has the potential of fundamentally altering the atmosphere in international politics. In some sense, it amounts to a challenge thrown to Moscow to rethink its distrust and suspicion of Washington. Moscow's failure to make any firm commitment to Washington during the recent UN Summit in New York may not in itself be considered a diplomatic casualty or a failure of Obama's strategy. Rather, it may be more appropriate to argue that the dynamics are slowly changing and that Moscow will choose the appropriate moment to reciprocate Washington's overtures.

Policy Considerations

For Washington

- There is need to broaden engagement with Moscow beyond the slogan of the 'reset button' to a more comprehensive policy towards Russia that will clearly articulate how it intends to address issues of shared interest; engage Russia on concerns and the challenges this presents and facilitate Russia's integration into the international community.
- Washington should establish new structures and relevant implementation agencies to execute its policy towards Russia.
- Equally important, the Obama administration needs to be much clearer and more consistent in its engagement with Moscow. This requires that it corrects the seeming contradictions which have emerged between its rhetoric of a new beginning and the conduct and utterances of some senior officials.

For MOSCOW

- There is the need to recognise that permanent confrontation with Washington is counterproductive and that a failure to seize the opportunity provided by the Obama administration would not endear Russia to the international community. Rather, it would present Moscow as obstructionist to international peace and security and as having disguised motives beyond taking its rightful place in the system.
- Although internal economic strength has historically never been the basis for Russia's regional and global projection of power, it would be in its interest to dedicate more time and resources to strengthening its domestic economic base as a prelude to competing meaningfully internationally.
- As a response to Obama's overtures, Moscow should consider offering its own package of proposals on improving bilateral relations. This is to suggest that rather than reject Obama's proposals, Russia should view them as the first step towards implementing a wider range of measures to normalise relations. ■

Endnotes

- 1 Obama quoted in Reason Magazine, April 2009, p. 2. At <http://www.reason.com/news/131970>. Accessed on 14 August 2009.
- 2 Samuel Charap, Laura Conley, Peter Juul, Andrew Light, Julian L Wong. 'After the reset: A strategy and new agenda for US-Russia policy.' The Center for American Progress. July 2009. p. 7. At http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2009/07/after_reset.html. Accessed on 15 September 2009.
- 3 See 'After the reset: A strategy and new agenda for US-Russia policy.' p. 9.
- 4 Ibid., pp. 8-9.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 9-11.
- 6 R. Craig Nation. 'Russia's security strategy under Vladimir Putin: US and Russian Perspectives.' Pp. 5-7. At <http://www.strategicstudiesinstitute.army.mil/pdffiles/PUB829.pdf>. Accessed on 13 September 2009.
- 7 Sergie Karaganov, Dmitri Suslov, Timofei Bordachev. 'Reconfiguration not just a reset: Russia's interests in the relations with the US of America.' Report for the meeting of the Russia-US section of the Valdai International Discussion Club. Pp. 6-7. At http://en.rian.ru/valdai_op/20090701/155399564.html. Accessed on 17 September 2009.
- 8 See 'After the reset: A strategy and new agenda for US-Russia policy.' Pp. 21-22.
- 9 Kenji Iwata. 'Russia's security policy since Putin's Speech at the 2007 Munich Security conference.' Pp. 73-74. At <http://home.hiroshima-u.ac.jp/heiwa/JNL/29/4Iwata.pdf>. Accessed on 13 September 2009.
- 10 Ibid., pp. 74-76.
- 11 Pavel Zolotarev. 'Missile defence strategy.' *Russia in Global Affairs*, Volume No.3. July-September 2008, pp. 66.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Robert Gates was re-appointed as secretary of state by President Obama.
- 15 See Kenji Iwata, 'Russia's security policy since Putin's Speech at the 2007 Munich Security conference.' Pp. 77-79.
- 16 See 'After the reset: A strategy and new agenda for US-Russia policy.' Pp. 11.
- 17 See 'Reconfiguration not just a reset: Russia's interests in the relations with the US of America.' Report for the meeting of the Russia-US section of the Valdai International Discussion Club, pp. 11.
- 18 Francis Ikome and Lesley Masters, 'Geopolitical Tsunami: The Georgia-Russia conflict and the changing balance of forces in the Caucasus.' *Global Insight* no 84, September 2008, Institute for Global Dialogue, Midrand, pp.4-5.
- 19 See 'After the reset: A strategy and new agenda for US-Russia policy,' pp. 11.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 James M. Goldgeier. 'A realistic rest with Russia: Practical Expectations for US- Russia relations,' *Policy Review*, August-September 2009, Hoover Institution, Stanford University. At <http://www.hoover.org/publications/policyreview/51403357.html>. Accessed 15 September 2009.
- 22 Nicolai Zlobin. 'US-Russia relations: reset, overload or more of the same?' *Russia Business Watch*, Spring 2009, p. 3.
- 23 See generally, 'The Western View of Russia,' in *STRATFOR*, 31 August 2009. At http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20090831_western_view_russia?utm_source=Gweekly. Accessed on 1 September 2009.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Ibid.
- 26 Time, August 25 2008, pp.19
- 27 See *STRATFOR*, op. cit.
- 28 See generally, President Obama's Moscow Speech as analysed in RIANOVOSTI. At <http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20090707/155460157.html>. Accessed on 31/07/2009.
- 29 Wall Street Journal, 25 July 2009, pp. 1. At <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124848246032580580581.html>. Accessed on 28 July 2009.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid
- 32 RadioFreeEurope-RadioLiberty, September 17 2009. At <http://www.rferl.org/articleprintview/1824647.html>. Accessed on 25 September 2009.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 Globe and the Mail of 18/09/09. At <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/Pbama-cancels-missile-defence-and-cha>. Accessed on 18 September 2009.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Ibid.
- 37 It is noteworthy that Moscow's co-operation is vital for any prospects of stiffer sanctions against Tehran and their effectiveness.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 See RadioFreeEuropa, op.cit.
- 40 Ibid.
- 41 Ibid.

Institute for



Global Dialogue

Block 12, Thornhill Office Park, Bekker Street,
Vorna Valley, Midrand, South Africa
PO Box 32571, Braamfontein 2017, South Africa
Tel +2711 315 1299
Fax +2711 315 2149
Email info@igd.org.za · Web www.igd.org.za

All rights reserved. The material in this publication may not be reproduced, stored or transmitted without the prior permission of the copyright holder. Short extracts may be quoted, provided the source is acknowledged.

ISSN 1607 2375

Produced by Acumen Publishing Solutions, Johannesburg.