

# US-RUSSIA RELATIONS AND FAILURE OF THE RESET (2008-14)

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## INTRODUCTION

At the end of the Cold War, US-Russia relations were expected to be on the upswing, given the end of their ideological and strategic rivalry. Getting over the uncertainties of the post-Soviet era, the two countries achieved remarkable cooperation in the areas of nuclear arms control, during the Gulf War against Saddam Hussein's Iraq and the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO)-led North Atlantic Cooperation Council, marking the first reset between the former Cold War adversaries. As the administration of George H. W. Bush did not promote democracy initiatives in the former Soviet Union, there was greater scope for a new form of partnership between the US and Russia.

However, this view rapidly changed once Bill Clinton was elected as US president. The view of his administration was fundamentally shaped by the US perception of the unprecedented unipolarity of the international system. Without any significant challenger, the US policies under the Clinton administration were based on a values-driven, market-reforms approach and this played out in its dealings with Boris Yeltsin's Russia. The critics of the Clinton-Yeltsin reset argue that the US played a major role in pushing democratic reforms within Russia, enlarging NATO eastward

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to include Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic, and ignored Russia's core interests in its neighbourhood, especially with the NATO military operation against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

Subsequently, under the George W. Bush Jr. administration, the US-Russia relationship was briefly strengthened after the 9/11 attacks when President Vladimir Putin took the initiative to mark the third reset. But the issue of US missile defence, further NATO enlargement to include the Baltic states in 2004 and interference in the former Soviet sphere of influence with respect to Georgia and Ukraine had alerted Moscow to Washington's continued

disregard for the former's core interests. The Russo-Georgian War of 2008 had all but ended the Bush-Putin era of rapprochement.

## **BACKGROUND TO THE RESET POLICY**

By the end of George Bush Jr.'s presidency, US-Russia relations had turned frosty and this served as the immediate background to the widely publicised Obama-Medvedev 'reset'. Despite cooperation in the sphere of counter-terrorism and non-proliferation in the early years of the Bush-Putin era, the relations were beset by strategic constraints. Firstly, the unilateral US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty in 2002 prompted Russia to "reject the implementation of the START II Treaty."<sup>1</sup>

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1. Wade Boese, "Russia Declares Itself No Longer Bound by START II", *Arms Control Today*; <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2002-07/news/russia-declares-itself-longer-bound-start-ii>. Accessed on October 10, 2019.

In order to move forward with its missile defence plan for Europe, the US mooted the idea of installing an anti-missile site close to Poland's northern Baltic Sea coast that would be a part of NATO's defensive umbrella. In the month of August 2008, when Russia sent troops into Georgia, the former threatened rocket attacks on Poland for "agreeing to host 10 US interceptor rockets there as part of the missile defence plan."<sup>2</sup> Despite US assurances that the missile shield was to provide protection for Europe against the Iranian short-to-intermediate-range ballistic

missiles, Moscow believed it had strong reasons to suspect Washington's intentions. Therefore, the repercussions of Bush's decision to abandon the ABM Treaty in 2002 had strategic consequences for both NATO's security and Russia's belief of an encroaching threat near its borders.

Second, continued NATO expansion heightened Russia's fears of the organisation's military objectives in the former Soviet Union's sphere of influence. The fifth wave of NATO enlargement in 2004 absorbed countries like Bulgaria, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia, among which the admission of the Baltic countries particularly angered Russia,<sup>3</sup> as these were former Soviet states. Prior to this, in 1999, NATO had admitted three former Warsaw Pact countries: the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. While most Central and Eastern European states had been courting NATO membership since the fall of Communism, Russia was staunchly opposed to the idea of NATO encroachment into what it considered

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2. Ian Traynor, Luke Harding and Helen Womack, "Moscow Warns it Could Strike Poland over US Missile Shield", *The Guardian*, August 16, 2008; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2008/aug/15/russia.poland.nuclear.missiles.threat>. Accessed on October 16, 2019.

3. Laurence Peter, "Why Nato-Russia Relations Soured Before Ukraine", BBC News, September 3, 2014; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-29030744>. Accessed on October 10, 2019.

as its “near abroad”.<sup>4</sup> This refers to post-Soviet countries where Moscow claims to have strategic stakes and acts as the self-proclaimed protector of the considerably large Russian ethnic minorities within the borders of these states.

While NATO expansion into Central and Eastern Europe complicated Russia’s relations with its neighbouring countries, it was the accession talks relating to Georgia and Ukraine that proved to be the thorniest subject in US-Russia relations in the following years. In the backdrop of the NATO Summit in Bucharest, Putin warned of consequences over the granting of the Membership Action Plan (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine. Although the action plan was not extended to these countries due to Germany’s intervention, the US supported Tbilisi’s and Kiev’s future inclusion. In the sixth wave of NATO expansion in 2009, Albania and Croatia were included which indicated the military organisation’s strategic interests in Eastern Europe. This was prompted by Russia’s backing of Serbia in its war over the breakaway territory of Kosovo, which proclaimed unilateral independence under the support of NATO forces in early 2008.

Thirdly, the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 represented in no uncertain terms the seriousness with which Moscow dealt with ethnic flare-ups involving Russian-speaking communities in the former Soviet states. The Georgian territories in question were South Ossetia and Abkhazia where Russia had maintained peace-keeping troops to prevent the discriminate killing of the ethnic Russian minority. Georgia claimed that the Russian forces targeted Georgian civilians and that it was an act of aggression in order to instigate war and invade the country under the pretext of ethnic tensions. The US backed Georgia in the conflict, which confirmed Russia’s deepest concerns about the military encirclement by Western forces around its border areas.

The issues of missile defence, NATO enlargement and ignorance of Russia’s sensitivities about its sphere of influence remained irritants

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4. Dominic Lieven, “Post-Soviet Russia”, *Encyclopedia Britannica*; <https://www.britannica.com/place/Russia/Post-Soviet-Russia>. Accessed on October 10, 2019.

throughout Bush's two-term presidency. The Russian president during these years, Vladimir Putin, had shown signs of both cooperation and confrontation in his dealings with the US. However, there was a change of leadership on both sides, with Dmitry Medvedev elected president of Russia in March 2008, and Barack Obama winning the US presidential elections in November 2008. The two presidents had the opportunity to rewrite the course of US-Russia relations that had suffered from weariness and mistrust over the previous decade or so.

### **FACTORS ENABLING A 'RESET' POLICY**

The Obama-Medvedev 'reset' was set against the background of the shaky bilateral ties during the final years of the Bush and Putin presidencies, culminating in the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008. There were increasing efforts by Washington to call out the resort to authoritarianism within Moscow's domestic political space. The cloud over the Iraq War had also unsettled the geo-political calculus of the Middle East, and with both the US and Russia taking opposite positions, the likelihood of their convergence on international security issues appeared slim. Thus, both Obama and Medvedev had inherited a tough foreign policy field from their respective predecessors. Nevertheless, there was a palpable glimmer of hope as the two leaders were determined to work out a common ground and set US-Russia relations on a new footing.

The major areas of cooperation, as outlined by the US, were identified as: nuclear arms control, sanctions against Iran, access to Afghanistan's northern border, counter-terrorism operations against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, restoration of verification procedures in the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), and trade. However, there was a caveat: Vice President Joe Biden warned Russia that the US "will not recognize any nation having a sphere of influence".<sup>5</sup> In spite of the avowed promises to cooperate on the aforementioned issues, the crux of the US reset policy

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5. Col. Jeffrey S. Davis, "US-Russian Cooperation in the Post-Cold War Environment", United States Army Command and General Staff College, April 2017, p. 30.

was based on a pragmatic approach toward Russia that included three elements: “cooperating on specific areas where their interests aligned, remaining firm where these interests diverged, and engaging with the Russian people themselves.”<sup>6</sup> The last objective was controversial and would later generate reservations from Russia as a form of US interference in its domestic affairs.

Before analysing the various elements of the reset policy, it is pertinent to understand the conditions that allowed for a reassessment of positions at the level of foreign policy decision-making. Broadly speaking, these factors generated favourable grounds for the brief period of rapprochement in US-Russia relations from 2009 to 2011.

### ***2008 US Presidential Election and Obama’s Foreign Policy***

During the first televised presidential debate, Obama offered a more balanced take on the course of US policy towards Russia. He agreed that there were certain issues of common interest for both sides and that the next president should not deal with Russia “based on staring into his eyes and seeing his soul” but based on the national security interests of the United States.<sup>7</sup> This was part of Obama’s larger strategy of soliciting Russia’s support on global issues like nuclear non-proliferation and the war on terror.

On the face of it, there was no ambiguity with regard to his policy over Russia. He condemned the Russians for the takeover of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and, at the same time, pledged to engage with Moscow on nuclear issues. Obama singled out Bush for his failure to undertake a pragmatic approach towards Russia on nuclear weapons and missile defence. He believed that the US treatment of Russia had to de-couple the Georgian crisis from the nuclear arms race. Engaging Russia on nuclear issues was vital to limit the destabilising impact of Russia’s nuclear weapons. This was a priority for US national security.

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6. Hillary Clinton, *Hard Choices* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014), p. 231.

7. “The First McCain-Obama Presidential Debate”, Commission on Presidential Debates, September 26, 2008; <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/2008-debate-transcript/>. Accessed on October 4, 2019.

The views of Henry J Kissinger and George Schultz influenced Obama's approach towards NATO expansion and enlisting Russia's support on Iran's nuclear programme, energy, finding ways to defuse the impact of the anti-ballistic missile deployment in Eastern Europe and a "possible linking of some American and Russian anti-ballistic missile defense systems."<sup>8</sup> Although Obama renounced his prior support for NATO expansion,<sup>9</sup> he continued the long tradition of US-sponsored democracy-promotion and assistance programmes in the former Soviet states of Ukraine and Georgia. This would later impede closer US-Russia cooperation on other issues.

### *The Russian 'Tandem'*

The term 'tandem' in Russian politics represents a unique power-sharing arrangement as part of the joint leadership of Russia between 2008 and 2012. Vladimir Putin was constitutionally barred from serving a third consecutive term but was appointed as Russia's Prime Minister under President Medvedev. There were conflicting views on who out of the two exercised power at the Kremlin, despite the prime minister's role being of lesser significance in Russian politics. Those who felt the transfer of presidential powers was only an eyewash and that Putin continued to retain his position as the paramount leader in the hierarchy, saw Medvedev as a "notional president".<sup>10</sup>

It was generally believed in the US strategic community that Putin still called the shots in the Kremlin. Having steered Russia's foreign policy direction since 2000, it was hard to discount the fact that no major decision could be taken by the new dispensation without Putin's consent. Despite

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8. Henry A. Kissinger and George P. Shultz, "Finding Common Ground", *The New York Times*, September 30, 2008; <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/30/opinion/30iht-edkissinger.1.16585986.html>. Accessed on October 4, 2019.

9. Benjamin H. Friedman and Justin Logan, "Hitting the 'Stop' Button on NATO Expansion", *International Affairs Forum*, April 24, 2009; [https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/articles/friedman\\_logan\\_hittingstopbuttononnatoexpansion.pdf](https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/articles/friedman_logan_hittingstopbuttononnatoexpansion.pdf). Accessed on October 4, 2019.

10. Philip Stephens, "Putin Maps the Boundaries of Greater Russia", *Financial Times*, August 28, 2008; <https://www.ft.com/content/128428e4-7517-11dd-ab30-0000779fd18c>. Accessed on October 5, 2019.

**There was a general attempt during the 'reset' period to manage the expectations of the bilateral relationship. Both the Obama and Medvedev administrations understood that a realistic assessment of interests without a reaction to rhetorical provocations by either side was the way forward.**

America's misgivings about Putin, the new Obama administration was determined to work amicably with Medvedev and begin a new chapter in US-Russia ties.

It was also helped by Medvedev's attempt to establish his own distinct persona and his general commitment towards modernisation reforms in Russia. The new US administration was encouraged by his rhetoric on domestic problems, which were forward-looking and "in sync with Western recommendations" for Russia.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Medvedev appeared to handle the foreign policy portfolio,

while Putin focussed on economic issues. This allowed Washington to act with Medvedev on various foreign policy challenges for which Russian support was crucial.

It was also noted that Medvedev had been at the helm when Russia decided to invade Georgia in August 2008 and, therefore, had the requisite wherewithal to initiate policy reforms and decisions. While the over-estimation of Medvedev's autonomy would hurt America's ability to engage with Putin once the latter was reelected as president in 2012, there was a general attempt during the 'reset' period to manage the expectations of the bilateral relationship. Both the Obama and Medvedev administrations understood that a realistic assessment of interests without a reaction to rhetorical provocations by either side was the way forward.

### ***Global Financial Crisis of 2008***

The economic downturn was attributed to a mix of factors: "falling energy prices, global market turmoil and political issues including worries over the

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11. Angela E. Stent, *The Limits of Partnership: U.S.-Russian Relations in the Twenty-First Century* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 186.



war with Georgia.”<sup>12</sup> Further, Russian economic sectors were controlled by state-backed monopolies that hold a disproportionate share of the market, supported by a corrupt government apparatus.

But the consequence of the financial crisis vis-à-vis the Georgia War was most acute on the energy front. Western Europe depends on Russia for energy deliveries and Georgia “offers an alternative corridor for energy transit from the Caspian basin, bypassing Russia.”<sup>13</sup> In response to sanctions over its Georgia incursions, Russia disrupted gas supply to Western Europe as slumping energy prices threatened the “fiscal health and political stability” of its economy.<sup>14</sup>

However, Russia’s leaders were not aware of the extent to which the country had been integrated with the global economy and the financial crisis helped to change that view. While Medvedev expressed surprise that Russia’s economic collapse was more than he had anticipated, Putin gave an implicit acknowledgement of Russia being affected by the crisis

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12. “Russian Stock Market Still Shut after Plunge: Market Official”, AFP, September 19, 2019; [https://web.archive.org/web/20080919230300/http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5j8R4\\_3j96oTVQzSlJlqtZsZD9OPA](https://web.archive.org/web/20080919230300/http://afp.google.com/article/ALeqM5j8R4_3j96oTVQzSlJlqtZsZD9OPA). Accessed on October 5, 2019.

13. Peter Havlik and Vasily Astrov, “Economic Consequences of the Georgian-Russian Conflict”, The Vienna Institute for International Economic Studies, September 2, 2008; <https://wiiw.ac.at/press-release-economic-consequences-of-the-georgian-russian-conflict-english-pnd-19.pdf>. Accessed on October 5, 2019.

14. Andrew E. Kramer, “Russia Cuts Gas, and Europe Shivers”, *The New York Times*, January 6, 2009; <https://www.nytimes.com/2009/01/07/world/europe/07gazprom.html?mtrref=www.google.com&assetType=REGIWALL&mtrref=www.nytimes.com&gwh=D9F07234837D57345344ABEFFAD52F92&gwt=pay&assetType=REGIWALL>. Accessed on October 5, 2019.

“because it had become globally integrated”.<sup>15</sup> Medvedev’s conciliatory tone prevailed and Putin’s economic team weathered the crisis better than many other countries.

Despite the improvement in its economic situation, Russia realised that there were two major obstacles in its way to become integrated into global markets: one was the World Trade Organisation (WTO) accession and the second was the US domestic legislation called the Jackson-Vanik Amendment. With regard to both issues, cooperation with the US was critical, which figured as an element in the US-Russia reset policy.

### *The Global War on Terror*

When President Obama took office, the United States was engaged in counter-terror operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Although the 9/11 World Trade Centre terrorist attack had heightened national security concerns regarding the Al-Qaeda and Taliban, the US-led “War on Terror” had failed to stabilise the situation in both these countries. The Bush administration’s unilateral intervention in these regions had worsened security fears and fuelled the rise of a global *jihadi* resistance against the US. In Obama’s early phase as US president, there was a concerted effort to reject Bush’s foreign policy actions, end the war in Iraq and undertake a path of cooperative engagement with both allies and adversaries.

For Russia, the global war on terror meant something entirely different. Unlike the US, Russia’s terror threats have mostly come not from ‘Islamist’ groups but rather from areas in its North Caucasus, driven by grievances over Moscow’s centralisation attempts. However, Russia’s support for the US’ war on terror stems from the fear that the conflict in Afghanistan could spread to its Central Asian doorsteps, which would lead to the presence of other insurgent groups. This cooperation had begun since the 9/11 attacks but the disagreements over the Iraq invasion had clouded attempts towards increased coordination between the two countries.

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15. “Putin: The Crisis is the Result of Integration into the Global Economy. For Which they Fought”, Newsru.com, December 29, 2008; <https://www.newsru.com/finance/29dec2008/putincrisis.html>. Accessed on October 5, 2019.

Despite reservations about the Bush-era war on terror, Russia opened the Northern Distribution Network (NDN), a “commercially based logistical corridor connecting the Baltic and Black Sea ports with Afghanistan via Russia, Central Asia, and the Caucasus.”<sup>16</sup> In this way, Russia sensed important gains accruing from the international coalition in Afghanistan, both “to contain the movement and activities of Islamic insurgents and terrorists and to curtail the drug flow infecting its own population courtesy the Afghan heroin.”<sup>17</sup>

### **ELEMENTS OF THE RESET POLICY**

A new US policy was announced by US Vice President Joseph Biden at the Munich Security Conference in February 2009 and was followed by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presenting Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov with a red button with the English word “reset” at Geneva in March 2009. The initial period of the reset was marked by US acquiescence over issues that had historically antagonised Russia: democracy promotion in post-Soviet states and US interference and criticism of Russian domestic politics. This posture was vital in soliciting Russian help in areas like nuclear non-proliferation, Afghanistan, Iran, etc.

The first official meeting between Obama and Medvedev took place on April 1, 2009, in London in the backdrop of the global financial crisis. Unlike the first Putin-Bush summit in Slovenia, which had suffered from over-promises and over-expectations, the Obama-Medvedev interaction was restrained and recognised the “real differences” between the two countries.<sup>18</sup> Obama’s meetings in the Kremlin a few months later with both Putin and Medvedev were starkly different. Putin saw Obama’s outreach as a signal of US course correction of its past mistakes. But Obama’s meeting with

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16. Andrew C. Kuchins and Thomas M. Sanderson, “The Northern Distribution Network and Afghanistan: Geopolitical Challenges and Opportunities”, Centre for Strategic & International Studies, January 2010; [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy\\_files/files/publication/091229\\_Kuchins\\_NDNandAfghan\\_Web.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/091229_Kuchins_NDNandAfghan_Web.pdf), p. 1.

17. Ibid., p. 2.

18. Stent, n. 11, p. 189.

Medvedev was more forward-looking as the two discussed wide-ranging issues like a new nuclear arms control treaty, opening of a joint early-warning centre to share data on missile launchings, Afghanistan, etc.

However, there was once again a mismatch between the US' stated policy and its on-ground behaviour. As US Ambassador to Russia and the president's chief Russia advisor Michael McFaul revealed, the Obama administration was careful to ensure that the reset in government-to-government relations was not a return to "pure realpolitik" and did not "oppose advocacy of democracy and human rights issues in Russia."<sup>19</sup> America's engagement with civil society members and Russian opposition figures would result in friction between the two governments in the later years of the reset period.

Nevertheless, Russia's rhetoric grew more positive towards the US due to two reasons: the new US government's change in policy and the 2008 global financial crisis.<sup>20</sup> The immediate realisation that Russia needed Western capital and technical knowhow to help deal with the crisis, necessitated Moscow's modified stance, and marked the beginning of the 'reset' years.

### *New START Treaty*

In what was to become the centrepiece of the Obama-Medvedev reset, the US and Russia began negotiations on a new nuclear arms control treaty, later termed as the New START Treaty. This was predicated on three factors. First, the existing treaty on the nuclear limit, START I, was set to expire in December 2009. Second, the Russians considered it a priority for them because it could free up resources to spend on other areas in the context of the financial crisis. Third, for the Americans, the treaty would help secure tangible reduction in the Russian nuclear capability, which would help to offset Moscow's relative weakness in conventional forces. However, the US was in it for the long haul.

Global de-nuclearisation was close to Obama's heart and he hoped to succeed in his long-term strategy to persuade Iran to discontinue its

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19. Michael McFaul, *From Cold War to Hot Peace: An American Ambassador in Putin's Russia* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2018), p. 66.

20. Stent, n. 11, p. 190.

nuclear programme. Further, the Obama administration was committed “to strengthen nuclear security by reducing and safeguarding nuclear materials and ensuring that they did not fall into the hands of rogue states or non-state actors.”<sup>21</sup> The Nuclear Security Summit of April 2010 in Washington was directed towards this purpose and the two countries agreed to “dispose of a combined sixty-eight metric tons of weapons-grade plutonium under an agreement that would eliminate enough material to produce seventeen thousand nuclear weapons.”<sup>22</sup> Since his pledge for de-nuclearisation would comprise a shift in US nuclear strategy, it was pertinent that Russia was equally convinced about the contents of the treaty.

According to Ambassador Michael McFaul, who was also a key member of the US negotiating team, there were essentially three focus areas during the treaty negotiations: limits on deployed nuclear warheads, limits on delivery vehicles [Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs), Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missiles (SLBMs), and heavy bombers] and missile defence. The Russians were most interested in securing limits on missile defence deployments, but the Americans would not budge on this even at the cost of exiting the treaty negotiations.<sup>23</sup>

The Russians feared that US missile defence deployment would improve in the coming years, while they themselves had not caught up with US systems. Putin threatened that “any plans for US missile defense systems would result in Russia not signing the New START agreement.”<sup>24</sup> However, Russia soon realised that the US’ missile defence capabilities were not going to expand enough over the duration of the New START Treaty to undermine

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21. Ibid., p. 192.

22. Peter Stockton, “U.S. Nuclear Weapons Complex: How the Country Can Profit and Become More Secure by Getting Rid of Its Surplus Weapons-Grade Uranium”, Pogo, September 14, 2010; <https://www.pogo.org/report/2010/09/us-nuclear-weapons-complex-how-country-can-profit-and-become-more-secure-by-getting-rid-of-its-surplus-weapons-grade-uranium/>. Accessed on October 8, 2019.

23. McFaul, n. 19, p. 103.

24. Patrick Goodenough, “Putin Impedes Obama’s Plan for ‘World Without Nuclear Weapons’”, CNS News, December 30, 2009; <https://www.cnsnews.com/news/article/putin-impedes-obama-s-plan-world-without-nuclear-weapons>. Accessed on October 8, 2019.

**For the US, the biggest threat came from Iran's ballistic missile programme. Since the Russian radar systems were positioned in locations close to Iran, it would be in the US interest to obtain early warning information about an Iranian attack on Europe.**

mutual assured destruction.<sup>25</sup> Although the Russians warned that future US deployments could undermine the treaty, the US argued that there was no relationship between the two.

In the final treaty limits, the New START provides the parties with seven years to reduce their forces, and is to remain in force for a total of 10 years. It limits each side to no more than 800 deployed and non-deployed land-based ICBM and SLBM launchers and deployed and non-deployed heavy bombers equipped to carry nuclear armaments. Within that total, each side can retain no more than 700 deployed\* ICBMs, deployed SLBMs, and

deployed heavy bombers equipped to carry nuclear armaments. The treaty also limits each side to "no more than 1,550 deployed warheads; those are the actual number of warheads on deployed ICBMs and SLBMs, and one warhead for each deployed heavy bomber."<sup>26</sup>

In strategic terms, both the US and Russia generally agreed that the New START Treaty succeeded in limiting the build-up and deployment of nuclear capabilities. For the Russians, their failure to link the New START to missile defence was underplayed and, instead, the focus was on its economic advantages. Although it reduced its strategic nuclear arsenal, it still allowed Russia to maintain a "significant nuclear posture".<sup>27</sup> For the Americans, the treaty helped to reinforce the idea of its conventional military superiority, courtesy the Russian reluctance to negotiate further reduction in deployed strategic warhead and delivery vehicles. However,

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25. McFaul, n. 19, p. 103.

26. "The New START Treaty: Central Limits and Key Provisions", Congressional Research Service, May 30, 2019; <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R41219.pdf>. Accessed on October 8, 2019.

27. Stent, n. 11, p. 192.

\* A deployed ICBM or SLBM is one that is contained in a deployed launcher. Non-deployed launchers are, therefore, those that are used for testing or training, those that are located at space launch facilities, or those that are located at deployment areas or on submarines but do not contain a deployed ICBM or SLBM.

the US could not seek restrictions on tactical nuclear weapons, where the Russians have a numerical superiority but which, from their point of view, “can offset the strategic weapons deficit”.<sup>28</sup>

### *Missile Defence*

The subject of missile defence came to the fore again with the idea of a unified European security architecture, having both NATO and Russian cooperative mechanisms. The limited objective was to assure defence from a missile attack launched from outside the continent, presumably from Iran. Russia’s suggestion was to have a “sectoral” plan, whereby the US and NATO would protect a “Western” European sector and Russia would shield the “Eastern” European sector. The Americans shot down the idea.<sup>29</sup>

For the US, the biggest threat came from Iran’s ballistic missile programme. Since the Russian radar systems were positioned in locations close to Iran, it would be in the US interest to obtain early warning information about an Iranian attack on Europe.<sup>30</sup> In the NATO summit in Lisbon in 2010, the two countries agreed to “cooperate on missile defense against shared threats”. To this end, it was agreed that NATO and the Russia Council would resume theatre ballistic missile defence and “... to identify opportunities for Russia to cooperate with NATO’s new territorial missile defence capability by 2011.”<sup>31</sup>

**The key factor for the inconclusiveness regarding the NATO-Russia joint missile defence plan was Moscow’s insistence on legally-binding guarantees from Washington. Since the US could not obtain congressional approval for the same, Russia decided that the negotiations were heading towards an impasse.**

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28. Ibid., p. 193.

29. McFaul, n. 19, p. 127.

30. Dean A. Wilkening, “Cooperating With Russia on Missile Defense: A New Proposal”, *Arms Control Today*; <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2012-03/cooperating-russia-missile-defense-new-proposal>. Accessed on October 9, 2019.

31. “Fact Sheet: President Obama’s Participation in the Nato Summit Meetings in Lisbon”, Obama White House Archives, November 20, 2010; <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2010/11/20/fact-sheet-president-obamas-participation-nato-summit-meetings-lisbon>. Accessed on October 9, 2019.

However, the plan for missile defence cooperation with Russia would impact the US' ties with its Central European allies. When the Bush administration had mooted the idea of a missile defence shield in Eastern Europe, Russia regarded it as a threat to its own strategic deterrence and considered that Washington's primary motivation was "to neutralize Russia's nuclear deterrent".<sup>32</sup> During their Moscow meeting, Obama had promised Medvedev that he would review these plans. This had alarmed the Central European countries, which already felt that Washington did little to counter Russia on its Georgian incursion.

The Obama administration went ahead with a modified programme, termed as the "phased, adaptive approach", and it reinforced the idea amongst the Central European countries that the US-Russian reset had superseded regional security. Around the same time, the Czech Republic and Poland expressed disappointment with Washington's decision to abandon its plans to deploy radars in Prague and interceptors in Warsaw against Russian offensive capabilities. Despite Russia's overall support for this move, the Obama administration's phased adaptive approach allowed for "stationing more advanced interceptor missiles in Poland as early as 2018 should Iran's missile capabilities continue to improve."<sup>33</sup>

While Russia once again sensed a threat to its nuclear deterrent, the key factor for the inconclusiveness regarding the NATO-Russia joint missile defence plan was Moscow's insistence on legally-binding guarantees from Washington. Since the US could not obtain congressional approval for the same, Russia decided that the negotiations were heading towards an impasse. The failed outcome of the joint missile defence plan not only showed cracks in the 'reset' policy but also on the long-standing issue of US engagement with post-Soviet states regarding missile defence deployments.

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32. Stent, n.11, p. 193.

33. Richard Weitz, "Illusive Visions and Practical Realities: Russia, NATO and Missile Defence", *Survival: Global Politics & Strategy*, 52:4, pp. 99-120, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00396338.2010.506824>



### *Iran Sanctions*

With Iran, the US realised the vital role that Russia could play in either aiding or sabotaging Washington's plan to stall Tehran's nuclear programme. With the signing of the New START Treaty, both countries knew that nuclear non-proliferation was a central concern. However, unlike in the case of the treaty negotiations, it was always going to be a tough proposition to convince Russia to support sanctions against one of its closest allies in the Middle East. The US had to up the ante and devise pressure tactics to bring the Iranians to the negotiating table.

On the sidelines of the UN General Assembly meeting in September 2009, Obama informed Medvedev about Iran's construction of a second nuclear enrichment facility near Qom; this information had been kept secret from the Russians. Although Medvedev was not convinced that sanctions would achieve the desired purpose, he was nevertheless livid with the Iranians for deceiving the Kremlin, and voiced his support for the sanctions.<sup>34</sup> During the Prague meeting in April 2010 for the signing of the New START Treaty, Obama and Medvedev extensively discussed about the nature of the sanctions. But the Russian president distinguished between the treaty and sanctions negotiations, arguing that, for Russia, the latter would result in the loss of billions of dollars in trade with Iran, while the US had virtually nothing to lose.

In this context, the US promised to lift sanctions on Rosoboronexport and three other Russian entities, re-submit the 123 Agreement to the US Congress and push for Russia's accession into the World Trade Organisation (WTO). With Russia on board, UN Security Council Resolution (UNSC) 1929 was implemented which imposed military and cargo sanctions, and called on states to "suspend trade and financial activities with Iran, and placed forty companies and organizations under a travel ban and asset freeze."<sup>35</sup>

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34. "Medvedev Signals Openness to Iran Sanctions After Talks", CNN Politics; <https://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/09/23/us.russia.iran/index.html?iref=nextin>. Accessed on October 10, 2019.

35. "Security Council Imposes Additional Sanctions on Iran, Voting 12 in Favour to 2 Against, with 1 Abstention", United Nations, June 9, 2010; <https://www.un.org/press/en/2010/sc9948.doc.htm>. Accessed on October 10, 2019.

To America's surprise, Medvedev added that Russia had decided unilaterally to cancel the S-300 missile defence contract with Iran over its nuclear programme, which also contradicted Putin's stance on the issue. As Medvedev projected a more independent hand in dealing with foreign policy matters, it bode well for the US-Russia reset. Post the Iran-sanctions, the US accelerated and completed negotiations on Russia's WTO accession and the other guarantees.

However, what turned out to be an issue of cooperation quickly turned into disagreement when Obama signed "legislation authorizing new unilateral sanctions by the US targeting Iranian individuals and companies."<sup>36</sup> The Russians expressed displeasure over the additional sanctions. When the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) released a report in 2011 claiming that Iran was working on a new facility in which it was designing an atomic bomb, Russia concluded that the sanctions would be "counter-productive and questioned the lack of evidence supporting that claim."<sup>37</sup> For Russia, the strategic partnership with Iran was too important to be dictated by the reset. Iran controlled key access points in the Strait of Hormuz, which were critical for Russian ships and waterways.

### *Afghanistan*

In the context of the US-Russia reset, the issue of Afghanistan was less complicated than Iran. The US wanted to identify an alternative route for military supplies to Afghanistan so as to reduce its reliance on Pakistan. Despite the threat to their "sphere of privileged interests", the Russians offered to open the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) to the US-led NATO troops.

At the 2009 Moscow Summit, Obama and Medvedev signed an agreement for the transportation of lethal and non-lethal goods. It was in Russia's

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36. "Obama Says New U.S. Sanctions Show International Resolve in Iran Issue", CNN Politics, July 1, 2010; <https://edition.cnn.com/2010/POLITICS/07/01/obama.iran.sanctions/index.html>. Accessed on October 10, 2019.

37. Steve Gutterman, "Russia Opposes New Iran Sanctions Over IAEA Report", Reuters, November 9, 2011; <https://www.reuters.com/assets/print?aid=USTRE7A857620111109>. Accessed on October 10, 2019.

interests that the US and NATO troops helped to stabilise the situation in Afghanistan and towards that end, Moscow enthusiastically embraced and facilitated the establishment of the rail line that constitutes the NDN north from Latvia down to the Uzbek-Afghan border, and overflights of lethal materials.

By the end of 2012, more than “70,000 containers of supplies had crossed over Russian territory.”<sup>38</sup> Despite the goodwill of the Russians to offer their air space for the Afghanistan operation, there were delays in the implementation of the agreement, courtesy “foot-dragging by the Russian bureaucracy”.<sup>39</sup> Despite the early signs of cooperation, Russia was simultaneously “dissuading Kyrgyzstan to deny the US military further access to the air base in Manas”, which for more than seven years had been a key transit hub for US military personnel and equipment into Afghanistan.<sup>40</sup> Being members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), Russia was sceptical of the US using the Kyrgyz base to exercise influence in what it considered its traditional sphere of influence. This once again highlighted the dilemma in Russia’s decision to allow the US presence in its Central Asian sphere of influence.

However, on countering the heroin trade and fighting terror, US-Russia cooperation was more forthcoming. The increase in drug use and illicit trafficking had affected Russia, and the two countries shared counter-terror intelligence information. In order to aid counter-terror efforts in Afghanistan, the US purchased 21 Mi-17 helicopters from Rosoboronexport.<sup>41</sup> In return for much needed investment in the Ulyanovsk region, Russia agreed to the establishment of a NATO military transit and logistics hub “to transport military cargo, non-military and non-lethal goods, transit flights for NATO

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38. Stent, n. 11, p. 197.

39. Samuel Charap, “Assessing the ‘Reset’ and the Next Steps for U.S. Russia Policy”, Centre for American Progress, April 2010; [https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2010/04/pdf/russia\\_report.pdf](https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/issues/2010/04/pdf/russia_report.pdf). Accessed on October 11, 2019.

40. Luke Harding, “Kyrgyzstan to Close Key US Military Airbase”, *The Guardian*, February 4, 2009; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/feb/04/kyrgyzstan-us-base-afghanistan>. Accessed on October 7, 2019.

41. “US Helicopter Contract ‘In Place’ Says Russian Arms Firm”, Sputnik News, March 12, 2012; <https://sputniknews.com/world/20121203177886242/>. Accessed on October 11, 2019.

**The reset period gave birth to promising initiatives. The signing of the New START Treaty, 123 Agreement on nuclear cooperation, cooperation on Iran, Afghanistan and Kyrgyz crisis, Russia's WTO accession, and the UNSC Resolution against Libya were mutually achieved due to the overriding sentiment in both administrations for deeper US-Russia cooperation.**

personnel, and other goods for onward rail shipment to Riga and Tallinn."<sup>42</sup>

Owing to the political standoff with Pakistan, US military logisticians had to shift up to 60 per cent of the supplies to northern routes via Russia, with the rest of the cargo having been delivered by air. Although it was more expensive than the Pakistani route and had the possibility of over-dependence on Moscow, the geography of the region necessitated US cooperation with Russia. Additionally, there were "no Taliban fighters registered north of the Afghan border", making it a far less risky route.<sup>43</sup> As a medium-term strategy, the US goal was also to withdraw troops from Afghanistan. Even here, the

Americans had to be dependent on Russia for the northern route.<sup>44</sup>

## CHALLENGES TO THE RESET

Despite the enduring disagreements on missile defence and US engagement with the former Soviet states, the reset period gave birth to promising initiatives. The signing of the New START Treaty, 123 Agreement on nuclear cooperation, cooperation on Iran, Afghanistan and Kyrgyz crisis, Russia's WTO accession, and the UNSC Resolution against Libya were mutually achieved due to the overriding sentiment in both administrations

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42. Heidi Reisinger, "A NATO Transit Hub in Ulyanovsk—What's Behind the Russian Debate", NDC Research Division; [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/141071/02Apr12\\_ReisingerRepNATOtransitUlyanovsk.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/141071/02Apr12_ReisingerRepNATOtransitUlyanovsk.pdf). Accessed on October 11, 2019.

43. "Logistical Nightmare: Russia Leads NATO Out of Afghan Trap", *Russia Today*, July 6, 2012; <https://www.rt.com/news/nato-transit-afghanistan-russia-565/>. Accessed on October 11, 2019.

44. Rathnam Indurthy, "The Obama Administration's Strategy in Afghanistan", *International Journal on World Peace*, 28:3, pp. 7-52; [https://www.jstor.org/stable/23266718?seq=1#page\\_scan\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/23266718?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents)

for deeper US-Russia cooperation. Both Obama and Medvedev succeeded in personalising ties, which proved to be an enabling factor during the reset years. However, the success of the reset ended there. Given the lack of a strong economic foundation and historical irritants in the relationship, the US-Russia reset was bound to confront challenges, leading to its eventual demise. These challenges offer a glimpse into why the inherent potential of the US-Russia relationship is still clouded by the Cold War narrative and mutual distrust of each other's motivations.

**For Russia, the Arab Spring spelled doom for its own domestic stability. The colour revolutions in the preceding decade in Ukraine and Georgia had alerted the Kremlin about the potential downside of popular uprisings.**

#### *Arrest of Russian Spies, June 2010*

The first instance of a potential rupture in US-Russia relations concerned the arrest of 11 Russian sleeper agents who had been living in America with fake identities and false passports.<sup>45</sup> Although they were not Russian intelligence officers nor working in the Russian Embassy, these individuals were attempting to infiltrate into US Silicon Valley companies and government think-tanks. Despite the low-key nature of the espionage network, the episode threatened to derail the reset as the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) officials pressed for the expulsion of Russian diplomats.

For the Obama administration, the spy scandal was an embarrassment at a time when the groundwork was being laid for Medvedev's visit in June 2010. Eventually, the arrests were held off until the Obama-Medvedev meeting concluded. It was decided that there would be a spy exchange, which happened to be the largest in the history of US-Russia relations. In that same year, another scandal broke out in the form of the leaked classified US

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45. Jerry Markon and Philip Rucker, "The Suspects in a Russian Spy Ring Lived All-American Lives", *The Washington Post*, June 30, 2010; <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/06/29/AR2010062905401.html>. Accessed on October 12, 2019.

cables by Wikileaks.<sup>46</sup> The cables revealed damning allegations of corruption and Russia's embrace of autocracy, as interpreted by the US Embassy in Moscow and other US government agencies. However, in keeping with the spirit of the reset, both governments tended to play down the fallout from both incidents and focussed on the initiatives lined up for the upcoming years. It showed the limits of the US-Russia reset, which so far had reflected a selective partnership, based on mutual recognition of interests. In so far as mutual suspicion of each other was concerned, both the US and Russian governments behaved like Cold War adversaries.

### *Arab Spring, December 2010*

The Arab Spring had caught both the administrations by surprise in the context of their increased cooperation on security issues like Iran, Afghanistan and Kyrgyzstan. Beginning in Tunisia, the Arab Spring represented a spontaneous uprising of pro-democracy supporters fighting for basic rights under authoritarian regimes in West Asia. Consequently, the Arab Spring had different connotations in the White House and the Kremlin. Despite US backing for dictators and regimes in the region, the Obama administration viewed it as an opportunity to engage with democracy-minded opposition groups in these countries and to ramp up collective security through the responsibility-to-protect doctrine with its allies. In this respect, the Arab Spring offered conditions for US primacy for humanitarian intervention.

For Russia, the Arab Spring spelled doom for its own domestic stability. The colour revolutions in the preceding decade in Ukraine and Georgia had alerted the Kremlin about the potential downside of popular uprisings. Moreover, Russia sought to emphasize the "primacy of absolute sovereignty and noninterference in the affairs of other states."<sup>47</sup> Additionally, the presence of Islamist parties among the dissident Arab Spring outfits posed "a threat to

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46. Simon Shuster, "WikiLeaks' Russian Cables: Bad for the Reset, Good for Putin?", *Time*, December 2, 2010, <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2034670,00.html>. Accessed on October 12, 2019.

47. Stent, n. 11, p. 209.

the Russian state's fight against insurgent ideologies taking root among its youth."<sup>48</sup> The Kremlin's fear of protests breaking out in Red Square was real.

In the case of Egypt, the initial US response was to wait for the demonstrations to mellow down. Within the Obama administration, there was divided opinion on how to react to the developments in Egypt; while most senior military officials insisted that Obama back Mubarak, the US president was leaning towards support for the civilian movement. When it seemed imminent that Hosni Mubarak's reign was threatened, it directed the Egyptian military to pressure the dictator to step down and institute an interim government. In his second Cairo speech, Obama expressed a desire to "promote democracies in the Middle East as a foreign policy objective."<sup>49</sup> However, the victory of the Islamist party leader Mohammad Morsi and the subsequent takeover by the military in 2013 unsettled US strategy. Putin criticised the US withdrawal of support for Mubarak, which paved the way for "the rise of Islamist parties like the Muslim Brotherhood."<sup>50</sup>

The US response in Libya would involve "humanitarian intervention, but without sending US troops, absence of regime change and nation building, etc."<sup>51</sup> Specifically, the US operation comprised air strikes, along with allies, to stop the killing of innocents by the Libyan Army. Further, the Obama administration sought to obtain the UN Security Council's approval for which Russia's vote or even abstention was crucial. This was a daunting task since Russia had consistently blocked UN approval of American-led interventions in the past.<sup>52</sup> In addition, Russia was always reluctant to back punitive action

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48. "Russia's Young Muslims Especially Devout", *The Moscow Times*, August 9, 2012; <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/08/09/russias-young-muslims-especially-devout-a16905>. Accessed on October 12, 2019.

49. "Remarks of President Barack Obama—As Prepared for Delivery—A Moment of Opportunity", Obama White House Archives, May 9, 2011; <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-barack-obama-prepared-delivery-moment-opportunity>. Accessed on October 12, 2019.

50. McFaul, n. 19, p. 149.

51. "Remarks by the President on Libya", Obama White House Archives, March 19, 2011; <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/19/remarks-president-libya>. Accessed on October 12, 2019.

52. McFaul, n. 19, p. 147.

in a region where it continues to sustain, albeit limited, post-Soviet political and economic influence. However, similar to his sudden decision to support sanctions against Iran, Medvedev agreed to support the first resolution on Libya, UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1970, that called for an arms embargo but did not authorise force. But the larger US strategy was to enforce a no-fly zone over Libya with an objective to push back the Libyan Army through military force. Despite reports of disagreements with Putin over Russia's role in Libya, Medvedev decided to not veto UNSCR 1973, thereby paving the way for UN-sanctioned military intervention. This marked the first instance when the United Nations Security Council authorised the "use of force within a sovereign country for the purpose of preventing genocide."<sup>53</sup>

However, the subsequent US-led air campaign in Libya failed to remove any doubts over the differences emerging between Putin and Medvedev. For Medvedev, the Libya resolution was a means of advancing the US-Russia reset and finding ways to cooperate on issues of peripheral importance. For Putin, Medvedev's decision to abstain on the UNSC vote was a sign of American influence over the Russian president. In short, Putin's criticism of Medvedev's foreign policy decision effectively undermined the authority of the tandem and, as a result, dealt the first blow to the US-Russia reset.

If the cases of Egypt and Libya underscored the tensions between the two former Cold War rivals, the outbreak of a civil war in Syria in March 2011 effectively ruptured the basis of the reset, given the opposing stands of both countries. A staunch supporter of Bashar al-Assad's Syria, Russia has important strategic and economic stakes going back over decades. To help Assad stay in power for what remains Russia's only formal ally in West Asia, Moscow stepped up "arms sales and missile defense systems worth nearly \$1 bn through Rosoboronexport."<sup>54</sup> Therefore, the Russians would

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53. "Security Council Approves 'No-Fly Zone' over Libya, Authorizing 'All Necessary Measures' to Protect Civilians, by Vote of 10 in Favour with 5 Abstentions", United Nations, March 17, 2011; <https://www.un.org/press/en/2011/sc10200.doc.htm>. Accessed on October 12, 2019.

54. Thomas Grove and Erika Solomon, "Russia Boosts Arms Sales to Syria Despite World Pressure", Reuters, February 21, 2012; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-russia-arms/russia-boosts-arms-sales-to-syria-despite-world-pressure-idUSTRE81K13420120221>. Accessed on October 12, 2019.



never support measures against Assad whom they favour to a much greater degree than they did Qaddafi. The fallout from the Libyan intervention had convinced Putin that the UN Resolution was only a pretext for resumption of Western military influence in the region.

The West, led by the United States, sought to oust Assad and remove the stockpile of chemical weapons from Syria. However, Russia vetoed a UNSC Resolution that called for Assad to step down and even “helped Syria evade financial sanctions through its banks.”<sup>55</sup> The United States and other Western countries, along with their Arab allies, continued to pressure Russia to agree to a UN sanctioned intervention against Assad’s use of chemical weapons against his own citizens. John Kerry, during his 2013 visit to Moscow, showed evidence that “chemical weapons had been used in Syria and warned that Assad could avoid a US military strike by surrendering the entire stockpile.”<sup>56</sup> Eventually, the US and Russia agreed to forge a deal to eliminate more than “1300 metric tons of Syrian chemical weapons in 2013.”<sup>57</sup> However, both sides continue to disagree on the nature of investigations with Russia blocking efforts by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) to this day.

### ***Russian Presidential Elections and the Return of Putin, Fall 2011–March 2012***

The power shift in the Kremlin would prove another challenge to the continuity of the reset. Despite claims that Putin closely monitored every decision taken by Medvedev and voiced either his assent or dissent, it was clear that the two had strong differences of opinion since the Western

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55. Margaret Coker and Jennifer Valentino-DeVries, “Syria’s Russian Connection”, *The Wall Street Journal*, August 14, 2012; <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10000872396390444130304577560810962055348>. Accessed on October 12, 2019.

56. Arshad Mohammed and Andrew Osborn, “Kerry: Syrian Surrender of Chemical Arms Could Stop U.S. Attack”, Reuters, September 9, 2013; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-kerry/kerry-syrian-surrender-of-chemical-arms-could-stop-u-s-attack-idUSBRE9880BV20130909>. Accessed on October 12, 2019.

57. Alicia Sanders-Zakre, “Russia Blocks Consensus at CWC Conference”, *Arms Control Today*, January/February 2019; <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2019-01/news/russia-blocks-consensus-cwc-conference>, Accessed on October 12, 2019.

**Putin sought to wrest control of the situation by appealing to his most important constituency—the provincial working class—who harboured a dislike for America’s policies. He alleged that foreign influences were orchestrating the mobilisation of the urban elites and opposition groups in Russia.**

intervention in Libya. For Putin, the reset failed to resolve the major points of contention between the US and Russia. But Medvedev, despite his displeasure at the US’ overreach on the Iran sanctions and Libya, emphasized that the reset enabled a mechanism where compromises could be made. However, the internal rebalancing of politics in Russia prompted Medvedev to step down at the end of his tenure in 2012.

Putin, running for his third presidential term, revealed his plans for Russia’s foreign policy in an article wherein he yearned to regain influence in the former Soviet republics

and establish “a powerful supra-national union capable of becoming a pole in the modern world” which would “change the geographical and geo-economic configuration of the entire continent.”<sup>58</sup> He believed that Russia’s core interests would never be taken seriously by the United States.

While Putin adopted a plan of action on the foreign policy front, he was faced with mounting criticism within the domestic arena. After the December 4 elections to the Duma, a protest movement gathered pace—numbering between 30,000 to 100,000—demanding “investigations into fraudulent election practices.”<sup>59</sup> Putin’s response was to allege “US interference in Russia’s domestic affairs and blame Hillary Clinton for organising the protests.”<sup>60</sup> Further, Putin sought to wrest control of the situation by appealing to his most important constituency—the provincial working class—who harboured a dislike for America’s policies. He alleged that foreign influences were orchestrating the mobilisation of the urban elites and opposition groups in Russia.

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58. Davis, n. 5, p. 39.

59. Stent, n. 11, p. 208.

60. “It’s Not in the USA, but in the Russian People”, *Kommersant*, December 12, 2011; <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1838682>. Accessed on October 13, 2019.

Putin's emphasis on Russia's role in a complex external environment, so as to alleviate his domestic problems, resonated with an audience that believed Washington used nefarious means to influence politics. He pointedly criticised the US for its "unilateralism in the Middle East through military intervention, blamed NATO expansionism as a cause of instability and chastised the United Nations for its ineptitude."<sup>61</sup> In clear signs of strain between the two countries, Putin snubbed his first meeting with Obama, before the G-8 Summit, since their respective reelections and sent Medvedev instead. Eventually, they met on the sidelines of the G-20 Summit in Mexico a few weeks later, which did not make for pleasant viewing. The reset policy was found crumbling.

**Putin ordered the annexation of Crimea in eastern Ukraine on March 14, 2014. Russian-speaking armed soldiers, who lacked any official insignia on their uniforms, seized the local Parliament and other strategic facilities. In a Russian-backed referendum, an overwhelming majority of the registered Crimean voters voted to join with Russia.**

### *Domestic Acts and Exiting Pacts, December 2012*

US-Russia relations further deteriorated in late 2012 when both Houses of Congress adopted legislation designed to punish Russian officials and businesses involved in human rights abuses. Named after Sergei Magnitsky, a lawyer who died while in Russian custody under mysterious circumstances, the Act penalised those Russian individuals who were connected to the killing by placing them on a visa ban list and freezing their bank assets. To Putin, a US domestic legislation highlighting "alleged human rights violation in Russia vindicated his claim about Washington's interference."<sup>62</sup>

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61. Vladimir Putin, "Russia and the Changing World", Foreign Policy Association, February 28, 2011; <https://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2012/02/28/russia-changing-world/>. Accessed on October 13, 2019.

62. Peter Baker, "U.S.-Russian Ties Still Fall Short of 'Reset' Goal", *The New York Times*, September 2, 2013; <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/03/world/europe/us-russian-ties-still-fall-short-of-reset-goal.html>. Accessed on October 13, 2019.

In response, the Duma passed the Dima Yakovlev Law, named after a Russian child who had died in the custody of his adoptive American parents. This legislation banned all future adoptions by Americans of Russian children. Americans had adopted “60,000 Russian children” prior to this ban.<sup>63</sup> US Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs) engaged in democracy promotion withdrew their operations in Russia after the latter imposed “strong restrictions” on their funding.<sup>64</sup> After the US backed out from a joint panel on civil society, Russia retaliated by “cancelling an agreement that provided help from the United States in fighting narcotics and human trafficking and enhancing the rule of law.”<sup>65</sup> Russia also refused to cooperate on the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction legislation, which had provided a “basis for joint US-Russian efforts to destroy the former Soviet Union’s weapons of mass destruction, related material and delivery vehicles.”<sup>66</sup> The United States’ increased criticism of the Russian government’s authoritarian turn and its clampdown on civil rights had affected US-Russia ties. However, the bigger diplomatic and strategic fallouts that would plague bilateral relations between the two countries were about to be witnessed.

### *Snowden Granted Asylum in Russia, June 2013*

Edward Snowden, a National Security Agency (NSA) contractor, had fled to Moscow to unravel the US domestic surveillance programme, with evidence of classified documents to back his claims. The Wikileaks affair had earlier embarrassed the administration but Snowden’s threats to release vital national security files to the press provoked the US officials. Upon

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63. “Dima Yakovlev Law”, *Russia Today*, December 28, 2012; <https://www.rt.com/russia/official-word/dima-yakovlev-law-full-995/>. Accessed on October 14, 2019.

64. Josh Rogin, “U.S.-Funded Democracy NGO Pulls Out of Russia”, *Foreign Policy*, December 12, 2012; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/12/12/u-s-funded-democracy-ngo-pulls-out-of-russia/>. Accessed on October 14, 2019.

65. Kathy Lally, “Russia Cancels Accord with U.S. on Fighting Drugs, Human Trafficking”, *The Washington Post*, January 30, 2013; [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-drops-us-help-in-fighting-drugs-human-trafficking/2013/01/30/f1b67228-6ae6-11e2-af53-7b2b2a7510a8\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-drops-us-help-in-fighting-drugs-human-trafficking/2013/01/30/f1b67228-6ae6-11e2-af53-7b2b2a7510a8_story.html). Accessed on October 14, 2019.

66. Daniel Horner and Tom Z. Collina, “Nunn-Lugar Program Scaled Back”, *Arms Control Today*, July 2013; <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2013-07/news/nunn-lugar-program-scaled-back>. Accessed on October 14, 2019.

revoking his passport, the US demanded that Snowden be extradited to face criminal charges. Putin, however, refused to do so citing the “lack of sufficient legal ground.”<sup>67</sup> Despite the outrage in the US over Russia’s decision, Putin hoped that “this wouldn’t affect the businesslike nature of our relations with the United States.”<sup>68</sup>

Putin’s stance on the Snowden affair was tempered by the need to find common ground on Syria for which US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov were meeting for a conference. Moreover, Putin saw it as an unwanted diplomatic affair that could drive a wedge in bilateral relations. But he knew that political asylum for Snowden was a vital bargaining chip he could employ to influence those in his country who looked to the US as a harbinger of civil rights and liberties, and to divert attention away from his policies. During the early part of his term, Putin astutely framed his international posture in order to “impact those Russian voters who were skeptical of his ascent to power.”<sup>69</sup> He partially succeeded as the protests against him waned by the end of 2013.

### *Ukraine Crisis, Sanctions and End of Reset, February 2014–end of 2014*

The situation in Ukraine became tense after President Viktor Yanukovich postponed the signing of the EU association agreement in early 2014. Putin, who nurtured a long-held desire to integrate Ukraine into the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), had played a pivotal role in Yanukovich’s electoral victory in 2010. He expected that the Ukrainian president would join Russia’s club rather than the EU. In order to sway his decision, Putin offered to “buy \$15 bn of Ukrainian government bonds and expressed his desire to cut

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67. Kathy Lally and Will Englund, “Putin: No Grounds to Extradite Snowden”, *The Washington Post*, June 25, 2013; [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-denies-that-it-could-have-handed-snowden-to-us-authorities/2013/06/25/3767d7b8-dd7d-11e2-948c-d644453cf169\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-denies-that-it-could-have-handed-snowden-to-us-authorities/2013/06/25/3767d7b8-dd7d-11e2-948c-d644453cf169_story.html). Accessed on October 14, 2019.

68. Ibid.

69. James Lamond, “The Origins of Russia’s Broad Political Assault on the United States”, Centre for American Progress, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/reports/2018/10/03/458841/origins-russias-broad-political-assault-united-states/>. Accessed on October 15, 2019.

the gas price.”<sup>70</sup> This helped to revive the economy that was heading into bankruptcy.

However, this prompted widespread protests in Kiev led by the pro-democracy activists and opposition figures who blamed Yanukovych for selling out the country to Moscow. In the ensuing protests, violence broke out between the police and the pro-EU demonstrators, leading to several deaths on both sides. The US immediately condemned the “use of police force to clamp down on the protests and called for a negotiated settlement.”<sup>71</sup> Due to mounting Western pressure, Yanukovych was left with no choice but to sign an agreement stating that the political crisis would be resolved via dialogue with all the stakeholders.

In another dramatic development, hours after signing the agreement, Yanukovych fled from Kiev citing fear for his life and sought refuge in the Russian city of Rostov. The Ukrainian Parliament immediately voted unanimously to impeach Yanukovych and an interim government was set up until the country went to polls in May 2014. The Kremlin denounced the new government, stating that it was illegitimate and stood by Yanukovych.

Then the moment that would sever diplomatic ties between the US and Russia came to pass: Putin ordered the annexation of Crimea in eastern Ukraine on March 14, 2014. Russian-speaking armed soldiers, who lacked any official insignia on their uniforms, seized the local Parliament and other strategic facilities.<sup>72</sup> In a Russian-backed referendum, an overwhelming majority of the registered Crimean voters voted to join with Russia. Putin acknowledged the results and announced that “Crimea and Sevastopol were now part of the Russian Federation.”<sup>73</sup> Russia’s next move was to seize a territory called

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70. Shaun Walker, “Vladimir Putin Offers Ukraine Financial Incentives to Stick with Russia”, *The Guardian*, December 18, 2013; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/dec/17/ukraine-russia-leaders-talks-kremlin-loan-deal>. Accessed on October 15, 2019.

71. “Remarks by President Obama before Restricted Bilateral Meeting”, Obama White House Archives, February 19, 2014; <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2014/02/19/remarks-president-obama-restricted-bilateral-meeting>. Accessed on October 15, 2019.

72. McFaul, n. 19, p. 275.

73. “Meeting in Support of Crimea’s Accession to the Russian Federation “We are together!”, President of Russia Website, March 18, 2014; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/20607>. Accessed on October 15, 2019.

Novorossiia or New Russia, which had been incorporated into Ukraine after the Bolshevik Revolution. The pro-Russian separatists captured the administrative buildings in the towns of Luhansk and Donetsk, leading to unprecedented clashes between ethnic Russian militias and the Ukrainian authorities.

The West, taken aback by the turn of events, instituted a comprehensive sanctions regime against Russian individuals and companies involved in the military campaign. Further, sponsored by the US, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution declaring “the Crimea referendum invalid, in a vote of 100 in favor to 11 against with almost 58 abstentions.”<sup>74</sup> Russia was expelled from the G-8 as the West sought to put up a united front against Russia’s adventurism. However, barring rhetorical statements from the White House, the overall Western response to Russia’s military action was weak, with the Americans and Europeans divided over what should entail an ideal reaction. The Russians issued “retaliatory travel bans on nine US lawmakers and officials”, thereby pulling the plug on the reset between the two countries.<sup>75</sup>

However, international attention for the Ukrainian conflict reached its crescendo after pro-Russian separatists shot down Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 in eastern Ukraine, killing all 298 people on board. In a Dutch investigation of the incident, it was revealed that the missile launched to down the passenger plane was of Russian origin, although Putin pinned the blame on the Ukrainian government for failing “to end hostilities in southeast Ukraine.”<sup>76</sup> In a fresh round of sanctions, while not immediately implemented, the EU called out Russia for its involvement in the crisis. Putin, buoyed by his rising domestic support post the Crimea episode, lashed out at the West for its “unjustified sanctions move, arguing that the humanitarian

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74. Louis Charbonneau and Mirjam Donath, “U.N. General Assembly Declares Crimea Secession Vote Invalid”, Reuters, March 27, 2014; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-un-idUSBREA2Q1GA20140327>. Accessed on October 15, 2019.

75. “Russia Sanctions 9 US Officials in Response to US Sanctions on Russian Officials”, CNBC, March 20, 2014; <https://www.cnbc.com/2014/03/20/obama-authorizes-new-sanctions-on-russia-over-crimea.html>. Accessed on October 15, 2019.

76. “Meeting on Economy Began with a Moment of Silence in Honour of Victims of Plane Crash over Ukrainian Territory”, President of Russia Website, July 18, 2014; <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/46243>. Accessed on October 14, 2019.

**The new Russian state, barring its nuclear and missile capabilities, is vastly inferior in military terms to the US and is a shadow of the former Soviet Union. Russia has now become a second-order priority for the US that only seeks limited engagement on issues of mutual interest like nuclear arms control.**

nature in eastern Ukraine had necessitated Russian military intervention.”<sup>77</sup> In short, this was Russia’s Libya moment, albeit without any UN oversight. The reset had well and truly ended.

#### **FAILURE OF RESET AND FUTURE PATH**

The Russian annexation of Crimea became the low point in US-Russia relations since the Russo-Georgian War of 2008. While the reset had effectively ended by the end of Medvedev’s term as president and Putin’s reelection in 2012, the two countries had not resolved the structural issues that had affected bilateral ties since the end of the Cold War. Despite the pragmatic nature of the reset policy, there were certain issues that remained contentious which were beyond the objectives of the Obama-Medvedev rapprochement. As much as the reset was possible due to conditions that allowed for cooperative engagement, long-standing issue-based factors fuelled the end of the reset. The crisis in Crimea was only the by-product of larger structural issues in the bilateral relationship.

First, the explanation for the Crimean crisis is that it was shaped by events that happened since the fall of the Soviet Union. While the Americans viewed the fall of the Soviet Union as a triumphalist moment in their foreign policy, the Russians perceived it as humiliation. Further, the Russians often complained of the US’ treatment of their concerns like being that “of a defeated rival rather than of an equal partner.”<sup>78</sup> The Russians contend that the Cold War was mutually ended rather than through a unilateral surrender by Gorbachev and that every Russian attempt at cooperation during the 1990s was seen

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77. Julian Borger, Alec Luhn and Richard Norton-Taylor, “EU Announces Further Sanctions on Russia after Downing of MH17”, *The Guardian*, July 22, 2014; <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jul/22/eu-plans-further-sanctions-russia-putin-mh17>. Accessed on October 15, 2019.

78. Stent, n. 11, p. 217.



as a sign of weakness. Compared to the US backing for the likes of Germany, UK and France, the Russians always felt that they were not offered a meaningful role in the new Euro-Atlantic security arrangement. Instead, they had to set their own interests and objectives. For the US, the “de-nuclearization of Russia’s neighbours, the beginnings of market economy, Western-style elections, increased attention to freedom of expression and securing Russia’s cooperation in the Balkans were touted as an achievement, embodied in its value-driven foreign policy, especially under the Clinton administration.”<sup>79</sup>

**Putin believed that by reaching out to Bush and facilitating the establishment of US bases in Central Asia, the United States would view Russia as “a partner, recognize its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, treat it as an equal, and give it the respect that had been lacking during the Yeltsin era.”**

Since Putin’s rise to the top in 2000, Russia’s foreign policy priorities have centred on the following themes: to carve out a ‘privileged’ sphere of influence in Eurasia and move towards an economic integration of the former Soviet states (excluding the Balkans) through the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU); to ensure that no major international decision is taken without Russia’s assent (this was seriously felt after Russia was snubbed regarding NATO’s Kosovo intervention in 1999, the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 and over the Western overreach in Libya in 2011); to prevent NATO’s eastern enlargement and EU accession for former Soviet states (the membership plans for Georgia and Ukraine irked Russia the most); to undermine US-backed democracy promotion and minimise the possibility of regime change in its neighbourhood; to seek minimum cooperation with the US for its technology and investment to aid domestic modernisation programmes. In all of the above cases, barring the last one, the Obama-Medvedev reset sought to overlook these themes and chart out a new path to US-Russia relations. However, all these themes featured prominently in one way or another, highlighting the limits of the partnership.

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79. Ibid., p. 218.

Second, the vast disparity in military power and economic influence between the two countries remains the proverbial elephant in the room. The new Russian state, barring its nuclear and missile capabilities, is vastly inferior in military terms to the US and is a shadow of the former Soviet Union. Russia has now become a second-order priority for the US that only seeks limited engagement on issues of mutual interest like nuclear arms control. For what Russia lacks vis-à-vis America, it makes up for by either oscillating between engagement and antagonism towards the US, depending on the domestic pressures for the same. Unlike in the Soviet-era foreign policy, Russia's external posturing is now heavily hinged on domestic considerations. Moreover, the two countries lack the necessary economic complementarity to foster a robust economic relationship as long as Russia remains primarily a raw materials and arms exporter. The bilateral trade stands at a paltry \$41 billion.<sup>80</sup> The absence of the rule of law, and the high-level corruption in Russia have also prevented a smooth commercial relationship.

Third, the US has tended to exaggerate its influence over Russia's domestic politics and economic trajectory. Consequently, the US has relied on democracy promotion and human rights activism, either at a governmental/congressional level or even through NGOs specialising in this field. According to those who insist on the US giving more attention to pragmatic foreign policy cooperation, the act of attempting to "influence the policies and politics of Russia is a counter-productive exercise."<sup>81</sup> Therefore, the US could limit its criticism of Russia's internal affairs and focus on issues that can result in mutual benefits. However, despite the best efforts of various US administrations, including Obama's, the US Congress has sometimes impeded such an approach by linking foreign policy issues to Russia's domestic climate. This was evident during the signing of the Magnitsky Act, which Obama was reluctant to do. There has also been the problem of a lack of a strong pro-Russian lobby in the US Congress that could help shape the narrative during such situations.

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80. Ibid.

81. Johan Kharabi, "An Interview with Prof. Stephen F Cohen: US-Russia Relations in an Age of American Triumphalism", *Journal of International Affairs*, Spring/Summer 2010, 63:2, pp. 191-205.

Finally, there is always a palpable sense of mutual distrust for each other stemming from the Cold War mindset. Even at the beginning of every reset, suspicion prevailed regarding the true intentions of each other's efforts. Most Russians recognise the unequal treatment meted out to them during the 1990s by both the Bush Sr. and Clinton administrations, including the US breaking a promise about "NATO's eastward enlargement."<sup>82</sup> Moscow also complains that the US doesn't appreciate the post 9/11 reset attempt to create a strategic partnership. Putin believed that by reaching out to Bush and facilitating the establishment of US bases in Central Asia, the United States would view Russia as "a partner, recognize its sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space, treat it as an equal, and give it the respect that had been lacking during the Yeltsin era."<sup>83</sup> On the 2009 Obama-Medvedev reset, Kremlin's take was that it was more of a "course-correction" and admission of past mistakes on the part of the US. Despite disagreements over US missile defence and regime change policies, the two leaders partially succeeded in setting aside these concerns because the US diluted its attention on the post-Soviet space, especially with respect to Georgia and Ukraine. However, Russia blamed the US for reverting to its "unilateral foreign policy actions" courtesy the Libya intervention and alleged interference in the Maidan protests in Ukraine that deposed Ukrainian President Yanukovich.

The failed reset shed light on the limits of the strategic partnership between the two Cold War adversaries. However, cooperation on nuclear arms control, Iran, Afghanistan, the Kyrgyz crisis, etc. pointed to the scope for selective engagement. With regard to the future potential of US-Russia relations, it is important to delve into the major challenges that came to the fore in the years after the Cold War, and how the reset years offered a lesson for future American strategy towards Russia.

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82. Mary Elise Sarotte, "A Broken Promise? What the West Really Told Moscow About NATO Expansion", *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2014, 93:5, pp. 90-97.

83. Stent, n. 11, p. 220.