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An Agenda for U.S.-Russian Relations in 2009

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An Agenda for U.S.-Russian Relations in 2009

Introduction

As the Bush administration came to a close, U.S.-Russian relations had fallen to their lowest point since the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. Moscow and Washington share the blame. We witnessed how thin the bilateral relationship had become last August. When the Russians acted militarily against Georgia, no evidence suggests that concern about damaging U.S.-Russian relations had any restraining influence; there was no cooperation that Washington could threaten about which the Russians much cared.

President Obama and his administration have an opportunity to turn the page and, as Vice President Biden said on February 7, "reset" the relationship. Doing so is in the U.S. interest. We want Russian help in meeting challenges such as controlling nuclear materials, pressing Iran to forgo nuclear arms, maintaining access to Afghanistan, and countering international terrorism. Building areas of cooperation advances specific U.S. goals and, the more there is to the bilateral relationship, the greater the interest it will hold for Russia, and the greater the leverage Washington will have with Moscow.
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The Obama administration should aim for a balance in its approach, making clear the unacceptability of Russian actions that violate international norms while encouraging cooperation. The administration can offer initiatives in several areas to test Moscow's readiness for improved relations and cooperation on issues of interest to Washington:

- A revived strategic nuclear arms control dialogue could lower the number of nuclear weapons while exerting a positive influence on the broader relationship. The administration should propose reducing to no more than 1000 strategic nuclear warheads on each side, with ancillary limits on missiles and bombers.

- Different timelines for Iran's expected missile development and for U.S. missile defense deployment in Central Europe offer a possibility to defuse the missile defense issue. The administration should impose a two- or three-year moratorium on construction of missile defense facilities in Central Europe.

- Expanding commercial links would add economic ballast that could cushion the overall relationship against differences on other issues. Specific steps could include bringing Russia into the World Trade Organization, moving forward with the

agreement on civil nuclear cooperation, and conferring permanent normal trade relations status on Russia and graduating it from the Jackson-Vanik Amendment.

- Greater creativity in the NATO-Russia channel could, over the longer term, reshape how Moscow views the Alliance and European security. Such creativity should include new areas for NATO-Russia cooperation, such as counter-piracy operations, and greater transparency about NATO plans. We should expect, however, that U.S. and NATO relations with Russia's neighbors will remain a difficult issue.

The Decline in U.S.-Russian Relations

The Moscow summit in May 2002 represented the high point in U.S.-Russian relations under Presidents Bush and Putin. It produced the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT), a joint declaration on a new strategic partnership, and joint statements promising broader cooperation in areas such as energy, missile defense and people-to-people exchanges. The presidents spoke of "a new era" and "qualitatively new relations."

Unfortunately, the two countries failed to realize this potential. Part of the failure can be attributed to the fact that President Bush became preoccupied with Iraq, while President Putin focused his energies on ensuring Kremlin control over key levers of domestic power and cultivating relations with Europe. The bilateral relationship with Moscow is one of the most demanding that Washington has in terms of requiring guidance from the highest level. It did not get it. Moreover, the National Security Council and its Russian counterpart failed to press their bureaucracies to implement presidential commitments. Each side became perturbed at the other's perceived lack of follow-through.

Most importantly, building a qualitatively new relationship required that the sides compromise and let the other "win" on some issues. But both appeared increasingly unready to make such compromises as an investment for better relations. For the Bush administration, Russia did not seem all that relevant to its foreign policy priorities.

Drift turned into decline in 2004, as the extent of Russia's democratic rollback became apparent. The 2003 Rose and 2004 Orange revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine triggered new anxieties in the Kremlin, which regarded those upheavals as U.S.-organized special operations to hem Russia in. Moscow's more assertive policy in the post-Soviet space raised alarm in Washington regarding Russia's intentions towards its neighbors.

Despite numerous meetings between Presidents Bush and Putin, difficult problems piled up without resolution. Russia agreed to modest sanctions on Iran but resisted more severe penalties. Moscow, Washington and the European Union failed to find a common approach to the question of recognizing Kosovo. NATO's outreach to Ukraine and Georgia provoked a Moscow push-back when the two countries sought membership action plans. Prospective U.S. missile defense deployments in Central Europe prompted a sharp Russian reaction. The fate of the Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty (START), on which the SORT Treaty depends for verification measures, became increasingly urgent, but negotiations produced no agreement. Russian unhappiness grew over NATO

members' refusal to ratify the 1999 adapted Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty to replace the original 1991 CFE Treaty, and Moscow suspended observance of the latter.

Meeting in Sochi in April 2008, the two presidents issued a "U.S.-Russia Strategic Framework Declaration." It was a curious document on which to close out seven years of Bush-Putin meetings. It summarized the range of issues on the bilateral agenda and recorded a few accomplishments. Mostly, however, the declaration presented an agenda of commitments to reach future agreement and unfulfilled ambitions. It did not describe anything like the relationship that the presidents had projected in 2002. The relationship worsened further in the aftermath of the August Russia-Georgia conflict.

What Does Russia Want?

Following the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, the Russians had to cope with the loss of empire, an economic bust worse than the Great Depression, and a political system that, while incorporating democratic practices, often appeared chaotic and corrupt. After 1999, however, Russia experienced a remarkable economic resurgence. By 2008, gross domestic product topped $1.3 trillion, four times the level in 1998. Living standards rose accordingly, which led to stunning Putin public approval numbers.

As Russia acquired greater economic wherewithal, Moscow's foreign policy adopted an increasingly assertive tone and made clear that restoring Russia's "great power" status topped its agenda. Russian policy was also shaped by a perception that the West had taken advantage of Russian weakness in the 1990s. The evidence does not support this, but the perception has taken hold among the Russian elite and public.

Although Moscow does not appear to have a fully coherent vision of its place in the global order, some of its specific desires are apparent.

Russia wants to develop its own political and economic model, free of criticism from the West. In the early Putin years, Kremlin pundits spoke of "managed democracy." They later talked of "sovereign democracy." Its key feature appears to be that it is solely up to Russia's leaders to decide the country's form of government.

Russia wants the role and the influence of the United States reduced. President Medvedev said last August that "the world should be multi-polar. … We cannot accept a world order in which one country makes all the decisions, even as serious and influential a country as the United States of America. Such a world is unstable …" The Russians calculate that a reduction in U.S. influence will benefit their power position.

Russia wants a sphere of influence – or "privileged interests" – in the post-Soviet space. As Russia regained its strength, it escalated its expectations regarding its neighbors' behavior. Moscow does not seek to recreate the USSR but wants deference from states in the post-Soviet space to its vital interests. Russia's stance appears most pointed with regard to how it views NATO's relations with Ukraine and Georgia.

Russia wants a seat and to have its views accommodated when major European or global issues are being decided. Russia insists on a seat almost regardless of whether or not it can bring something to the table to facilitate resolution of the problem. Simply being there appears important to Moscow, part of Russia's due as a recovered "great power."

Russia does not seek isolation but wants better relations with Europe and the United States on its terms. The Russians would like better relations with the West, but they insist that Russia's interests and concerns be addressed.

One of Washington's mistakes at the turn of the century was to misunderstand Russian weakness. It is important now, however, not to overestimate Russia's strength. The country faces major vulnerabilities, including a fragile economy that is overly dependent on energy revenues; infrastructure that is in abysmal shape; a frightening demographic decline; and lingering separatist tensions in the northern Caucasus.

These are serious problems, and it is not clear that Russia's leadership has the agility and creativity to cope successfully with them. The most critical test now is dealing with the ramifications of the global financial and economic crisis, which is having an ever greater impact on the Russian economy. Over the past five months, Russia has expended more than $200 billion of its foreign reserves. After nearly eight years of high economic growth, Russia faces a recession in 2009. The leadership is concerned not only about the economy, but also about the public reaction and possibility of social unrest.

How this economic test and other challenges will shape Russian foreign policy remains to be seen. One possibility is that they will feed the leadership's need for an "enemy image" of the United States in order to rally the populace and distract it from domestic economic difficulties. Alternatively, these challenges could prompt the leadership to conclude that a more cooperative international context, including improved U.S.-Russian relations, would allow it to focus on tackling its internal troubles.

An Agenda for Engaging Russia in 2009

The Obama administration has an interest in exploring whether U.S.-Russian relations can be put on a more solid footing. Securing Russian help on issues such as controlling nuclear materials, pressing Iran to forgo nuclear arms, maintaining access to Afghanistan, and countering international terrorism is in the U.S. interest.

Building areas of cooperation not only can advance specific U.S. goals, it can reduce frictions on other issues. A more positive U.S.-Russian relationship and more robust NATO-Russia relationship would put Russian concerns about NATO relations with Ukraine and Georgia in a different context.

Further, the more there is to the bilateral relationship, the greater the interest it will hold for Russia, and the greater the leverage Washington will have with Moscow. Washington should aim to build a relationship so that, in any future crisis similar to that between

Russia and Georgia last August, concern about damaging relations with the United States would exercise a restraining influence on Moscow's policy choice.

As the United States copes with complex problems that increasingly demand multilateral responses, it should test Russia's readiness to be a partner. Ultimately, it makes sense to have Russia in institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, as that will encourage Moscow to play by rules that have served the United States well.

Likewise, as Washington works with others to craft multilateral approaches and perhaps new institutions to deal with problems such as international terrorism, climate change and the global financial crisis, it should be inclusive. Having Russia at the table in a cooperative frame of mind is vastly preferable to a truculent Russia that seeks to undermine U.S.-preferred institutions and initiatives or create alternatives.

Overall, the administration should seek a balance in its Russia policy, making clear the unacceptability of actions that violate international norms while encouraging a broader, more positive relationship. For example, Washington should continue to support Georgia, maintain a policy of non-recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and call on Russia to fully implement the terms of the ceasefire agreement with Georgia. At the same time, Washington should look for ways to improve relations with Russia that would benefit the United States. The administration should offer initiatives to test Moscow's willingness to put relations on a more even keel.

A Return to Nuclear Arms Control

President Obama should revive the bilateral nuclear arms reductions process. Doing so will have a positive impact on the broader relationship. Moscow values an ongoing nuclear arms dialogue with Washington, if for no other reason than it acknowledges Russia's place as a nuclear superpower. The president should take advantage of this.

President Reagan and Secretary of State Shultz made arms control a central element of a broader U.S.-Soviet agenda in the 1980s, recognizing that Moscow's interest in arms control created diplomatic space to pursue other issues, including human rights. Their strategy worked. As President Reagan and General Secretary Gorbachev signed the treaty banning U.S. and Russian medium-range missiles and narrowed differences over strategic weapons, parallel discussions made progress on human rights issues, including winning exit permission for Soviet dissidents, and secured more helpful Soviet approaches to problems such as Angola and the Middle East peace process.

Presidents George H. W. Bush and Clinton likewise gave arms control special attention. Arms control progress contributed to a positive relationship, with significant pay-offs for other U.S. foreign policy goals: Russia went along with German reunification; lent diplomatic support during the 1990-91 Gulf crisis; cooperated with the United States and NATO in ending the Bosnia conflict; and acquiesced in NATO enlargement.

By contrast, the Bush administration saw little value to arms control after it withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty and signed the SORT Treaty in 2002, preferring flexibility with regard to U.S. force structure to limitation and predictability. That came at a price: a weaker relationship and decreased leverage on other issues with Russia.

Beyond giving a positive impulse to the bilateral relationship, arms control is in the U.S. interest. SORT allows each side to deploy 2200 strategic warheads. Such levels make no sense today. U.S. security would be enhanced by reducing the number of nuclear weapons capable of reaching America. Moreover, given its imposing conventional force capabilities, the United States has every incentive to deemphasize nuclear weapons.

The administration thus should propose to the Russians negotiating a legally-binding treaty under which each side would reduce and limit the number of its strategic warheads to no more than 1000. Other elements of the treaty should include limits on the numbers of strategic missiles and bombers, at levels well below those in START; provisions for a small but limited number of spare warheads beyond the 1000, under stringent monitoring requirements; and provisions for "down-loading" missile-carrying submarines, with appropriate monitoring, so that some missile tubes could be filled with concrete ballast or other obstruction to reduce the number of missiles that a submarine can carry.

Such a package would interest the Russians. The principal challenge would be designing monitoring rules that would give each side confidence that warheads had been reduced and eliminated.

The administration could frame this as a first step. It should also seek Senate ratification of the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. Subsequent steps should include conclusion of fissile material cut-off treaty, talks on the possibility for greater transparency regarding and reductions in U.S. and Russian tactical nuclear weapons, and further reductions in strategic forces in the context of a multilateral negotiation that would bring in the other nations that possess strategic nuclear arms.

An early renewed U.S. effort to cut strategic nuclear arsenals would restore American credibility and leadership in the nuclear non-proliferation area, particularly as the Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference approaches in May 2010.

One nuclear arms control question must be dealt with as a matter of urgency. SORT depends entirely on START for its monitoring and verification regime, but START by its terms expires in December 2009. The administration should propose quick negotiation of an extension of START for one to two years, to allow time for completion of a new strategic nuclear arms reductions accord.

U.S.-Russian Relations, Iran's Nuclear Program and Missile Defense

One goal of Obama administration policy with Russia will understandably be to secure greater assistance in persuading Iran to forgo a nuclear enrichment program that could produce weapon-grade material. The Russians have been somewhat helpful in the P5-

plus-1 process (the United States, Russia, China, Britain, France plus Germany), but have resisted UN Security Council sanctions that would have real bite and have continued negotiations on conventional arms sales to Iran.

In parallel with more forthcoming approaches on nuclear arms control and missile defense (as described below), the administration should seek a more robust Russian approach on Iran. The U.S. government needs to participate directly in the negotiating process with Iran and make clear the steps it would be prepared to take in moving toward more normal U.S.-Iranian relations if Iran makes the right choice; Russia needs to do its part by beefing up the costs to Tehran of continuing its nuclear program, including by forgoing the sale to Iran of advanced S-300 anti-aircraft missile systems. The goal should be to make the choice before the Iranian leadership as stark as possible.

That said, Moscow has a variety of interests in Iran that it will not want to abandon. Iran is Russia's gateway to the Persian Gulf; the geopolitics and economic links will make Moscow reluctant to sacrifice that. Moreover, although Russia does not want a nuclear-armed Iran, the prospect does not present the nightmare scenario for Moscow that it does for Washington. For Russia it would be something akin to Pakistan's 1998 nuclear tests – a bad thing, but a problem that could be managed. American diplomacy should seek to persuade Russia to be more helpful on Iran, including by stressing to the Russians the danger that Iranian acquisition of a nuclear weapon will prompt other countries in the Middle East to seek their own nuclear capability. But Washington should be realistic in its expectations; Moscow probably will not go as far as Washington would like.

U.S. plans to deploy a ballistic missile radar in the Czech Republic and ten silo-based interceptor missiles in Poland to counter an Iranian long-range missile have become one of the most contentious issues on the U.S.-Russian agenda. The Russians strongly object and in response have threatened to deploy tactical missiles on Poland's border as well as target nuclear weapons against both Poland and the Czech Republic.

Moscow asserts that Iran remains years away from having a ballistic missile that could reach all of Europe, let alone the United States, and attributes the U.S. system to other motives, including use against Russian missiles. Whether or not the U.S. interceptors could have any meaningful capability against Russian strategic missiles, the prospect of U.S. military infrastructure on the territory of new NATO members and closer to Russian borders clearly upsets Moscow.

Differing timelines for the U.S. missile defense system and the development of a long-range Iranian missile offer the administration an opportunity to find a way forward. The Bush administration aimed to complete and make the sites in Poland and the Czech Republic operational in 2012. Most projections suggest that the Iranians will need more time to develop a long-range missile.

The administration should adopt a two- or three-year moratorium on construction of the missile defense sites. Procurement of long-term lead items and interceptor tests would

not be affected, but the moratorium would mean no construction at the sites in Poland or the Czech Republic.

Washington should inform the Russian government that, if credible information were to emerge that the Iranian missile program or Iranian nuclear program had been abandoned or otherwise slowed, the moratorium could be extended. (It is the combination of a long-range ballistic missile and a nuclear warhead that poses the main threat.) This would give Moscow an incentive to press the Iranians on their missile and nuclear programs.

The odds that Moscow would lean hard on Tehran, or that the Iranians would take heed were the Russians to do so, might be low. But the moratorium would defuse missile defense as a problem issue on the U.S.-Russia agenda. And, if the Iranians in the end went forward and developed a long-range missile, the moratorium would not prevent the United States from having a timely response.

Ideally, the missile defense question could be moved into a cooperative NATO-Russia context. Alternatively, given the relationship between strategic offensive forces and strategic missile defense, the Russians could seek to address missile defense in the context of renewed negotiations on strategic arms reductions (it would be preferable, however, not to burden the strategic arms negotiations with missile defense; the United States and Russia would maintain strong, viable nuclear deterrents with 1000 strategic warheads). The moratorium approach, in any case, would not preclude moving missile defense into either the NATO-Russia or strategic nuclear arms context at some point.

Broadening Commercial Relations

The Obama administration should seek to broaden commercial links with Russia. This would benefit U.S. companies by increasing access to a $1.3 trillion economy. It would also add economic ballast that could cushion the overall relationship against the unpredictable swings caused by political differences.

Anemic U.S.-Russian commercial relations fall well below their potential. In 2007, two-way trade totaled $27 billion. Russia represented the thirtieth largest market for U.S. exports. This level creates little incentive for Moscow or Washington to adopt more measured stances when political differences arise. By contrast, U.S.-Chinese trade totaled almost $387 billion in 2007, while EU-Russian trade in goods and services totaled 262 billion Euros (approximately $364 billion). This is real money, which factors into the calculations of political leaders as they manage the overall relationships.

The U.S. government cannot force business into Russia. But the administration, in concert with the European Union, should work with Moscow to shape a more predictable business climate that will increase confidence among Western companies that they can operate more “normally” in the Russian market. Among other things, this means addressing barriers such as corruption, red tape, and arbitrary customs and tax rules, and in particular strengthening the rule of law and contract enforcement.

Other issues could contribute to improved commercial relations. The first is a policy of U.S. support for getting Russia into the WTO. Bringing Russia in makes sense, as it will require that Russia play by global trade rules that have served U.S. interests well.

The second involves the U.S.-Russian peaceful nuclear cooperation agreement, which was withdrawn from Congressional consideration in the aftermath of the Russia-Georgia conflict. Depending on how relations between Washington and Moscow develop, this agreement merits a second look. Approval will be necessary if U.S. companies are to engage in civil nuclear projects in Russia and if the Russian atomic energy entity is to go forward with its plan to store nuclear waste from third-country reactors (most of such waste would come from U.S.-origin nuclear fuel, provided to third countries under agreements by which the U.S. government must approve where the waste gets stored).

Deepening commercial relations will mean business for U.S. companies and a stabilizing element in the broader bilateral relationship. Those ties may benefit from relaunching a high-level business dialogue, led on the U.S. side by the secretary of commerce. If oil prices stay low and Russian interest in joint projects to develop new Russian energy fields grows, this might justify renewal of a high-level commercial energy dialogue.

The Jackson-Vanik Amendment is another trade-related issue. Enacted in 1974, Jackson-Vanik prohibited the USSR (or its successor states) from permanent normal trade relations status until it permitted free emigration of religious minorities, particularly Soviet Jews. In the 1990s, Russia relaxed its exit rules and allowed hundreds of thousands of Jews to emigrate. The Clinton administration in 1994 found Russia in full compliance with Jackson-Vanik, a view reaffirmed by the Bush administration. The remaining step is to confer permanent normal trade relations status on Russia and graduate it from the amendment's provisions, which requires a Congressional vote.

Graduating Russia would be an important symbolic step for the Russians. Congress should act on this. Graduation should not be seen as a concession to Russia; it is something that Moscow earned long ago by doing the right thing on emigration.

A Wide-Ranging Dialogue on European Security Issues

U.S. policy has long supported widening the circle of European integration and the Euro-Atlantic community, including by enfolding former states of the Warsaw Pact. That stems from a belief that a wider, more stable and secure Europe is in the U.S. interest. Institutionally, this has involved integration into the European Union and NATO.

NATO poses a neuralgic issue for the Russians, who consider its enlargement one cost of Russian weakness in the 1990s. The desires of Ukraine and Georgia to draw closer to the Alliance and have membership action plans (MAPs) provoked particular concern in Moscow. The Russians see enlargement as directed against Russia rather than as an effort to underpin the difficult democratic and economic transformations made by countries on the Alliance's eastern flank and to foster a more stable and secure Europe.

The administration needs to find a balance between acknowledging Russia's legitimate security interests and supporting the right of Russia's neighbors, as sovereign states, to choose their own foreign policy courses. The United States and NATO should not acquiesce to Russian efforts to fence Ukraine and Georgia off from Europe and the Euro-Atlantic community. The Alliance should continue to keep an open door and work with those countries as they prepare themselves for possible membership.

That said, gaining Alliance approval for MAPs for Ukraine or Georgia in 2009 is all but impossible. The December NATO foreign ministers' meeting identified annual national programs as the mechanisms for Ukraine and Georgia to develop their relationships with NATO at the current stage. The administration can work with Kyiv, Tbilisi and NATO so that those countries' annual national programs incorporate all or most of the content of a MAP – without the heat and friction that have come to surround MAPs.

The administration should be prepared for a full discussion of these issues with Moscow. It should lay out its rationale for supporting Ukraine and Georgia and their integration into NATO, and its ideas for strengthening NATO-Russia relations.

Ultimately, it is in the U.S. and Alliance interest that Moscow comes to see that NATO is not a threat but increasingly a partner. This will require greater creativity in broadening NATO-Russia cooperation. One area should be missile defense. Another area, with NATO and Russian warships operating off Somalia's coast, should be joint operations to counter piracy. While difficult to envisage in the near term, step-by-step development of a truly cooperative relationship will at some point require the confidence to accept joint decision-making on certain issues.

NATO might also offer to make more concrete the assurances that were offered Russia regarding restraint in the deployment of NATO forces on the territory of new NATO members. The Alliance stated in 1997 that there would be no permanent stationing of substantial combat forces on the territory of new member states, but it never defined what it meant by "substantial combat forces."

Ending the perception of NATO as a threat will take time and work. It will also require that Moscow not ignore the dramatic changes of the past 20 years in NATO's force structure and missions. Russians all too often overlook the Alliance's transformation. For example, NATO's key tasks today – peacekeeping in the Balkans, coalition operations in Afghanistan, and Active Endeavor's effort to interdict the illicit transit of materials related to weapons of mass destruction – all benefit Russian interests.

At the same time, Washington should be more sensitive to Russian perceptions. While the missile defense planned for Central Europe is aimed at Iran, not Russia, and the establishment of U.S. brigade headquarters in Bulgaria and Romania was driven by Middle East requirements, not Russia, Moscow sees U.S. flags going up in new NATO states, ever closer to Russia.

Speaking in Germany last June, President Medvedev proposed "a general European summit to start the drafting" of an accord "to achieve a comprehensive resolution of the security indivisibility and arms control issues in Europe." Suspicion has arisen in Western capitals that the Russian goal is to unduly constrain NATO's freedom of action or secure for Moscow a veto over major European security developments.

Skepticism is justified. An array of structures already exist that deal with European security questions, including NATO, the NATO-Russia Council, the European Union and its common foreign and security policy, OSCE and the CFE Treaty. Still, Washington should not dismiss the Medvedev proposal out of hand. It should instead challenge the Russians to provide greater detail and explain what this concept would accomplish that existing institutions cannot do. Washington should consult with allies on whether the Russian ideas are manageable or useful, and on possible counterproposals. It should not fear a conference. U.S. positions are likely to have greater support than bad Russian ideas. The United States should lead in shaping a Western response; it would not want to be left on the sidelines if the Europeans decide to engage on their own.

Russia suspended its observation of the CFE Treaty at the end of 2007, in protest at the failure to bring into force the Adapted CFE Treaty. NATO countries have not ratified the adapted treaty due to Russia's failure to fully live up to commitments to withdraw forces from Georgia and Moldova (Russia denies any such conditionality). Given that most CFE participating states have cut their conventional forces to levels well below those required by the treaty, the main loss from Russia's suspension has been the confidence created by regularized data exchanges, notifications and inspections.

The Bush administration suggested parallel actions, a plan of steps that NATO would take to ratify the Adapted CFE Treaty in parallel with certain Russian steps. Finding agreement on this will be more difficult in the aftermath of the Russia-Georgia conflict, but the Obama administration should continue to pursue the parallel actions concept. If other new U.S. proposals have resonance in Moscow, the Russians may give this idea greater attention. Alternatively, NATO countries could seek to fold the parallel actions plan – or at least resumption of data exchanges, notifications and inspections – into a package involving agreement to Medvedev's proposed European security conference.

Global Issues

Washington should add transnational issues such as climate change, biological threats and the risk of pandemic to the U.S.-Russian agenda, which already includes nuclear security and countering international terrorism. Successful strategies for coping with these challenges will require multilateral efforts, something the Russians have said they want to pursue as part of their foreign policy approach. The United States and Russia have few inherent conflicts of interest on these questions. They might find they could forge common strategies and jointly take a leading role in broader multilateral efforts.

The Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism, which now has more than 65 participating states, offers a good example of successful cooperation between

Washington and Moscow to develop a multilateral approach. This could be expanded in the nuclear security area. Russia has offered to supply and reprocess nuclear fuel for third countries. The United States and Russia should explore together how to facilitate the use of nuclear power globally without spreading nuclear enrichment and reprocessing capabilities to third countries, which would greatly raise the overall risks of nuclear proliferation. Such a U.S.-Russian effort, coupled with a renewed strategic arms reduction dialogue, would bolster the basic premise of the Non-Proliferation Treaty: the nuclear weapons states disarm, non-nuclear weapons states get access to civilian nuclear power, and all work together to prevent proliferation.

Democracy

Democracy is a touchy question with Moscow. Russians today enjoy more individual freedoms than they did during Soviet times, but the Putin era brought a significant rollback in democratic liberties and checks and balances compared to the 1990s. While the United States has little real leverage to affect Russian internal politics, the U.S. president cannot ignore serious democracy problems and will want to help create space for Russians to determine a more democratic course. The president should address U.S. concerns in private discussions with Russian leaders and on occasion in public. This can be done tactfully, but it has to be done even if little immediate result is likely.

Washington should not break faith with those in Russia who seek to promote a more democratic future for the Russian people. In the long run, a Russia with real democracy and accountable leaders will be one in which the United States has confidence as a reliable partner. It will also be a Russia that is viewed by its neighbors as a more predictable and less threatening state.

Implementing the Agenda

Implementing this agenda will require careful preparation in Washington and coordination with European allies. First, the administration needs to get in place its people and establish an interagency process to manage the Russia agenda.

The NSC needs a process to ensure follow-up to agreements reached between the president and his Russian counterpart. Nothing takes the gloss off of a summit more quickly than the sense that the other side failed to carry out commitments. This has been one of the problems of the past six years. Presidents Bush and Putin agreed on an "action checklist" in 2003, but it quickly became apparent to the bureaucracies on both sides that there was no penalty for missing deadlines, and the checklist lost much of its value.

One other problem complicated the Bush administration's management of U.S.-Russian relations. While bureaucratic in nature, it had strategic ramifications. Key questions on the U.S.-Russia agenda – such as nuclear arms control, missile defense, NATO, Iran's nuclear ambitions and counterterrorism – were handled by different interagency groups. The NSC lacked a structure to overcome this stove-piping and review the overall U.S.-Russia relationship.

The Obama administration needs an explicit Russia policy – one that is considered, focused and sustained – if it wishes to get Russia right. This requires a structure to take an overall look at the broad U.S.-Russia agenda, set priorities, and identify for senior policy-makers possible trade-offs. Building a successful U.S.-Russian relationship, one in which cooperative issues increasingly outnumber problem areas and in which Russian help can be secured on questions of key interest to Washington, requires letting Moscow sometimes "win." Obviously, issues on which to let Russia "win" need to be chosen with care, but investing in a long-term relationship will require that the administration on occasion scale back its goals to accommodate solutions of interest to Moscow.

As it formulates its approach, the Obama administration should consult regularly with Europe – NATO, the European Union and key European countries. Many of the major issues on the U.S.-Russian agenda affect important European equities. The consultation process can be cumbersome; "Europe" often needs time to find its voice. Washington, however, will find its bargaining position with Moscow strengthened if it has robust European support. The April NATO summit offers the president an early opportunity to consult directly with his European counterparts on Russia and policy toward Russia.

A successful U.S.-Russian relationship is labor-intensive at the highest level. The presidents often must resolve substantive differences that other bilateral relationships settle at lower levels. While President Obama will have many demands on his time, he should return to the Reagan, Bush 41 and Clinton models for engaging Russian leaders.

Those summits allowed plenty of time for presidential discussions. They typically lasted two days, including two or three working sessions, each ranging up to three hours in length. This ensured that the presidents addressed not only the burning problems at the top of the agenda but the broad range of issues. While Presidents Bush and Putin met far more frequently than did their predecessors – nearly 30 times over seven years – their meetings usually comprised a single, relatively short working session. Certain issues had to be discussed at every meeting, so time limitations meant that other questions received no or, at best, cursory attention.

President Obama might also consider a mechanism similar to the binational commission chaired by Vice President Gore and Prime Minister Chernomyrdin. The commission, which operated from 1993-99, provided a senior political forum for resolving problems that defied settlement at lower levels. The commission ensured that eight U.S. cabinet officers and agency heads sat down once or twice a year with their Russian counterparts – a broad range of contacts with senior Russian officials that has not been duplicated since.

Conclusion

One objective of the administration's early engagement with Russia should be to offer new proposals and test Moscow's readiness to respond in kind. The proposals outlined above would advance U.S. security and economic interests in a manner that addresses at least some stated Russian concerns. If Washington tries but is rebuffed, the United States

would not be disadvantaged. It would have greater credibility with its European allies for having made the effort. That could translate into support for a sterner Western approach, should Russian policies require that. The hope, however, is that such an approach can move the U.S.-Russian relationship to a more positive and sustainable basis.

The United States and Russia are unlikely to agree on every issue. On some questions, interests simply differ. But their interests coincide on a number of questions. Those questions can offer a foundation for better relations.

In this regard, Vice President Biden, during his February 7 speech in Munich, and Under Secretary of State Burns, during his visit the following week to Moscow, laid out approaches toward Russia that suggest the Obama administration will offer new ideas. As Washington puts forward its specific proposals, the test will be whether Moscow responds in a reciprocal manner. If so, we should see welcome movement to strengthen the U.S.-Russian relationship.

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