

The Reset Is Fizzling Out

By [Vladimir Frolov](#)

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The future of the U.S.-Russian “reset” could shape President Dmitry Medvedev and U.S. President Barack Obama’s legacy in foreign affairs. But their venture is in need of an upgrade to acquire a sense of strategic purpose and direction.

The reset is turning into a policy of diminishing returns. It is yielding less and less bang for the buck, despite the flurry of diplomatic meetings and presidential phone chats.

After significant early achievements like the New START treaty, cooperation to support the U.S. war in Afghanistan and joint United Nations action to curtail Iran’s nuclear program, Donald Jensen, a former senior diplomat at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, wrote on Voice of America’s web site: “The rewards have become more modest and less frequent. A child adoption agreement and the promise of fewer visa restrictions for travel between the countries ... pale next to the earlier expectations of a much broader range of joint work.”

The missile defense talks have stalled over U.S. opposition to Russia’s demands for either a jointly run system or legally binding guarantees and technical limitations on U.S. radar

stations and interceptors in Europe that would preclude their use against Russia's strategic nuclear missiles.

Cooperation on Afghanistan has reached a dead end because the United States is desperately seeking to disengage from that war-ravished country.

Mutual trade and investment are unlikely to grow significantly in the foreseeable future as "neither country produces much of what the other wants," Tom Graham, managing director at Kissinger & Associates, wrote in a June paper titled "The Future of U.S. - Russian Relations."

The reset is a caretaker policy designed to keep the relationship from heading over the cliff. It offers no answer to what the two nations should aspire to move beyond, and the uneasy cooperation is skidding at every turn into open rivalry. It lacks a mutually shared strategic purpose.

In his paper, Graham suggests searching for a common strategic purpose, uniting Russia and the United States in managing the strategic challenges both nations face along Russia's periphery — "a rising China with an insatiable appetite for natural resources and an increasingly assertive foreign policy ... radical Islamic fundamentalism penetrating the fragile states of both the Caucasus and Central and South Asia ... and strategic disarray in Europe."

Yet, Medvedev and Obama have shied away from engaging on these issues. They have sought to exploit the reset only to maximize their domestic political gains, making clear their preferences for the presidential election outcomes in each country.

In Moscow, Medvedev's supporters have sought to put the blame for the stalling reset on Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, who, according to political analyst Gleb Pavlovsky, discourages Medvedev from accepting Obama's offer on limited missile defense cooperation.

The Kremlin has sought to drag Obama into Russia's presidential politics by engineering his visit to Moscow later in the fall. Obama's advisers have wisely resisted the push.

Neither Obama nor Medvedev has stepped forward to outline a strategic vision for the U.S.-Russian relationship. The coming electoral season in both countries makes it unlikely that they ever will.

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