

Pundits Divided on Success of 'Reset'

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Presidents Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev enjoying their time together in Seoul. The summit is a farewell tour for Medvedev as a head of state. **Pablo Martinez Monsivais**

President Dmitry Medvedev said Monday that the relationship between Russia and the United States was at its best during his term in office.

Medvedev was attending a nuclear summit in Seoul, which is his last opportunity to meet counterpart Barack Obama before he yields the presidency in May to Prime Minister Vladimir Putin.

"I view everything that we have done over the three-year period as being absolutely useful, and I think that it was probably the three best years for the U.S. and Russian relationship over a 10-year period," Medvedev told reporters soon after meeting with Obama.

Although the Russian-American relationship suffered a huge blow near the start of Medvedev's presidency because of the Russia-Georgia military conflict, Medvedev established a good personal relationship with Obama.

Ambassador Richard Burt, a former U.S. chief negotiator with the Soviet Union on nuclear arms, said Medvedev was among the few senior statesmen who had a "productive relationship" with Obama, whom he described as a "cold fish."

The two presidents are of a similar age and share a law background, and the chemistry between them seemed to be genuine.

But foreign policy experts have a mixed reaction of Medvedev's four years.

"If we understand that everything began from not quite a cold war but rather a cold relationship, we could say the relationship has changed for the better," said Alexei Makarkin, deputy head of the Center for Political Technologies.

He singled out the signing of the New START nuclear treaty and Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization as Medvedev's foreign policy achievements.

The Russian president also hit it off with Obama thanks to his efforts in fostering the "reset" policy with the United States.

That started in March 2009 with the symbolic pressing of a reset button presented by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov.

However, the word was incorrectly translated and ended up as "overload" in Russian.

That was fitting, some experts said, because the Obama administration's reset policy became overloaded with various obstacles.

Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of Russia in Global affairs, described it as "generally successful."

"Except for the first period, when the Georgian war happened, Medvedev played the role of stabilizer," Lukyanov said. "He was able to get the relationship out of a dead end and turn it into a normal working relationship."

"Putin knowingly gave him the post, and he hasn't regretted it. While Medvedev was not doing anything contradictory to Putin in foreign policy, he became more visible," Lukyanov said, referring to the fact that Medvedev took a leading role in trying to normalize the relationship with the United States.

But Putin, who stated early on that he wouldn't interfere in foreign policy matters, appointed former Ambassador to the United States Yury Ushakov as an adviser, a move some experts said was made with the intention of having a U.S. policy expert close at hand.

Putin's hand-picked successor, Medvedev had limited domestic power, so he was trying to play a more independent role in foreign policy, which he did with limited success.

Last year, he even got into an indirect argument with Putin about Libya after the prime minister called the NATO operation against Moammar Gadhafi a "crusade."

"The idea was to show a more liberal and nice-to-deal-with face, and he was good at doing that," said Carnegie Moscow Center analyst Masha Lipman.

She added that she saw no policy differences overall between Putin and Medvedev.

Lipman also recalled some harsh rhetoric by Medvedev toward Obama. Shortly after Obama's inauguration, Medvedev threatened to put Iskander missiles in the Kaliningrad region if the United States built its missile defense system in Europe.

"He was doing that when everyone else was congratulating Obama," Lipman said.

The argument over U.S. plans to put a missile defense shield in Europe, which Russia believes would threaten the country's nuclear deterrent, will soon pass from Medvedev to Putin.

"The problem of an antiballistic missile shield will remain the major issue," Makarkin said. "While there will be no new Cold War, there will be more realpolitik."

Putin has committed to a more aggressive foreign policy, saying the country "would act in its own interests and aims and not take decisions imposed on it."

Nikolai Borduzha, secretary general of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, interpreted Putin's words broadly.

"I think Putin as the future president is aiming to increase all of the security structures," Borduzha told The Moscow Times last week.

But prominent analyst and author Igor Zevlyov said Russian foreign policy will continue as it is under "old-new president" Putin.

"One shouldn't judge by election rhetoric," he said.

Most experts seem to agree that rhetoric aside, U.S.-Russian cooperation will remain limited and focused on familiar topics, such as Iran's nuclear ambitions, missile defense and Afghanistan.

"Since the agenda of the Russian-American relationship is limited, Medvedev didn't put any new substance in it, and it remains on the same level," Lipman said.

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