

One Way That Obama Can Revive His Reset

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With Moscow taking a heavy sigh of relief over U.S. President Barack Obama's re-election, it is easy to ignore the political constraints Obama will encounter in carrying out his Russia policy during his second term.

After an open mic incident in the spring that captured a private conversation between Obama and then-President Dmitry Medvedev, the word "flexibility" has become linked to Obama's Russia policy for his second term. But far from getting more flexibility, Obama will face a set of policy options that are restricted by his narrow electoral majority and the reinsertion of Russian domestic politics into Washington's debate on Russia policy.

Even before the U.S. election, Obama's reset with Russia encountered fierce criticism from the conservative right as too accommodating to Moscow. Obama was seen as overly eager to get Russian cooperation on a limited range of issues by sweeping growing concerns over democracy and human rights under the rug.

As for Obama's promised flexibility on U.S. missile defense installations in Europe, it is unlikely that the U.S. would agree to downgrade missile defense enough to satisfy Moscow. Meanwhile, genuine U.S.-Russia cooperation on missile defense would require a new paradigm of trust, and this looks increasingly unlikely given the new political realities in Moscow and the Republican opposition to any sharing of sensitive information with Russia. Obama's offer of more nuclear cuts is of little interest to the Kremlin.

Russia's evolution will have a direct bearing on Obama's policies. The Kremlin's slide toward more political repression and anti-Americanism will narrow Obama's options for cooperative ventures with Moscow beyond the exhausted reset agenda.

Obama will face mounting political pressure to reinvent democracy-promotion efforts in Russia, despite his sober appreciation of the modest effect of such policies. Signing the Magnitsky bill would be Obama's least costly way of placating his critics.

Moving toward a new bilateral agenda that focuses on strategic cooperation on Central Asia and the Arctic, as proposed by some analysts, looks tempting. But it would require transforming a worldview that is not politically feasible in either country for the foreseeable future.

According to my sources in Washington, Obama's opening gesture of goodwill with the Kremlin will be when he recalls Michael McFaul, the U.S. ambassador to Russia, in 2013, a year earlier than planned. Since McFaul's activities have irritated Moscow, perhaps this will count as change.

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