

Cold War Chill

Stephen F. Cohen

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For the American political and media establishment, US-Russian relations always begin yesterday, without the pre-history of the relationship, and thus without its essential political context. Of this we now have a new and increasingly dangerous example.

As Washington and Moscow sink deeper into another familiar Cold War-like conflict, this time over Syria, American policy-makers and commentators, Democrats and Republicans alike, declare that President Obama's 'reset' of relations with Moscow has failed. With equal unanimity, they blame only Moscow, in particular President Vladimir Putin, while entirely deleting Washington's longstanding role in the deteriorating relationship, as they have done for more than a decade.

But as I pointed out in *The Nation* a year ago, Obama's reset was all but doomed from inception because it was based on the same bipartisan, winner-take-all triumphalism that had guided US policy toward post-Soviet Russia since the 1990s. As before, Obama's 'new' policy meant 'selective co-operation', that is, concessions from Moscow without US reciprocity.

Until the US-Russian conflict over Syria erupted this year, the Obama White House wanted three major concessions from the Kremlin as part of the reset: support in the US confrontation with Iran (new negotiations were recently under way in Moscow); assistance in supplying NATO forces in Afghanistan; and then withholding Russia's veto of a UN Security Council resolution for a 'no-fly zone' over Libya. The Obama administration got all three concessions. In return, Moscow wanted a compromise on the administration's plan to

place missile defence installations near Russia's borders; an end to NATO expansion in the direction of Ukraine and Georgia; and a curtailment of US interference, known as 'democracy promotion', in Russia's internal politics. The Kremlin got none of these.

In short, another chance for expansive co-operation in US-Russian relations, even the partnership possible after the Soviet Union ended in 1991, has again been squandered in Washington, not in Moscow.

That the historical and political analyses set out in my 2011 article, as well as the concerns expressed there, have been amply justified by events gives me no satisfaction. Nor to add that a year later, things have only gotten worse. The three US policies to which Moscow reasonably objected before the reset have become more aggressive, and indeed, in the Kremlin's view, have been supplemented by Washington's policy of selective military 'regime change' in the Middle East. In response, as I also warned, anti-American forces in Russian politics have continued to grow, along with the possibility of 'another escalation of the arms race', about which both Putin and former Russian president Dmitri Medvedev, on whom Obama unwisely based the reset, warned.

Meanwhile, Obama's challenger for the presidency, Mitt Romney, has declared that Russia is again America's 'number one geopolitical foe', thereby confirming my worst concern that we are on the verge of, or already in, a new Cold War.

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STAR WARS: NO CHANGE IN USA

QUESTION: *Concerning your meeting with Obama, did you have the impression that an improvement in relations with the USA could be on the horizon if Obama wins the presidential election, and is a solution for the missile defence issue in sight?*

VLADIMIR PUTIN: I think the missile defence issue will not be resolved regardless of whether Obama wins the election or not. The United States has been working on its own missile defence system for many years now, and I do not see anything for now that could change the situation. I think that real change in the situation would be possible only if the United States agreed to our proposal that Russia, the USA, and Europe all be equal participants in this process. What this would mean in practice is that the three participants – Europe, the USA, and Russia – would build the system together, work together on assessing the threats, operate the system together, and decide together on its use. This would bring real change to the security situation in the world. But this does not in any way rule out reaching agreements on particular aspects of this overall joint work. I think this is possible.

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