

Russia-US “reset” over, what next?

11:10 11/02/2013



[SUSLOV, Dmitry](#)

There are at least two interpretations of the so-called “reset” of the US-Russia relations. One is that it was an initial push to get out of the crisis of the relations in 2008, when they hit their lowest point since the end of the Cold war, an attempt to make a new start. Another interpretation was to define the “reset” as an ongoing process of steady and sustainable improvement of the US-Russian relations, or at least as a process of building a model of sustainable and constructive US-Russian relations.

However, in both interpretations the “reset” is now obviously over. As a process of building sustainable US-Russia relations of constructive nature it started to crumble at least a year and a half ago, when the negative part of the US-Russia agenda started to grow, while the positive one stalled, when the sides faced serious contradictions that they failed to overcome, namely on missile defense, and provoked mutual disappointment and irritation, namely on Libya and then Syria. So missile defense, Libya and Syria became the major stumbling blocks that triggered the end of the “reset” as we knew it during the years 2009-2010 even before adoption of the Magnitskiy Act and the Dima Yakovlev law in late 2012.

Deadlock of missile defense negotiations seemed in the Russian eyes as an evidence that the US is untrustworthy and is looking for ways to undermine the strategic balance that exists between the two countries, which Russia cherished as an important criteria of its military security and great power status, and to hamper the Russian strategic deterrence potential. For the US the Russian position on missile defense, which demanded concrete limitations on the future system, seemed artificial and exaggerated, while stagnation of negotiations signaled about Moscow’s firm commitment to the Cold war era strategic deterrence philosophy.

For Russia the US stance on Libya and Syria meant that the US foreign policy is still of interventionist nature, that Washington does not recognize or tries to reverse the dramatic power

shift in the world and emergence of multipolarity, and is still committed to usurping decision-making rights on the use of force issue; that it is still trying to impose its unilateral decisions, which regime might survive and which should go, ignoring interests and objections of many other international players. For the US the Russian policy was a short-sighted attempt to safeguard its old friends and clients and a violation of the unspoken, but real rules of the “reset”, according to which the sides should conceal on their secondary interests if the primary interests of the other side’s are concerned.

The symbolic end of the "reset", as well as the end of the whole previous period of US-Russian relations, started in 2009, was the “mini-crisis” that occurred between Russia and the US at the end of 2012. This “mini-crisis” (a definition coined by the Russian President’s Foreign Affairs Adviser Yuri Ushakov) was colored with a serious degeneration of the political climate and the political atmosphere surrounding their relations, mutual resentment and dissatisfaction. Russian political leadership colored the US as a very unfriendly (at best) power and emphasized that it no longer has a will to move the relations forward and invest into them politically.

This kind of deterioration to a certain extent was the result of the election year, which was the year 2012. As a rule election years are considered to be dead seasons for the US foreign policy in general, and for US-Russian relations in particular. Indeed, due to the elections, neither Russia nor the United States could pursue their policy toward each other based on their national interests and objective considerations. Rather, their policies were based primarily on domestic political considerations. The latter mattered much for the both sides, and throughout 2012 domestic politics was the major factor determining the US-Russia relations both from the Russian and the US sides.

In particular, on the Russian side its relations with the US became a victim of the desire of the Kremlin to marginalize the Russian opposition, protest movement and human rights activists, thus coloring them as traitors and as puppets, masterminded by the United States, as well as to limit the space for US direct or indirect involvement into the Russian domestic affairs even further. On the US side, its relations with Russia became a victim of the desire of the Republicans to weaken the Obama's administration and the President himself, thus attempting to describe his foreign policy as a weak, as a foreign policy of concessions, which brings no benefits for the US interests, but undermines American values.

All this culminated in December last year with the adoption of a series of unfriendly steps on both sides. The difference was that on the US side these steps were unwanted by the Obama Administration, but forced by the domestic circumstances. Whereas on the Russian side they were deliberate and organized by Kremlin.

On the part of the United States, it was, above all, the Magnitsky Act, as well as the decision of the US Congress to prohibit the US Department of Defense to cooperate with the Russian company Rosoboronexport because of Syria (a decision which will not be implemented by the Administration), and a very emotional and unwise statement by Hillary Clinton about the so-called re-Sovietization in post-Soviet states, the alleged Russian desire to dominate the region, and that the United States would oppose this policy.

Russia’s retaliation was mainly adoption of the Dima Yakovlev law, the essence of which was not really about imposing visa and economic sanctions on some of American officials and citizens, involved in violation of human rights of some Russians, despite the fact that it was meant to be so. The law’s main substance was in the two amendments introduced into it already during its readings in the State Duma. They were about prohibiting adoptions of Russian children by the US citizens and banning all the Russian political NGOs that receive American funding.

Thus, the real purpose of the Dima Yakovlev law was twofold. First, to utilize the overall deteriorated climate in US-Russian relations to promote the Kremlin's domestic political agenda, and, second, to contribute to creating an unfriendly and even perhaps evil image of the United States in Russia. The law was meant to become a sound slap in the face of the Obama Administration, which by that time was trying to do its best to prevent or marginalize the unfriendly steps towards Russia on the US side initiated and promoted by the Republicans. The law vividly depicted negative image of the US in general, of the US as a country, not even as a state only, and emphasized that the US impact on the Russian domestic politics – even in a form of providing private grants to the Russian NGOs – is regarded as a threat to Russian national security.

The major outcome of the “mini-crisis” is a profound degradation of the political atmosphere of the relations and minimization of the political will of the sides to move the relations forward. None of the sides is likely to invest serious political capital in the relations in the short- and middle-term future and to approach them as an important foreign policy priority of its own value. Neither Russian nor the US will try to build sustainable bilateral positive partnership and provide the relations with a strategic goal. On the contrary, the during the next 4 years relations will be dominated by tactics and conjuncture of converging or diverging national interests of the sides on this or that matter that appears on their agenda.

This makes the following two alternative scenarios of the further evolution of the US-Russia relations mostly possible. The 1st and preferable one is a model of selective pragmatic partnership. It presumes that the sides will cooperate on the issues where their interests converge and where they find this cooperation beneficial for their according national interests, while compete and quarrel on the areas of disagreement and contradictions. At the same time, their competition on the areas of disagreement will not undermine cooperation on the issues where it is possible and desirable, thus the eventual US-Russia agenda will be kept balanced. The overall tone of the relations according to this model will be quite lean and modest.

The 2nd model, which looks like undesirable for the political leaderships of both countries but could happen by default and would be devastating for their, especially Russian, national interests, is of steady degradation of relations resulting not in a “mini”, but in a serious and comprehensive crisis of the US-Russia relations in several years to come, putting them again on a brink of systemic confrontation. This model might come true under the following four preconditions.

First, if the sides allow themselves to dismantle the positive achievements and cooperative institutions of the “reset”, such as the Bilateral Presidential Commission, which has already started to shrink.

Second, if they allow the contradictions to undermine cooperation on the areas of converging interests. A particular risk comes from the missile defense issue. The sides' probable failure to find an agreement on it by the years 2016-2018 and Russia's possible military response (especially if Moscow withdraws from the New START and the INF Treaties and targets its short-term missiles on the US missile defense installations in Central Europe) could trigger a new US-Russia arms race and a serious degradation of their relations in general. Even despite the fact that these will be of profoundly artificial nature.

Third, the negative model might fulfill itself by default if the sides fail to strengthen their positive agenda with the new important fields of cooperation, thus compensating for the probable weakening of the existing positive agenda and strengthening of the negative one.

Indeed, the major pillar of their current positive agenda is Afghanistan and, above all, transit to and from the country via Russia and the Central Asian states. This is the issue on which the US dependence on Russia is maximum. But this area of cooperation is doomed for change. By the end of 2014 the majority of the US troops will be withdrawn, and Afghani importance for the US will be inevitably reduced. This, the US dependence on Russia will drop down. Moreover, a new round of a US-Russia geopolitical rivalry in Central Asia might occur. Already now Russia is objecting against the US plans to preserve some minimal military presence in Afghanistan and suspects that this would allow the US to exert geopolitical influence on the wider region, including Central Asia. Moreover, the closer the sides are to date of the US withdrawal, the less compatible become their approaches to managing the Afghani security, economic development and narcotics issue after 2014.

Another matter of concern is incompatibility of the US and Russian policies in the field of the further nuclear reductions. The Obama Administration has already indicated making a new round of nuclear arms reductions beyond the New START as one of the major priorities vs. Russia for the next 4 years, and identified two areas, where progress could be achieved in its opinion: non-strategic (tactical) and non-deployed nuclear arms. Whereas for Russia one of the major priorities for the next several years is to prevent this new round of nuclear reductions from happening. So, Moscow will be blocking these negotiations by all means, including by linking further hypothetic reductions with imposing limitations on those dimensions of the US defense policy which impact strategic stability, such as missile defense, strategic non-nuclear weapons, space systems, etc. For the US such limitations would certainly be unacceptable. Thus, nuclear arms reductions is very likely to become in the next years a source of serious disagreement and mutual irritation between Russia and the US and will turn from a positive into a negative part of the US-Russia relations agenda.

On its turn, the Obama Administration is already making clear that Russia's rhetorical hopes for a breakthrough on missile defense are at best overestimated and hardly realistic. Indeed, the Russian officials several times stated in the end of the last year, that they regard resuming of the missile defense negotiations as a high priority of the US-Russia relations after the end of the election periods in both countries, and are looking forward to a "flexibility" on the US part – along the lines of the famous promise by Barack Obama to Dmitry Medvedev at the Seoul summit in March 2011. Whereas Washington is making clear that the kind of flexibility that Russia is anticipating – legally or politically binding limitations – are impossible, and that the likelihood of a breakthrough is quite low.

Thus, in several years from now the US-Russia relations might find themselves in a situation where the positive cooperative agenda will shrink or marginalize, while the negative one will grow both in size and importance, and Russia could again color the US as a major threat to its military and political security. The result would be implementation of the 2nd scenario – of a new comprehensive deterioration of the US-Russia relations. This will contradict to the real interests of both sides, to the objective trends of the international relations development, and weaken the US and especially Russia, vs the real global and regional challenges they face in the world of today and tomorrow.

In order to prevent a new steady period of the relations deterioration, Russia and the US should overcome the "mini-crisis" of December 2012 immediately, i.a. normalize the political atmosphere of the relations, avoid dismantling legal, diplomatic and institutional achievements of the "reset" period, and, above all, start or continue normal and pragmatic cooperation where it is possible and desirable.

Keeping the dramatic worsening of the political atmosphere of the relations and the big number of serious contradictions aside, there is still an impressive positive agenda for Russia and the United States to work on, there are several important issues where the priorities and interests of the sides converge and intersect.

First and foremost, this is Afghanistan. Apart from remaining the major pillar of positive cooperation between Russia and the US in the next four years, Afghanistan is also among their major challenges. The sides already now need to prepare for the withdrawal of the majority of US troops from Afghanistan by the end of the year 2014, and restructure their relations accordingly. In particular, Russia already now should be included into discussions of the Afghan political, security and economic future, and the US and Russian strategies in relation to the country should be not just compatible (today they are mutually excluding), but even common. This will be beneficial for Afghanistan itself, for the Central Asian region, for Russia, the US and their relations. On the contrary, if the sides fail to accommodate their policies on Afghanistan and make them compatible and mutually strengthening before the date the US troops leave the country, all the sides will suffer. Including Afghanistan itself, for after the US military withdrawal its security and economic development will depend on the regional players much more than on anyone else. Whereas another round of Afghan internal destabilization will undermine the US credibility (and maybe security as well – remember 9/11) and present a direct threat to the security of Central Asian countries and, consequently, Russia.

Another area where cooperation between Russia and the US is possible, desirable, and even probable, is economic relations. Both sides are committed to increasing trade and investment. The US law on repeal of the Jackson-Vanik amendment encourages the Administration to elaborate an investment agreement with Moscow. The strategic alliance between Rosneft and Exxon Mobil has become recently one of the most vivid symbols of the US-Russian practical cooperation in one the most controversial and politicized areas, which is energy and the Arctic. Both sides are interested in bringing this cooperation further, which could be a game changer for the US-Russian interaction in the Arctic. Finally, both sides are interested in taking advantage of Russia's membership in the WTO and benefiting from the establishment of the normal trade relations regime between Russia and the US on a permanent basis.

However, one has to keep in mind that despite all the importance of increasing US-Russian economic relations, they are incapable of reaching a level in the observable future, when they could act as a stabilizer and “insurance mechanism” of the relations as such. Due to internal and external factors (imperfect quality of socio-economic governance in Russia, existence of China and India, etc.) economic relations between Russia and the US are very unlikely to create conditions of economic interdependence. Still, their development is useful and necessary. Even the Rosneft – Exxon Mobile project is capable of creating a commercial lobby in the US interested in constructive relations with Russia.

One of the most prospective areas of the US-Russian cooperation for the next several years and decades, where the sides' important interests clearly intersect and which could over time become an anchor of the US-Russian positive agenda, is the Asia-Pacific Region. Today, the situation there is quite strange and even absurd in terms of US-Russian relations.

On the one hand, both sides recognize that Asia Pacific is becoming a center of political and economic gravity in the world, and both sides have declared their “pivots” or policies of re-orientation towards the region. Both Russia, and especially the US, the Obama administration, define today Asia-Pacific as one of the major foreign policy and foreign economic policy priorities. Russian leadership recognizes that integration into the region could become one of the major sources of economic development and modernization of the Russian Siberia and Far East,

if not the only sources remaining.

But on the other hand, the sides simply do not see each other in this region, which is becoming more and more vital for both of them politically, strategically and economically. The United States cannot so far find any place for Russia in its Asia Pacific “pivot”. And Russia, in its strategy of reorientation toward the Asia-Pacific, and the development of Siberia and the Far East with the help of integration into the Asia-Pacific, also does not see any particular role for the United States to play, which is simply unwise, wrong and short-sighted. After all, the majority of the Asian Pacific countries who could become major investors into the Russian Siberia and Far East, are American allies or very close partners, and the Russian Asian Pacific strategy should – and does – go definitely beyond China. Thus, a comprehensive dialogue between Russia and the US on the Asia-Pacific, possibly with inclusion of other important actors, such as China, should be one of the major dimensions of the profoundly and philosophically new positive agenda of the US-Russian relations.

Finally, the sides will be compelled to cooperate in the following years on certain issues of international politics, which will draw them in and appear on their agenda “from the outside”, such as Syria. Obviously, the situation in this country, as well as in the Broader Middle East in general, is deteriorating, presenting both the US and Russia with serious risks and challenges. Whereas tactically Russia and the US cannot find a common platform and confront over the problem of Bashar Asad and regime change in Syria, strategically neither of them is interested in Syria sliding into a civil war with ethnic and religious dimensions and going into chaos in general. Neither Russia nor the US is interested in Syria's Muslim-Islamic radicalization, – especially in the context of the recent developments in Egypt and especially Libya, including raise of the negative attitudes towards the United States and assassination of the US ambassador in the country. Thus, Moscow and Washington will be compelled to find common ground on Syria. As soon as the Asad problem is solved in this or that way, further cooperation might be easier. This presumes tough bargaining between the sides, but forging a common agenda is still possible, and very much desired.

Another example of the issues that Russia and the US will be compelled to deal with within the next several years is Iran. The two principle things on which Moscow and Washington agree is that both options of Iran getting a nuclear weapon and of a military strike against Iranian nuclear facilities are highly undesirable. Having being reelected, Barack Obama is now more capable of resisting the Israeli pressure about the military option. Definitely, much will depend here on US-Israeli relations, and on the development of the Iranian nuclear program.

In order to prevent this war from happening, Russia and the US should activate their dialogue and cooperation on Iran, and Russia should contribute to the progress of the six-party negotiations between Iran and the international community, and maybe even agree to increasing international pressure on Iran. With diplomatic pressure increasing, the probability of war is going down.

Hence, the major challenge and impediment to the US-Russian relations today, to their pragmatic evolution, is the lack of political will on both sides, but especially on the Russian side, to invest in the relations, to invest political capital and to commit themselves to moving these relations forward. If the sides fail to use the cooperative opportunities described above because of the lack of political will and unfavorable political atmosphere, the current “mini-crisis” could indeed spill over into a longer period of stagnation and gradual degradation of the US-Russian relations – with a new comprehensive crisis in several years from now.

Thus, the sides should overcome today's “mini-crisis”, and start a new period of their relations,

simply basing them on their own objective national interests, which in reality coincide and converge in a substantial number of areas. If this is accomplished, there would be no new and serious crisis in the US-Russia relations, and a model of their pragmatic cooperation will prove to be sustainable. Even if there is no new "reset", there will be certain practical achievements to the benefit of the national interests of both countries. And the latter are far more important than any labels.

Dmitry Suslov is Deputy Director for Research at the Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, member of the Valdai Discussion Club.