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Will Moscow Help with Trouble Spots?

YURY E. FEDOROV

Those who view international politics through the pragmatic lens of *realpolitik* might observe of the Obama administration’s offer to hit the “reset” button in relations between Washington and Moscow that it simply amounted to proposing a deal.

In return for Russia’s help in ending Iran’s nuclear program and achieving stability in Afghanistan, the United States would conclude a new strategic arms treaty with Russia, scrap its plans for ballistic missile defense in Central Europe, and perhaps not push too hard for Ukrainian and Georgian membership in NATO. And as for Russian democracy? The White House and the State Department have long since decided that if Russians enjoy living under an authoritarian regime so much, it is a waste of time and effort to try convincing them of democracy’s advantages.

Indeed, what really matters to the United States is not how well or badly the Kremlin treats its subjects but whether Moscow is capable of making rational foreign policy decisions. This approach, though cynical, has its logic. Yet it takes two to tango. The question is: Will Moscow seriously help with trouble spots such as Iran, Afghanistan, North Korea, and the Middle East, in return for a more conciliatory American posture on other issues? And if not, why not?

ACCOMMODATING IRAN

So far, Russia has thrown cold water on US suggestions that Moscow might assist in ending Iran’s nuclear program. In February 2009, just after it became clear what sort of reset the US administration was proposing, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov said that Russia’s “stance on the Iranian nuclear program has no elements which could be interpreted as a toughening of

approach.” A few weeks later Ryabkov announced that Moscow saw no evidence that Iran was trying to build nuclear weapons. And Russian President Dmitri Medvedev—in April, on the eve of his first meeting with President Barack Obama—himself rejected linking the Iranian nuclear issue to the problem of missile defense in Europe. “I don’t think that any trade-offs are possible in this respect,” he said. “This is not serious talk.”

Russia’s claims that Iran is not trying to develop nuclear weapons are not at all convincing. All these claims prove is that—at least from Moscow’s point of view—Iran’s nuclear ambitions do not run counter to Russia’s own interests. Thus, Russia does not intend to rethink its approach to the Iranian nuclear issue, nor will it support effective sanctions against Tehran. Some experts suggest this attitude recalls the Soviet Union’s stance on Iraq’s nuclear efforts nearly 30 years ago. Oleg Grinevsky, a former high-ranking Soviet and Russian diplomat, has described the reaction of then-Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko to news about Saddam Hussein’s nuclear activities at the beginning of the 1980s:

Development of nuclear weapons, if of course Saddam Hussein is able to do this, will change the Middle East conflict significantly,” Gromyko said to his trusted subordinates. “Yet . . . is this really dangerous for us? Can we imagine the circumstances under which an Iraqi atomic bomb threatens us? I do not see such a situation. But for the Americans and for Israel, which is an American ally, it will cause a strong headache. The Middle East conflict will flame up with a new strength and they will be on their knees begging us to help them to settle it.

Today, just as then, Russia would like to see the United States and Israel on their knees. Yet Moscow does not actually want a nuclear-armed Iran. A nuclear Iran, unlike the Iraq of 30 years ago, might actually threaten Russia. Such an Iran would create dramatic and mostly undesirable

YURY E. FEDOROV is an associate fellow at the Royal Institute of International Affairs (Chatham House) in London.

changes in the strategic environment of regions near Russia's southern borders.

In particular, a nuclear Iran might become a source of tension in the Caspian region and in Central Asia, and could encroach on Russian interests in those areas, which Moscow regards as its own backyard. On the other hand, the possibility of a US or Israeli "military option" to prevent Iran's nuclearization, an option whose likelihood is growing as Iran approaches the ability to produce nuclear weapons, is highly unwelcome in Russia.

Rightly or wrongly, many in Israel see a nuclear Iran as an existential threat, one that could be neutralized only by destruction of its nuclear assets. However, if a military strike against Iran were to be launched, Tehran would immediately respond through asymmetrical means, including massive terror attacks against the United States and Europe. Thus, it would be necessary not merely to eliminate Iran's nuclear and missile facilities but also to paralyze the country's governance through massive air and missile strikes.

Such a mission could only be performed by American forces. A war of this nature would result in complete chaos in Iran, and probably a division of the country along ethnic lines. A hotbed of Shiite extremism would emerge near Russia's borders. In all likelihood, Azerbaijan would unite with the Azeri-populated areas of northern Iran and create a large Azeri state in the South Caspian, a state that would maintain close links with Turkey and the United States. For Russia, all of these prospects are decidedly undesirable.

No, No, AND NO

At the same time, and for a number of reasons, Moscow does not want to see a political resolution to the Iranian nuclear issue. Theoretically, such a resolution could come about if Tehran halted its nuclear program in exchange for massive Western investment, security guarantees, and recognition of Iran as the West's principal partner in the Islamic world. In reality, especially in view of the turmoil surrounding Iran's recent presidential election, this outcome hardly seems possible.

However, if it were to come about, Moscow would no longer be able to use the Iranian problem as a bargaining chip in its relations with the West. The Central Asian and Caspian states would acquire new pipeline options for exporting their energy resources, allowing them to bypass Russia. And Iran might once again play the geopolitical

role that it played under the Shah—something that Moscow definitely does not want.

The Kremlin prefers for US and European resources, both political and military, to be focused on Iran, and not on the post-Soviet states that Moscow considers within its zone of "privileged interest," as Medvedev has termed it. The Kremlin also prefers for the government-controlled Gazprom, Europe's largest supplier of natural gas, not to face competition from Iranian gas fields. In addition, Moscow has a major investment in Iran's nuclear program: The Russian Ministry of Atomic Energy was closely involved in building Iran's \$1 billion Bushehr nuclear power plant, and the Russian nuclear industry seeks more such projects.

As a result, Moscow has developed an approach to the Iran issue that may be characterized as "the three noes": no to a nuclear Iran, no to a military option, and no to a diplomatic resolution of the problem. Effectively, the Kremlin wants to freeze the status quo. With this in view, Russia as a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council vetoes all effective sanctions against Tehran. In the long term, Russia is concerned that such sanctions might lead to a political solution. In the short term, Moscow is worried that effective sanctions would cut off its ability to supply arms to Iran and to pursue further cooperation in the nuclear field.

Russia uses Iran's nuclear program as a trump card in its zero-sum game with the West. The strategy has produced some tactical gains to date. But the longer Moscow plays this trump, the deeper may be an "Iranian trap" for Russia: Moscow will be challenged either by a nuclear-armed Iran or by the consequences of a military operation against Tehran.

In light of all this, Moscow was deeply satisfied with the June reelection of Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and with Iran's brutal crackdown on election protesters. Just after the voting, Ahmadinejad participated as an observer at a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), a body created to assure Russian-Chinese dominance in Central Asia. The Russian Foreign Ministry declared that "Russia respects the choice of the Iranian people and is ready to continue developing mutually beneficial cooperation with Iran." No glimmer of hope exists that Moscow and Washington will cooperate to thwart Iran's nuclear ambitions by diplomatic means. Thus Tehran carries on with its

nuclear program, convinced that its actions will go unpunished.

WELCOME TO THE QUAGMIRE

Along with Iran, Afghanistan is among the most critical issues on the West's security agenda. Stabilization in Afghanistan is seen as the key proving ground for NATO's capacity to address the emerging strategic realities of the twenty-first century. A failure there, rightly or wrongly, would be considered a strategic defeat for NATO and the United States, and would signal a dramatic reduction of the West's power and influence. This would have long-term global consequences. Many in Washington believe that if the war in Afghanistan is lost, Al Qaeda would regain its strength and strike the United States again. The Obama administration considers the struggle against Islamist extremists in Afghanistan a principal strategic goal.

In this light, Russia's support of Western efforts in Afghanistan is a practical indicator of Moscow's readiness (or lack of readiness) to reset its relationship with the United States and NATO. This is especially the case when it comes to Russia's approach toward the Western military presence in Central Asia, of which a critical element is communication lines that supply the international coalition's troops in Afghanistan.

Then-President Vladimir Putin's dramatic decision in September 2001 to support the US-led war in Afghanistan was widely interpreted at the time as a departure from the Kremlin's Soviet-style policy of treating international relations as a zero-sum game. It was believed that Russia might pursue long-term cooperation with the West on the issues of Islamist terrorism, nuclear proliferation, drug trafficking, and other shared threats. But the conciliatory decisions made by Putin at the beginning of his presidency did not result from any change in the basic attitudes of Russia's ruling cohort. Rather, the decisions were made because Russia lacked resources to confront the West and because Russia's economic situation at the beginning of this decade was frightful.

Although Moscow officially supports the international operation in Afghanistan, since 2005 it has been working to bring about the withdrawal of the Western military forces from Central Asia. Thus Moscow initiated an SCO declaration in

2005 which said it was "essential that the relevant members of the antiterror coalition fix time limits [on] the temporary use of . . . infrastructure and [on] the length of the military contingents' stay on the territories of SCO member states." In Russia this declaration was interpreted by mass media close to the Kremlin as a demand by the SCO members for an immediate termination of the West's military presence in Central Asia. This idea was wishful thinking, since the document did not mention the withdrawal of military forces, only the need to fix time limits. It may be that Russian negotiators and Putin himself tried to persuade the leaders of the other SCO countries to approve a much tougher statement, but failed.

In 2005 the Karshi-Khanabad air base in Uzbekistan, known as K2, was evacuated of US forces following American criticism of the host country's brutal suppression of a popular uprising. This was seen in Moscow as a great political triumph. Afterwards, America's withdrawal from the Manas Air Base in Kyrgyzstan became a priority of

Russian policy. This base is a crucial facility for operations in and around Afghanistan. The international coalition relies on it heavily for supply, logistics, troop rotations, and refueling of aircraft—especially in view of growing

problems associated with supplying Afghanistan via Pakistan.

The Russian aim of ending US use of the Manas Air Base has been frustrated by the fact that US payments for use of the base represent a substantial financial resource for Kyrgyzstan. In addition, the Kyrgyz government—like the governments of other Central Asian states—has good reason to believe that if US and NATO troops are not able to defeat Islamist extremists in Afghanistan, then sooner rather than later Islamists will become active in Central Asia, possibly igniting widespread popular unrest there. Nonetheless, a group of Kyrgyz politicians, including a few within the inner circle of President Kurmanbek Bakiyev, in recent years became receptive to Russia's campaign for immediate US withdrawal from the base.

Tensions over the air base came to a head in February 2009—just after Medvedev had made conciliatory remarks regarding Russia's attitude toward Western military operations in Afghanistan. Speaking in Uzbekistan in January,

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Medvedev had announced that Moscow was ready to cooperate with the new US administration and with NATO. Medvedev welcomed Obama's plans to review US policy in Afghanistan, and voiced his hope that "the new US administration will have greater success than the previous one in resolving the Afghanistan issue." He also said Russia would work with NATO on transit routes for the delivery of nonmilitary goods to Afghanistan. This was seen as a signal that Moscow was rethinking its hostile attitude toward the United States and NATO and was ready to turn over a new leaf in Russian-US relations.

A PECULIAR UNDERSTANDING

It turned out very quickly, however, that the Kremlin had a peculiar understanding of what it meant to help the United States fight terrorism. Just a few days after his Uzbekistan statement, Medvedev managed to twist Bakiyev's arm into ordering the United States to withdraw from Manas. The Kyrgyz president, speaking in Moscow after a lengthy haggling session in which he had secured a \$2 billion loan from Russia, said that the Americans would be given six months to withdraw.

If the loan was not inducement enough for Bakiyev to do the Kremlin's bidding, another factor motivated him: He faced the prospect of presidential elections in July 2009. If he was unresponsive to Moscow's pressure, the Kremlin would support his rivals, financially and otherwise. Although the Kremlin denied there was a Russian hand behind Bakiyev's decision, the Russian propaganda machine implied exactly that, with great satisfaction. Moscow had demonstrated its dominating influence in Central Asia.

But Russia's apparent success in closing the American air base at Manas proved a short-lived phenomenon. First, in May, Uzbek President Islam Karimov announced that a cargo airport in the Uzbek city of Navoi could be used for airborne transport of NATO supplies to Afghanistan, and that a major renovation at that airport would turn it into a world-class airfreight hub. Then, a few weeks later, the Kyrgyz government announced a deal with the United States that would allow the Americans to continue using the Manas Air Base as a transit center. The deal represented a significant defeat for Russian policy in Central Asia.

The deal was probably a major reason that the Kremlin in July agreed to allow the United States to transport troops and weapons across Russian airspace en route to Afghanistan. That agreement, signed during a Russian-US summit in Moscow, permits 4,500 American flights per year and saves the US government an annual \$133 million. For Russia, it appears, the deal amounted to making the best of a bad situation. Because the United States had managed to maintain transit arrangements to Afghanistan via Central Asia, it had become meaningless for Russia to continue pursuing its objective of cutting off US supply lines.

At the same time, America's war in Afghanistan is definitely in Russia's interest, and the new air transit corridor across Russia only deepens US involvement in Afghanistan—reinforcing Washington's determination to fight there until final victory, even if that goal is unattainable. Another benefit of the agreement from Moscow's perspective is that it suggests Russia still holds the keys to US and NATO military transit.

The zigzags and inconsistencies in Moscow's

approach to the US war effort in Afghanistan result from opposing viewpoints that persist in the top echelons of Russian government. Certain segments of Russia's political and military circles hope to see NATO and the United States atrophy

because of defeat in Afghanistan. They see America and NATO as greater potential dangers to Russian interests than the threat of Islamic jihadism that might result from the restoration of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Indeed, they entertain a paranoid perception that the United States poses a military threat to Russia because of its presence in Central Asia.

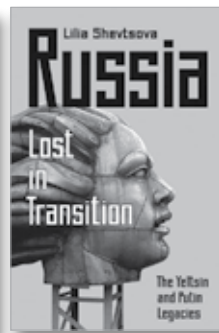
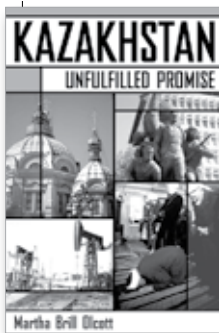
Others in the top echelons understand that if the international coalition fails in Afghanistan, serious consequences might develop not only in Central Asia but in the northern Caucasus too. However, they are not interested in US and NATO success in Afghanistan but rather in their long-term, large-scale involvement there. The Kremlin hopes that the United States and NATO, by committing an increasing number of troops to operations in Afghanistan, will severely limit their strategic capabilities in other regions, such as the Black Sea, the Caspian, Ukraine, and other areas of Russia's "privileged interest." Moreover, as long

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as US and NATO forces remain in Afghanistan, the Taliban and Al Qaeda cannot gain control of the country and thus do not present a substantial threat to Russia's allies in Central Asia.

In this light, military transit via Russian territory makes a withdrawal of US and European troops from Afghanistan less probable, especially given the tense situation in Pakistan and the Khyber Pass area. At the same time, it stops the West from developing an alternate supply route across the Black Sea, the southern Caucasus, the Caspian, and Turkmenistan.

NUCLEAR DOMINOES

Recent developments on the Korean peninsula have put Russia in a ticklish position. North Korea's nuclear test in May 2009, along with its subsequent missile launches, shows that the Korean nuclear crisis is escalating. The crisis threatens far-reaching strategic changes in East Asia, in particular a game of "nuclear dominoes," which would be highly unwelcome in Russia.

The next domino to fall could be Japan. That country is concerned not only about North Korea's nuclear weapons but also about America's strategic focus on the greater Middle East, something that weakens Tokyo's confidence in US security guarantees and that is stimulating deep changes in Japan's strategic attitudes. Japan is capable of quickly building its own nuclear arsenal if it decides to go that route. A nuclear Japan, on top of a nuclear North Korea, might cause South Korea and Taiwan to develop nuclear weapons as well. In the meantime, Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea might, together with the United States, accelerate the development of an antimissile defense system.

In this context, China would increase its arsenal of nuclear missiles, further stimulating a regional arms race. In response, Washington would increase its military presence in Northeast Asia. This increased presence would include warheads and delivery platforms for limited nuclear attack, improved ballistic missile defense systems, and precise conventional counterforce capabilities.

As part of this vicious cycle, a new strategic configuration would emerge in East Asia. At one pole would be the United States and its allies—Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. These countries

would combine America's extended deterrence with development of their own military capabilities, both conventional and nuclear. China would have no option but to constitute the other pole in this system.

This of course would have significant negative consequences for Russia's strategic posture in the northern Pacific. An arms race would change the ratio of the military forces in the region, and not in Moscow's favor. In fact, Russia already is concerned about its military position in the region. Its Pacific fleet is degrading. Its ground forces in Siberia and the Russian Far East are outnumbered more than three to one by Chinese ground forces deployed in military districts adjacent to Russia. Russia's main military asset in the region is nuclear weapons. But a game of nuclear dominoes, along with deployment of missile defense systems and a high-tech arms race, could diminish the significance of Russia's nuclear arsenal.

Finally, as nuclear dominoes fell, the probability of a military conflict on the Korean peninsula might increase. This would carry severe economic and sociopolitical consequences for the Russian Far East. Prospects for the realization of some large economic projects that promise critical benefits to Russia would come to a definitive end, and foreign investment in the development of oil and gas deposits in eastern Siberia would be blocked.

All this makes Russia interested in resolving the Korean nuclear crisis as soon as possible. The longer the situation remains unresolved, the higher the probability that Russian interests will suffer. Theoretically, this opens a path for Russia to cooperate constructively with the United States. But Russia, like China, wishes to resolve the nuclear crisis in a way that will not strengthen American influence on the Korean peninsula and in the North Pacific. Moscow understands that a political solution to the North Korean crisis would most probably result in a fundamental improvement of North Korea's relations with the United States. This is highly unappetizing to the Kremlin.

In addition, as soon as Pyongyang abandoned its nuclear program, rapprochement between North and South Korea would begin. This might eventually result in the unification of the two Korean states and the rise of a strong new inter-

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national actor that could diminish Russian influence in the region and threaten territory close to Russia's strategically important sea terminals on the Pacific.

In any case, Russia as a practical matter has virtually no instruments with which to influence the nuclear crisis. Russian military intervention in an armed conflict on the Korean peninsula virtually defies imagination. Such an intervention could occur only if conflict in Korea spread to Russian territory, which is highly unlikely. Similarly, Russia's ability to render economic aid to North Korea is minimal. Large Russian-North Korean joint projects are impractical due to a dearth of Russian funding. And Russia cannot use its trade with North Korea to exert political influence—in 2008, trade between the two countries comprised only 2.3 percent of North Korea's total foreign trade.

Because of competing motives and a lack of levers, Russia's Korea policy is incoherent. On one hand, Moscow uses its status as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to block effective international sanctions against North Korea. Such sanctions are the only means available to force Pyongyang to give up its nuclear weapons, and Russia's actions only stimulate North Korea's nuclear ambitions and discourage Pyongyang from rethinking its approach toward relations with the United States and South Korea. Indeed, Russia's actions increase the probability of a nuclear arms race in the North Pacific.

On the other hand, Russia routinely calls for a resumption of the six-party talks (involving Russia, China, Japan, the two Koreas, and the United States) on North Korea's nuclear program. Participation in these talks creates for Moscow the illusion that it has political influence on the Korean peninsula and in a wider regional strategic context. However, North Korea's recent nuclear test and its missile launches prove that these talks are not an effective instrument.

CAPITALIZING ON CONFLICT

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian policy regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been essentially constant. In place of the rigid anti-Israel strategy of the Soviet days, which was driven by confrontation with the United States (Israel's primary patron and sponsor) as well as by the antisemitism that was typical of Soviet ruling circles, Moscow has pursued a more sophisticated and balanced policy.

Today, Russian elites do not see the Middle East as a principal area of strategic rivalry with the West, as they did during the days of the cold war. Russia has developed a pragmatic relationship with Israel, and in some ways a cooperative one, motivated by economic concerns and, many believe, a common interest in fighting Islamist terrorism. It might seem that Russia has replicated the US policy of maintaining relations with both Israel and the Arab states, playing a role both as mediator and as a guarantor of security. If this view of Russian policy were correct, there would be a substantial chance that the United States and Russia can cooperate to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and help stabilize the region.

But this perception of Russian behavior in the Middle East is not accurate. Unlike America and Europe, which are actually interested in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and believe that the conflict's end would strengthen their position in the region, Moscow's goal is to capitalize on the conflict—as well as on conflicts between Israel and Syria, and between Israel and Iran.

Russian policy in the Middle East calls into question Moscow's willingness to partner with the United States in fighting Islamist-led terrorism. Russia supplies Syria and Iran with armaments, which then fall into the hands of Hezbollah and Hamas, two of the region's most dangerous organizations. Indeed, Russia invites Hamas leaders to Moscow, treating them as legitimate political figures. This strengthens the radicals' position and hinders moderate Palestinian forces from compromising with Israel. The logic of the Russian position is quite simple. Moscow retains very few levers of political influence in the Middle East, so it uses the one it has—which is to manipulate conflicts between Israel and its enemies.

Policy makers in the West need to realize that in no case will Russia be their partner in resolving Iran's nuclear program, in providing practical support (other than flyover rights) to the international military operation in Afghanistan, or in other trouble spots. Moscow cannot be called a rival to the West in these areas either. The Kremlin does not want, and has no resources, to force the West out of Afghanistan or the Middle East, to take on responsibility for resolving the North Korean nuclear crisis, or to impose its own solution on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Instead, Russia is content to play a parasitic role regarding the world's trouble spots and Western—above all, American—involvement in them. ■