

Russia and Obama: Untying the Gordian Knot

By [Eric Walberg](#)

Region: [Russia and FSU](#), [USA](#)

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Russian President Dmitry Medvedev gave his state-of-the-union address last Wednesday, just a few hours after Barack Obama's historic electoral triumph, and pointedly refrained from mentioning it, though he is on record as hoping for an Obama presidency. "It would be easier to work with people with a modern outlook, rather than those whose eyes are turned back to the past," he said in February, before he was elected president himself. In a simple note sent to Obama and posted on the Kremlin's web site later Wednesday afternoon, he said, "I hope for a constructive dialogue with you, based on trust and consideration of each other's interests."

It is unlikely there will be a love-in à la US President George W Bush and President Vladimir Putin, when the former famously said, "I looked the man in the eye. I was able to get a sense of his soul," considering the disastrous plunge in relations following this sound-byte moment. Or, more to the point, because of the foreign policy hawks Obama relies on, including Zbigniew Brzezinski, whose anti-Russian credentials I dissected in "The real power behind the throne" <<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/907/in3.htm>>. Or, in light of the virtually identical public avowals by both Obama and John McCain concerning relations with Russia (apart from McCain's inane vow to exclude Russia from the G8), i.e., Georgia, missile defence, and Iran. The Russians know perfectly well that not much changes in US foreign policy from one regime to the next. The US empire follows a certain ruthless logic and must be accommodated by the political functionaries presiding over it.

In fact, analyst Kiril Rogov says most politicians actually wanted McCain to win. "Russian officials were ready for the kind of old-style confrontation a McCain presidency appeared to offer," he said. "Obama has promised a new model of foreign relations, and that worries Russian politicians." And there's Obama's loose cannon veepee Joseph Biden, who presented the Democratic Convention with his plan for the new administration's "real war", the war against Russia and China.

Still, there is room for hope. We all know just how "powerful" US vice presidents are (with the exception of the current office holder). Obama will not let himself be seen as an Uncle Tom. Both presidents are 40-something lawyers by training, cultured and reserved, starting their day online, not just relying on briefings prepared by aides. By all accounts, they are both reasonably uncorrupted by their meteoric rise to power, have cool heads and have the best interests of their countries at heart.

It is unlikely that Obama will run such a wild, unpremeditated foreign policy as his predecessor. There are factions within the imperial establishment — liberals vs hawks. As presumably one of the former, Obama will be more likely to rely on soft power (undermining other governments in the name of democracy) vs outright war. The Russians no doubt will count on Obama to wind down the current wars rather than starting new ones, all the time

keeping their eye on campaigns to “promote democracy” in their backyard. Remember it was Republican McCain’s adviser Randy Scheunemann and Vice-President Richard Cheney who abetted the brash Georgian president to go to war with Russia last August. Vyacheslav Nikonov, of the Politika think tank, says, “Obama is an open book, a story to be written.”

So there is a bit of a fresh slate, despite the exigencies of the empire. Any anti-Russia manoeuvring under the tutelage of Brzezinski will be much cleverer than under those that pulled the strings for Bush. The sorest point with Russia, of course, is the ever-looming plan for US missile bases in Poland and the Czech Republic. Obama has been cagey about this so far. After the Polish government website announced Obama would proceed with the missile sites, his senior foreign policy adviser Denis McDonough said, “President Kaczynski raised missile defense, but President-elect Obama made no commitment on it. His position is as it was throughout the campaign, that he supports deploying a missile defense system when the technology is proved to be workable.” The Czech public are solidly against it and just proved it by drubbing the ruling Civic Democrats in Senate and regional elections. The Senate will discuss the plan at the end of November. The Social Democrats, who benefited from the drubbing, promise to halt it. The Poles are already resigned to the possibility it will not happen after the above embarrassing exchange, with analysts suggesting the many problems the US now faces could mean an indefinite delay in the coveted base.

Alexander Khramchikhin, a defense analyst with the Institute of Political and Military Analysis, said that with Democrats in control of the presidency and Congress, the US could well cut defense spending and put the anti-missile system on the backburner. Obama could easily remove himself from that hook, providing a wonderful olive branch to the Russians. Medvedev’s threat to station Iskander missiles next door to Poland in Kaliningrad would evaporate. Dmitry Rogozin, Russia’s hardnosed envoy to NATO predicted that Obama would stop pressuring European NATO members from cooperating with Russia.

The other, equally sore point in relations — NATO’s triumphal march to Russia’s borders — could also be resolved by diplomacy. The rose is off Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili’s bloom after his botched war, and Ukraine is due for a new president, with both opposition contenders dismissing NATO membership as a priority. Again, by giving the right signals and avoiding Bush bluster about freedom and democracy, Obama could pacify the Russians without any loss of US prestige.

The main economic issue, which swamps both these political issues, is the September financial meltdown, which slashed the value of Russian stocks by two-thirds and, with the collapse in the price of oil, promises to leave Medvedev helpless to carry out his ambitious reform programme. Medvedev’s top economic adviser, Arkady Dvorkovich, thinks that under Obama, the United States will engage in a closer dialogue with Europe, Asia and Russia to find a way out of the financial crisis. “This dialogue will begin in the near future in Washington. We will look for solutions together.”

Medvedev will travel to Washington on 15 November to attend a G20 summit on the financial crisis, where he could meet Obama. Konstantin Kosachyov, head of the State Duma’s Foreign Affairs Committee, called on Obama to “find courage” to abandon the United States’ unilateral approach in its foreign policy and embrace the idea of collective action. The Bush administration has managed to worsen ties with Russia more than with any other major country, and Obama’s election “instills hope that a dramatic page in the relations of the two countries will be turned,” Federation Council Speaker Sergei Mironov

said.

There is one conflict where the US can move quickly to find common ground with Russia — in Nagorno-Karabak. The US, Russia and France are co-chairs of the Minsk Group, which acts as intermediary there. Medvedev met last week with the leaders of Azerbaijan and Armenia for talks on the conflict, getting them to agree to continue working on “a political resolution of the conflict.” None of the co-chairs has any particular hidden agenda, and if they could get the opponents to agree on a compromise, flooding them with development aid to sweeten the pill, this would be a strong signal that there is a way out of the nasty Cold War which Bush-Cheney have bequeathed Obama.

But there are many ways to sour relations, if that’s what the real actors want. Already, it was announced that Obama’s election team’s computers were hacked by a “foreign entity” during the election. Obama “technical experts” later speculated the hackers were Russian or Chinese. How easy it is to execute any number of pre-packaged false flag operations if necessary.

The common refrain these days is, “Who could possibly want to be US president after the mess Bush created?” On the contrary, cleaning up after the devastation of a hurricane is very rewarding; the results of one’s labours are clear and laudable. Obama could well have a truly historic sound-byte moment in a few years, meeting with his equally handsome, dynamic Russian counterpart to jointly solve some crisis which is bound to happen. The Bush years could be just a horrible — but receding — nightmare as we celebrate Obama’s re- election in four years.

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