

## **RESET OR OVERLOAD: NEW CHALLENGES FOR US-RUSSIAN RELATIONS**

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**Abstract.** At present global community faces lots of challenges, and stable and sound foreign relations are the priority for sustaining world peace and security. The relations between the leading powers like the USA and Russian Federation cannot be overlooked in this context. And these relations since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been most complicated and controversial with ups and downs. 2009 can be called a turning point in these relations: after the period of chill out, the new US presidency generates new hopes and expectations for a fresh start in the US-Russian relations. The article discusses the credibility of the US top officials' pledges, the response of the Russian side and a possibility of a genuine fresh start in the USA-Russia relations.

**Introduction.** In 1776 the US Declaration of Independence proclaimed that there are certain self-evident truths - "that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness". The document also underscored that the reason for existence and ultimate concern of any government is "to secure these rights".

Contemporary global community faces lots of challenges, and stable and sound foreign relations are the priority for sustaining world peace and security. The relations between the leading powers like the USA and Russian Federation cannot be overlooked in this context. And these relations since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have been most complicated and controversial imbued with both competition and partnership, with the periods of ups and downs. 2009 can be called a turning point in these relations: after the period that was called a return of the Cold War, new hopes and expectations have emerged.

The article discusses the credibility of the US top officials' pledges to a fresh start in the US-Russian relations; for that purpose their most recent key statements and speeches are analyzed. As a nation's official foreign policy is best worded in the speeches and statements of its political elite, the paper studies mainly the US official point of view, the major sources (speeches, statements, press releases and articles) being taken from the US Department of State official web-site *America.gov*, as well as the web-sites of the US Embassy in Moscow and the Carnegie Foundation in Russia [1]. The authors of the articles referred to (David McKeeby and Merle David Kellerhals, Jr.) are staff writers of *America.gov*.

The response of the Russian side can be perceived in Russian mass media. Since the limitations in the size of the given paper do not allow a detailed and comprehensive analysis of all major Russian mass media on the problem, for the sake of demonstrating the general attitude two Russian newspapers are chosen: "Kommersant" (as a sample of serious press) and "Moskovsky Komsomolets" (as popular press).

January 20, 2009 is called a hallmark in the US contemporary history: Barack Hussein Obama, the 44<sup>th</sup> President of the US, took the oath of office. It had been for the first time when African American became the US president. Before that the domination of WASPs (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants) in the US presidency had been broken only once, in 1961 – when John F. Kennedy, a catholic and ethnic Irish, became the 35th president of the United States.

The 2008 electoral campaign in the US is bound to provoke further interest, discussion and controversy since it was not just a traditional opposition between two major political

parties and an evitable change of one political force by the other. As the popularity of the Republicans was at its historical lowest, a Democratic candidate was to reflect the major aspiration and vision of the country. The country, confronted with failures in foreign policy, continuing military and political flops in Iraq and Afghanistan and anti-americanism growing globally, desperately sought radical changes in the administration and the Democrats were more than willing to offer that. Even if B.H. Obama had failed to be nominated the first African American candidate for the US president, influential and charismatic Hilary R. Clinton could have become the first woman to be nominated for the highest office in the USA.

Americans voted for young, dynamic, intellectual, athletic, good-looking, brilliant cosmopolitan image of Barack H. Obama, seeing in him the very opposite to seemingly dull Mr. G.W. Bush, who was currently called the most unpopular president in the US history. (George W. Bush succeeded in becoming even less popular than unlucky Herbert C. Hoover who had been appointed the scapegoat for the Great Depression by American public opinion). The pursuit of change personified by the very smiling image of B.H. Obama was so powerful that neither people nor electoral voters paid any attention to the allegations that B. Obama had been violating one of the basic principles of the US Constitution: “only a natural born citizen of the United States... shall be eligible to the Office of President” (Article II, Section 2).

The global reaction that followed B. Obama’s victory and inauguration seems to prove the correctness of the American choice: Obama’s popularity in African and in some Muslim countries has greatly improved the US image there. President Obama has been warmly welcomed in every country he has visited during his first world tour in the capacity of the country’s leader - in March 31–April 5, 2009 President and Mrs. Obama visited Britain, France, Germany, the Czech Republic and Turkey. (It is enough to recall the recent most enthusiastic cheers during his visit to Strasbourg, France). World mass media seems to be in love with the new US president (and with his shining smile).

So far the 44<sup>th</sup> President has been acting impeccably to preserve and enhance this positive image. Declaring in his public speeches and addresses his permanent allegiance to America’s fundamental values and principles of the Founding Fathers, he also promotes and instills the feelings of trust, confidence and hope among his countrymen, acting as a true leader in crisis. (See, for example, President Obama’s Inaugural Address [2]). He keeps referring to the intention to follow the example of one of the most esteemed presidents in the US history – Abraham Lincoln. (Marking Lincoln’s 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary, B. Obama underscored that it was Abraham Lincoln, who made his own personal story possible [3]). And it is worth mentioning that B. Obama took the presidential oath of office over the Bible last used for inaugurating President Lincoln in 1861 [4].

Besides A. Lincoln, President Obama has chosen another highly popular American President - F.D. Roosevelt – as a role model, which is most important in the period of crisis. And it is not a coincidence that on the official web-site of the US Department of State (*America.gov* -) a new blog dedicated to the beginning of B. Obama’s presidency has been created. The title is symbolic: *First 100 Days*. One cannot miss the allusion to FDR’s 100 days [5]. Moreover, copying E. Roosevelt (F.D. Roosevelt’s wife), President Obama’s wife Michelle organized a small vegetable garden to show the Americans how to provide themselves with fresh vegetables and save money in crisis.

Constant allusions to F.D. Roosevelt who is thought to be the main architect of the New Deal Program that saved the country in the period of Great Depression, the worst economic crisis in America’s and world history, also greatly enhance B. Obama’s positive image of a strong and charismatic national and global leader.

His family is also an asset for winning public sympathy and support. Being called “the icons of style”, the Obamas at the same time demonstrate the commitment to basic American

values: hard work, self-reliance and self-sufficiency, and - first and foremost- traditional family values.

The phenomenon of B.H. Obama, his charismatic public image and his growing popularity deserves a separate lengthy study. However, for the purposes of the article it is worth concentrating on one aspect of his impact on the US foreign policy and international relations in general: the implications of B. Obama's presidency for the US-Russian Relations.

Outlining the program of action, President Obama underscored some major challenges the country is facing: global crisis, transnational terrorism, dramatic decline in the US popularity with other nations (the legacy of the previous administration), ecology... It is noteworthy that discussing counterterrorism, US President again emphasized his commitment to stick to basic American values while confronting global terrorism [6].

Analyzing the priorities of the US foreign policy, B. Obama underscored the necessity to improve the US global image, turn around the NATO role and involvement in world affairs, handle the situation in Iraq (including the total withdraw of American troops in visible future) and Afghanistan. The US president emphasized the importance of a new approach to establishing a reliable partnership with such leading world powers as China and Russia; and he also demonstrated his intention to improve relations with Cuba.

It is noteworthy that although B.H. Obama himself is a novice at global politics, but his team consist of highly experienced and skilled "heavy-weights": he appointed Hilary R. Clinton (who is listed among the US most powerful people) Secretary of State and William Burns (a former US Ambassador to Moscow) Under Secretary of State; Vice President Joe Biden should be also listed among the key players on the global stage.

The improvement of relations with Russia is listed among the priorities of the US foreign policy. And the Obama administration has been giving definite signs of that. Acknowledging a recent "dangerous drift" in relations between Russian Federation and US and NATO, President Obama and his cabinet "seek improved relations with Russia". (As B. Obama has put it: "We need to reset or reboot the relations" [7]). Since his inauguration, President Obama has been exchanging letters and phone calls with President Medvedev, identifying the issues of common concern: global financial crisis, cooperation in combating terrorism, nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, control over nuclear programs of Iran and North Korea, new US-Russian talks on the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START); security in Afghanistan and a number of others. The first meeting of the two leaders was to take place at the G20 Summit in London.

The summit meeting was a success due to preceding diplomatic activity. As it was mentioned since taking office in January, B. Obama has exchanged letters and several phone calls with his Russian counterpart on ways to improve mutual ties that have recently snapped due to controversies between the nations. In February, US Vice President Biden met with Russian Deputy Prime Minister Sergey Ivanov on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference in Germany and said that it was "time to revisit relations with Russia" and that the US "seeks to reverse dangerous drift in Kremlin ties" [8]. In March, US Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton met Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Geneva to set the stage for the Obama-Medvedev talks in London and later in Moscow. It is also noteworthy that striving to "repair" US-Russian relations both leaders sought advice from former top officials and influential politicians. President Obama and Vice President Biden had a private meeting with former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, while President Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in March met with an American delegation led by former US Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and George Shultz along with former senator Sam Nunn and former Defense Secretary William Perry. Another ex-Secretary of State, James Baker, also traveled to Moscow.

A positive role in the success of the London meeting and further prospects for repairing the relations can be also played by the personalities of the two presidents. Observers note that there is a kind of definite sympathy between them, which can be partly accounted by both B. Obama and D. Medvedev being lawyers by education and representing a new, post-Cold War generation of world leaders who can promise a genuine new start in the US-Russian relations [9].

The summit meeting in London, being a culmination of the first stage in promoting a “fresh start” for Russia and the USA, identified the key elements in the future relations between the two countries. And the most important issue has become the new arms control plan outlined by presidents Obama and Medvedev [10]. A “fresh start” in the U.S.-Russian relations is to begin “with a renewed commitment to shrinking stockpiles of nuclear weapons, after Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov announce plans to start negotiations on a new arms control treaty” [11]. The cut was has been listed among the top priorities of the US-Russian relations since the advent of the Obama administration. “We intend to have an agreement by the end of the year ... This is a highest priority to our governments,” H.R. Clinton said in Geneva March 6 [12]. This approach has been also shared by Russian government. In his March 7 statement President D. Medvedev praised the US administration’s commitment to arms control “as a first step toward “pressing the reset button” in U.S.-Russian relations“[13]. However, one should not forget about the sore points in US-Russian relations: dramatic differences over the 2008 events in Georgia being treated by the US and its allies as “Russia’s invasion” [14]; NATO enlargement to the East (including plans to admit Georgia and Ukraine) and the future of European security, and a proposed European-based ballistic missile defense system.

The meeting between B. Obama and D. Medvedev during the G20 Financial Summit in London has been called the peak of weeks of intensive US-Russian diplomatic efforts to “press the reset button” on their relations. A joint statement issued in the result of the meeting set out a new US-Russian agenda, targeted at “moving beyond reset and toward turning warm words into actual achievements” [15]. In addition to arms control and nuclear nonproliferation, some other top priorities for global security were identified (i.e. necessity to counter the global financial crisis, encourage stability in South Asia by promoting peace and stability in Afghanistan and monitoring Iran’s nuclear aspirations, and continuously and consistently support progress toward Middle East peace). It was also agreed that future summit meetings should include discussions on joint efforts countering such global threats as terrorism, organized transnational crime, corruption, human and drug trafficking, as well as ways to strengthen U.S.-Russian economic ties and promote cultural and academic exchanges. As it was stated on the US official web-site *America.gov*, “early progress on shared challenges could help bridge points of disagreement between Washington and Moscow on such issues as Russia’s continued presence on internationally recognized Georgian territory and the Kremlin’s concerns over proposed European components of a ballistic missile defense system”[16].

Although important and productive, the London meeting has been just a beginning of a new trend in the relations of our presidents: B. Obama accepted President Medvedev’s invitation to visit Moscow in July, 2009.

It may be more relevant to analyze President Obama’s statements at other important events that followed the G20 Summit, since the London summit was mainly a financial meeting aimed at working a joint course of actions to face the global economic recession. For world foreign policy the NATO 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Summit is far more important. (The 60th Anniversary NATO Summit was jointly hosted by France and Germany). Speaking in Strasbourg at a press conference, President Obama urged NATO to engage Russia in sustaining global security, to re-establish the partnership program (suspended after the 2008

Russian-Georgian conflict) and recognize that the Russians like other nations have legitimate interests of their own. B. Obama also said he held a “terrific bilateral meeting” with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev during the G20 Financial Summit; but US President did not fail to repeat that although in some cases there are common interests, there are still “some common core disagreements” [17].

It is now denying that the current trend in global politics and in the US attitude towards Russia is positive and encouraging. However one should not be overenthusiastic with the results. Differences, controversies, frictions and permanent competition in the US-Russian relations are inevitable. As President Obama stated at the press conference with British Prime Minister Gordon Brown: “There are very real differences between the United States and Russia, and I have no interest in papering those over. But there are also a broad set of common interests that we can pursue ... On a whole range of issues, from Afghanistan to Iran to the topics that will be consuming most of our time here at the G20, I think there's great potential for concerted action.” (See the [transcript of the Obama-Brown press conference](#)) [18].

The issue of Iran seems to be of utmost importance for the USA and the implication of Russia's support is hard to overestimate. (Having had long-lasting partnership with Iran and other Muslim countries, Russia can be a valuable ally in re-shaping not very positive current relations between Western powers and Iran). And US President is among the first to understand the full implication of that. Thus, speaking in Strasbourg, he stated that with the Europeans, Russia and the United States working together on the Iranian issue, there is a strong chance for a peaceful resolution that will respect Iran's sovereignty and allow Iran to develop peaceful nuclear energy. B. Obama reminded that the US has been working with Britain, China, France, Germany and Russia to persuade Iran to give up its nuclear weapons program in return for a series of economic and political incentives [19].

The results of the Anniversary NATO Summit look beneficial for Russia's foreign policy. The US President (with the USA playing the dominant role in the Alliance) called upon respecting interests of our country and renewing cooperation with it. And at present the measures are being taken to revive the NATO-Russia Council suspended because of the Russian-Georgian conflict in August, 2008 and to resume regular talks between Russia and NATO. The issue of Ukraine and Georgia joining the Treaty is also out of agenda. And the proposed plan for deploying components of a ballistic missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic is also delayed due to resistance in these countries. However, the NATO's expansion to the East is continuing: Croatia and Albania have just become the new members. Also France is coming back to the military structure of the Alliance.

B. Obama has also highlighted the challenges the US and NATO would like to meet in partnership with Russia: ensuring a peaceful nature of Iranian nuclear programs and establishing peace and stability in Afghanistan and Middle East. But the key issue for the US President is the non-proliferation and dramatic cut of nuclear weapons, the total abolishing of nuclear weapons being B. Obama's greatest dream and ambition. President Medvedev shares the vision. And this may become the foundation for building a new productive partnership between our countries based on mutual respect without any reference to the spheres of influence or interest [20].

Both sides have shown clear indications of their desire for mutually beneficial partnership on the principles of equality and justice. The general tone of all US official statements, speeches and articles is either neutral or rather friendly – no more rhetoric of confrontation and harassing. President Medvedev is painted quite favourably. The description of President Obama and his actions in Russian press is also positive and constructive. Moreover, he is the third most referred to person after President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin. Since January 2009 it has been hard to find an issue of Russian most popular

newspapers “Kommersant” and “Moskovsky Komsomolets” without reference to B. Obama [21].

Russian TV and Internet have also been friendly to the current American leader, a sharp contrast to his predecessor. His popularity with Russian TV and Internet equals that of with the Russian press. Hardly any day passes without B. Obama being shown by Russian central TV channels or without him being mentioned on the Russian Internet [22].

Summing up, it will not be an exaggeration to say that the popularity of President Obama with Russian mass media almost equals his popularity with American official sources. And since mass media is rightfully called the “fourth estate”, the treatment of the new American leader by Russian mass media not only forms public opinion in Russia, but reflects both the overt and hidden attitude of Russian political establishment towards US president and his administration. So far this attitude is definitely positive and signals the readiness to constructive and fair partnership as well as openness towards the dialogue between the leading nations.

**Conclusion.** The advent of the 44<sup>th</sup> US president – young, dynamic, democratic and charismatic Barak Obama – seems to be a real turning point and a true “fresh start” in the US-Russian relations: after a long period of frictions, misunderstanding and coldness, real positive shifts can be perceived. And some most important steps include the acknowledgement of key roles and responsibility of both powers in sustaining and promoting world peace and global security as well as readiness to listen to and hear each other no matter the differences in the points of view.

However, let us not be too optimistic in our hopes. Numerous statements by top officials of the preceding US administration also used to sound very positive [23]. And although Russia is listed among the US key partners, China and India have also been called crucial partners and in reality the transatlantic relations (with the UK, France, Germany and other NATO countries) have always been the top priority for the US administration [24].

Moreover it is worth remembering that some very serious problems in the relations between our countries appeared when the Democrats were in power. It will be enough to mention, the Carribean Crisis during JFK’s term and the US bombing and shelling of Yugoslavia during B. Clinton’s presidency. The re-appearance of the same family name in the current US administration seems symbolic and may call for vigilance.

It is also rather symbolic that there was a “mistake” in the gift Hilary Clinton presented to Lavrov during their meeting in Geneva: the red button for resetting US-Russian relations was called *peregruzka* (*overload*) and not *perezagruzka* (*reset*). Only very naive people could believe in coincidences and accidental errors at the level like that. Thus a cautious optimism seems to be the best policy.

The current period is thought to be a perfect time for improving or “resetting” relations between Russian and the US. There are new presidents in the two countries, sharing a similar academic background (both have been trained as lawyers) and a similar respect to the principle of the priority of law and justice in state governance, public administration and foreign affairs. Some important practical steps towards each other have been already made. And the presidents’ first official meeting during the G20 summit in London (April 2, 2009) was a real turning point in the long and controversial history of the US-Russian relations, where our countries have experienced lots of ups and downs. Now there appear to be a new chance for a true fresh start. Let us hope that the chance will not be wasted as in a global world like ours the relations between countries like Russia and the USA are of utmost importance not only for them but for the whole global community.

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