



Devin Nunes oversimplifies timeline of Obama 'reset' with Russia

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In his opening statement at a closely watched hearing about possible Russian interference with the 2016 presidential election, House Intelligence Chairman Devin Nunes, R-Calif., criticized United States policy toward Russia under President Barack Obama.

"In recent years, committee members have issued repeated and forceful pleas for stronger actions against Russian belligerence, but the Obama administration was committed to the notion, against all evidence, that we could reset relations with Putin," Nunes said.

This description of the Obama administration's position struck us as one-sided, so we took a closer look. We asked Nunes's office for comment, but didn't hear back.

We concluded it's misleading for Nunes to have ignored at least three years of the Obama administration in which the reset policy was dead, replaced by a much tougher line on Moscow.

How the reset came about

In March 2009, about two months after Obama was sworn in, his administration initiated a new policy toward Russia called the "reset." The official kickoff came in Geneva on March 6, 2009, when then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave her Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov a red button.

The new policy came less than a year after conflict flared in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, two regions of Georgia, an independent country that was previously part of the Soviet Union. Obama's foreign policy team had decided that the United States had a window of opportunity to find common ground on certain issues with Russia, given that Dmitry Medvedev had replaced Vladimir Putin as president in mid 2008.

The administration -- and some outside observers -- credit the reset with some achievements, at least initially.

During the period when the reset was U.S. policy, the two nations signed a nuclear-arms treaty; reached an agreement to allow U.S. troops and weapons destined for Afghanistan to be sent through Russian territory rather than Pakistan; collaborated on tough United Nations sanctions against Iran; achieved Russian membership in the World Trade Organization; and agreed that

Russia would not use a U.N. Security Council veto to block a bombing campaign in Libya by the United States and its European allies.

As time went on, though, the reset drew increasing criticism. In 2011, former chess champion and human-rights activist Garry Kasparov criticized both Obama and Putin, telling the *Daily Beast* that the reset was "a disaster." And Douglas J. Feith, who served as undersecretary of defense for policy during the George W. Bush administration, co-wrote an article in *Foreign Policy* that called the reset "a head-shaking disappointment."

The reset peters out

The era of cooperation began to come apart in 2012 -- not coincidentally, the year Putin returned to the presidency after Medvedev's term.

Large street protests in his 2012 presidential campaign "had unnerved Mr. Putin, and he accused Mrs. Clinton of instigating them," the *New York Times* reported. "White House officials had hoped the hostile talk was just for domestic campaign purposes, but even after Mr. Putin formally won re-election, he kept it up."

Relations worsened further in 2013, when Russia took in Edward Snowden, a former National Security Agency contractor who had leaked a large trove of sensitive intelligence.

The last straw, however, came in 2014 with Russia's intervention in Ukraine. A popular revolution overthrew pro-Russian President Viktor Yanukovich of Ukraine, another former Soviet republic that became independent after the end of the Cold War. Russia responded by applying military pressure in pro-Russian regions of Ukraine and eventually annexing Crimea.

In addition to strongly condemning Russia's actions, the United States worked with its European allies to impose a series of escalating sanctions on Moscow starting on March 6, 2014.

The sanctions "inflicted real costs on Russia," said Dan Nexon, a Georgetown University foreign service professor.

Emma Ashford, a research fellow with expertise on Russia at the libertarian Cato Institute, said that while the reset was "dying" between 2012 and 2014, the sanctions were a turning point.

"By 2014, with turmoil in Ukraine and the Russian invasion of Crimea, there was no longer any real attempt to seek the reset," she said. "In fact, the Obama administration pursued a strong sanctions policy against Russia, and contributed troops to bolster NATO forces in Eastern Europe."

Other experts agreed.

"Certainly by March 2014, when Russia annexed Crimea, there was no evidence of any ongoing Obama administration commitment to the reset," added Susan H. Allen, a foreign policy specialist at George Mason University. "The U.S. condemnation of the annexation of Crimea was clear and unequivocal."

"By 2014, I don't know how anyone could credibly argue that U.S. policy was the reset policy," added Richard Nephew, a research scholar at Columbia University.

Our ruling

Nunes said, "In recent years ... the Obama administration was committed to the notion, against all evidence, that we could reset relations with Putin."

Nunes' summary of U.S. policy toward Russia is at best incomplete. The Obama administration did pursue a reset policy, and kept it up arguably as late as 2014. But observers agree that the policy was dead no later than early 2014, when Russia intervened in Ukraine, and was already in question for two years before that.

Nunes' statement is misleadingly oversimplified, so we rate it Half True.