



# POLITICUS For Obama Abroad, Moscow Is a Special Case

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WASHINGTON — When Barack Obama goes to Moscow early next month, his third major foreign trip since taking office, he'll be pressed to modify what's been an Obama Abroad pattern of scoring points with heady idealism and doses of expiation for what he considers America's past sins.

The Kremlin, about 20 years after the Soviet Union's implosion, still offers little in the line of atmosphere fit to accommodate an American leader's desires.

Updates of Mr. Obama's talk in Prague of a nuclear weapon-free world, or echoes of his can't-we-all-just-get-along appeal in Cairo to Islam and the West — meant to comfort and heal — would screech off-key in the Moscow halls of power where the invasion of Georgia was planned last year, or laws were endorsed last month that could mean jail terms for those who challenge official, standardized versions of Soviet and Russian history.

The president's visit July 6-8 is his first in what he may yet call adversarial territory.

How do you bring something positive to a relationship with a country whose president, Dmitri A. Medvedev, in his first year in office, basically annexed two Georgian provinces, reasserted a Soviet-type zone of influence for countries at Russia's borders, and reapplied his predecessor's tactic of intimidating Russian energy clients in Europe with threats of shutdowns?

And this leader is cast as the good guy, with whom the American president said he had a "terrific meeting" in London in April (which in Obama terms may mean talking to somebody describing himself as young, interested in change, and a lawyer).

As for Vladimir V. Putin, officially prime minister these days but probably still pretty much in charge, it was he who gave a heavy's parting-shot speech at the Munich Security Conference two years ago attempting to enshrine the notion of America as the cause of the world's great problems.

The Russian leadership that Mr. Obama will meet, according to Lilia Shevtsova, a senior associate at the Carnegie Moscow Center, a think tank, is representative of "a system based on an official mechanism of anti-Americanism."

In a conversation here looking at the prospects for the summit meeting against a backdrop of the Russian leadership's aggression in Georgia, its threats to Ukraine and its smothering of democracy at home, Ms. Shevtsova said, "There is unfortunately very little to talk about if you consider the lack of common interests and values."

Since the Moscow meeting is likely to focus on nuclear weapons issues — an enhancement

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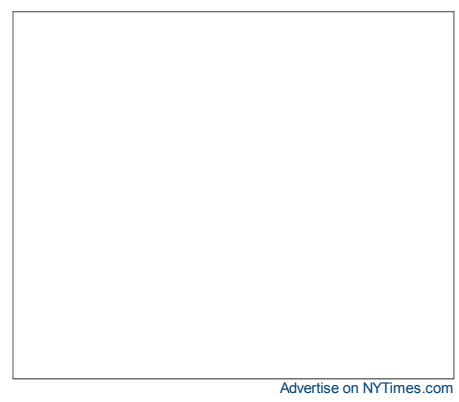
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of the START agreements is regarded here as Mr. Obama's "deliverable," or indicator of improved relations for world and American opinion — Ms. Shevtsova said the meeting recalled the U.S.-Soviet relationship of the 1980s.

Or one in which "improved relations" soon could risk being a kind of American acquiescence to the existence of an authoritarian Russia, claiming great power status and abandoning any notions of democratic change.

Apart from the nuclear discussion, in which America might be surrendering a bit of its strategic advantage, the Obama administration has given little specific indication of what it expects or would want from the talks.

As supplier of Iran's nuclear wherewithal, Russia can make a difference by acting to halt its drive toward a nuclear weapon.

But what's the point for Russia of delivering the United States from the grief of having to confront the mullahs, when the American anti-missile shield, which Moscow doesn't like, may fall on its own? That could come without trade-offs if Mr. Obama distances himself from this Bush administration idea, or Poland or the Czech Republic bails out from deployment of its interceptors and radar.

Andrei Illarionov, a former Putin economics adviser and now a senior fellow at the Cato Institute here, told me that he had spent considerable time trying to explain to people in the United States that "help from the Russian leadership on Iran is just impossible. It's such a naïve idea."

The Russian leaders are not likely either to assure the president that they will not deliver S-300 surface-to-air missiles to Iran. The missiles could foil an eventual Israeli air attack on Iranian nuclear installations, and any sign of their acquisition (a deal was negotiated in 2007) might prompt a pre-emptive Israeli strike.

And who would expect Mr. Medvedev, after weaning the government of Kyrgyzstan from American influence, and seemingly succeeding in getting its government to close a U.S. air base there central to the supply of U.S. troops in Afghanistan, to reverse field?

Taking all this into consideration, according to Mr. Illarionov, "It isn't apparent Obama understands what he wants. At the same time, the Russian leadership is clearly better prepared and, indeed, knows what it wants.

"The key issue for them is getting something akin to acceptance of a 'zone of special interest'" — or an accepted sphere of influence taking in the countries of the former Soviet Union.

"In this context," he said, "the president's trip is premature."

Mr. Illarionov believes the administration is unlikely to forcefully challenge the Kremlin in the numerous areas where it has destroyed expectations for Russia's future as a predictable, fair and law-abiding country.

There's a great irony here. Because that's just how George W. Bush behaved even after what his aides have described as a "dalliance" with the Russia of Mr. Putin from 2002 to 2006.

At Georgia's invasion, America barely woofed. On Russia's use of its energy resources as a weapon, the Bush administration backed off from confrontation at the 2006 St. Petersburg G-8 summit meeting.

When it came to a NATO meeting last year at which Georgia and Ukraine were supposed to have received membership plans, the Bush administration offered promises for entry that equate with Mr. Obama's time estimate for ridding the world of nukes — not while he's alive.

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More: just after that meeting, Mr. Bush and Mr. Putin agreed on details intended to follow up on the START nuclear arrangements. But Russia never made the documents official.

Now, American diplomats find themselves laboring on the fine print of a reportedly similar plan that Mr. Obama wants to be emblematic of a successful trip and his pressing a reset button on Russia.

At this rate, as he flies into Moscow, the president might appear a supplicant. Three weeks from touchdown, it seems fair to ask, what for?

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