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The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming?

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At her first meeting with Sergei Lavrov in Geneva in March 2009, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton gave the Russian Foreign Minister a small gift box. Inside was a red button with the English word "reset" and the Russian word peregruzka. "You got it wrong," Lavrov announced. The Russian word for "reset" is perezagruzk. Perezagruzk means "overload."

Albeit inadvertently, Angela Stent asserts, Clinton got it right. Like Clinton and Bush era officials, she and President Obama discovered that U.S.-Russian relations were "overburdened" by a legacy of disagreements, mutual mistrust, different values and priorities, and an agenda that included, among other pressing issues, human rights, nuclear non-proliferation, missile defense, security arrangements for countries in Eastern Europe, responses to "The Arab Spring" in the Middle East, and bi-lateral trade and investment.
In *The Limits of Partnership*, Stent, a professor of government and foreign service at Georgetown University and a member of the State Department and National Intelligence Council in the Clinton and Bush administrations, clearly and carefully lays out the contentious issues that have divided the United States and Russia since the end of the Cold War. Stent urges American policy-makers to be modest and realistic in their goals, expect no breakthroughs, pursue a long-term consistent policy of engagement, focus on areas (Afghanistan, non-proliferation and terrorism) where cooperation seems feasible, support greater openness in Russian civil and political society without antagonizing Russian leaders, and create more stakeholders by expanding economic ties between the two countries.

It won't be easy. Worried about the impact of democracy-promotion and regime change on Muslims inside Russia, suspicious of NATO's meddling in its backyard, intent on establishing "an equal partnership of unequals," and convinced that the United States is in decline, Vladimir Putin, who may well remain in office until 2024, cannot be expected to respond positively to American initiatives. Nor does the United States, which has not made Russia a high priority in its foreign policy, have much leverage over its former Cold War adversary.

Stent demonstrates, moreover, that in each specific policy domain, the United States must deal with countervailing pressures that are the enemies of consistency. Dependent on Russia for much of its oil and gas, she suggests, the nations of Western Europe have been reluctant to antagonize Putin by offering a NATO membership action plan (MAP) to Ukraine and Georgia. Embracing a "more realistic timetable" for Russia to evolve into a more modern, democratic society, a senior German official recently chastised America for its "empathy deficit disorder." While Russia greeted President Obama's decision to not abandon plans to deploy radars and interceptors in Eastern Europe as "obviously a positive sign for us," the governments of Czechoslovakia and Poland made clear their disappointment. Russia has, of course, consistently blocked UN resolutions against Syria, which it continues to supply with weapons. And, Stent adds, although there has been more continuity between Democratic and Republican presidents on Russia "than many would publicly admit," the United States Congress "has often been skeptical about deeper engagement."

Although she does not explicitly endorse his views, Stent notes that Dmitri Trenin, "one of Russia's most astute foreign policy observers," believes that his country has pressed its own reset button. "Until recently," has written, "Russia saw itself as a Pluto in the Western solar system, very far from the center but fundamentally part of it. Now it has left that orbit entirely." The West, Trenin concludes, "needs to calm down and take Russia for what it is: a major outside player that is neither an eternal foe nor an automatic friend."

Perhaps. But, Stent implies, the United States and its European partners can more effectively engage Russia by promoting commercial relations. To be sure, since Russia is primarily a raw materials and arms exporter, the two nations currently lack economic complementarity. In 2012, Russia accounted for less than 1% of total U.S. trade. However, given high oil prices and effective macroeconomic policies, Russia has an expanding middle class, with the desire - and purchasing power - to acquire Western goods. Creating stakeholders on both sides, Stent indicates, might change the political climate. China is the obvious model: "Despite the administration's sometimes testy political relations with China and concerns about its human
rights record, U.S. business advocates successfully for its interests because China is such an important economic partner."

If Putin makes good on his promise to modernize and diversify the economy, the two countries could well increase bi-lateral trade and investment. Their leaders might realize that cooperation is in their interest - and everyone's interest. A group of former U.S. ambassadors to Russia and former Russian ambassadors to the U.S. put it well in 2013: "The world is no longer hostage to tense relations between Moscow and Washington, but the global community is still concerned to see these relations put on a stable foundation."

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