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When Medvedev became president, it was understood that Putin would retain a large amount of power as prime minister, but there were still a few hopes that he might champion a few independent initiatives. How do you think that this relationship has played out? Will Putin return as President in 2014 or is he content to guide policy from the seat of Prime Minister?

Speculation about who will be the next President of Russia is best left to analysts outside of government, not me. In the Obama Administration interactions with Russian government, including both President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin, we have noticed a unified commitment to establish a more substantive relationship with the United States that advances the interests of both the Russian and American people. To date, we have made real progress in working with the Russian government to pursue several mutual interests, including new cooperation in the transport and supply of our troops in Afghanistan, the signing of a New START treaty, agreement to use our seats at the UN Security Council to deter proliferation of nuclear weapons, sharing experiences about the role of innovation and new technologies for more transparent government, more effective civil society, and more profitable private companies, and the creation of a new Bilateral Presidential Commission that seeks to support greater interaction between our government agencies and non-governmental organizations along many dimensions, from sport to space. We also continue to have frank discussions with our Russian counterparts on issues where our interests do not overlap.

Medvedev has announced initiatives against corruption, which is enormously prevalent in Russia. Are these initiatives feasible?

As President Medvedev has articulated, corruption remains a major challenge that has an impact on Russia's economic well-being and security. We appreciate the measures President Medvedev has taken to date and welcome the fact that Russia has become a State Party to the UN Convention against
Corruption. Moving toward more transparency and open government, introducing financial disclosure, strengthening rule of law and an independent judiciary, and empowering civil society and an independent media are all important elements in our own experience of combating corruption. Through many different government and non-government channels, we seek to support President Medvedev’s goals of reducing corruption in Russia.

Russia was recently in talks with the United States about an agreement to limit cyber warfare. Will this prevent a new cyber arms race? What do you make of independent Russian hackers who have been accused of attacking pro-Western parties or government websites in former Soviet republics?

As you know, President Obama has made cybersecurity a national priority and, as with other issues, we are engaging in a dialogue with the Russian Federation and other nations on this broad topic. It would be inaccurate to describe those discussions as talks to limit cyber warfare; given the range of threats we face, including hackers and organized criminal groups – and the technical limitations to effectively attributing malicious conduct to the perpetrator – we need to focus collectively on building capacity among nations to strengthen defenses and enhancing international cooperation among law enforcement organizations and others. As all countries are increasingly dependant on this digital infrastructure, this cooperation must also include forging consensus among nations concerning norms of acceptable conduct in cyberspace in order to reduce uncertainties and build confidence among states. We look forward to working with the Russian Federation to achieve these goals.

4. Russia controls some of the largest gas and oil reserves in the world and provides these services to Europe. What are the implications of Russian control of gas and oil supplies for European security and prosperity?

Europe, like the rest of the world, is seeking to diversify energy supply routes of traditional energy sources such as oil and gas, and at the same time develop alternative energy sources (solar, wind, nuclear), utilize new technologies in areas like extraction of shale gas, and all the while pursuing policies to encourage greater energy efficiency. When possible, we support these efforts and also learn from our European allies and partners as we too seek greater independence from reliance on traditional energy sources.

Russia certainly continues to play an important role as an integral energy supplier for Europe, and this in turn, does factor into political relationships between Russia and European countries. However, the relationship is symbiotic. Not only is Europe dependent on Russia for energy, but Russia is dependent on Europe for consumption. Recognizing and balancing between these different factors will lead to greater European security and prosperity.

Afghanistan is a major American strategic priority right now, but it is also very close to Russia. How can Russia be of help in securing Afghanistan and how can the US assuage concerns about being present in the Russian sphere of influence?

Since the Obama Administration took office, the United States has stepped up cooperation with Russia on Afghanistan in significant ways. Russia has opened up its land and air routes for the transportation of troops and supplies along the Northern Distribution Network, which now plays a much greater role in supplying our troops in Afghanistan. We are also working together to assist the Afghan government build its infrastructure, or in some cases rebuild Soviet-era infrastructure. The United States and Russia also are collaborating in the combating narco-trafficking, working to stem the flow of illicit opiates out of Afghanistan and the import of precursor chemicals used in the manufacturing of heroin into Afghanistan.

President Obama categorically rejects the notion of a “spheres of influence.” As he said in his graduation speech at the New Economic School in Moscow last July, “There is the 20th century view that the United States and Russia are destined to be antagonists, and that a strong Russia or a strong America can only assert themselves in opposition to one another. And there is a 19th century view that we are destined to vie for spheres of influence, and that great powers must forge competing blocs to balance one another. These assumptions are wrong. In 2009, a great power does not show strength by dominating or demonizing other countries. The days when empires could treat sovereign states as pieces on a chess board are over. As I said in Cairo, given our independence, any world order that -- given our interdependence, any world order that tries to elevate one nation or one group of people over another will inevitably fail. The pursuit of power is no longer a
zero-sum game -- progress must be shared.” Instead the Obama Administration seeks to work with the Russian government to advance our common interests in the region – that is, pursuing win-win outcomes, rather the embracing zero-sum thinking.

The six party talks over North Korea have stalled recently. What is Russia’s role in these talks and how can it help bring North Korea back to the table?

Russia has played a constructive role in the six party talks, working closely with the United States and other partners to engage the North Koreans and, after they conducted a nuclear test, to pass UN Security Council Resolution 1874. We continue to coordinate closely to bring the DPRK back to negotiations.

Two years ago, Russia and Georgia engaged in a military conflict. How has the relationship between Georgia and Russia changed, and what direction do you think it will go? How can the US balance concern for its ally, Georgia, with Russia?

The Obama Administration continues to have serious disagreements with the Russian government over Georgia. In the aftermath of the 2008 conflict, Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries. With almost every other country in the world, we continue to affirm that these two regions are part of Georgia, and continue to call upon Russia to end its occupation of these territories. Tensions between Russia and Georgia remain high, but we have witnessed some incremental confidence building measures, such as opening the border at Verkhniy Lars and allowing direct charter flights between the two countries. We continue to address our concerns bilaterally with Russia as well as with all parties within the Geneva process. We are also trying to strengthen the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms and seek a return of international observers to the two occupied regions of Georgia to foster stability, prevent renewed conflict, and promote reconciliation among the parties to the conflict.

Recently, Ukraine publicly expelled four Russians and detained one on charges of espionage. In your professional opinion, why were the Ukraine’s spy charges against Russia so public?

I’m not in a position to judge the merits of this particular case.

In the past month, the pro-Russian candidate won in a free election in Ukraine. However, according to the New York Times, the Kremlin was less than enthusiastic about the openness of the elections. What do you make of this development?

Based on what we have seen from our Embassy and international observers, the Ukrainian elections were by and large fair and free.

In the news today, we do not see many headlines about Chechnya. Given the America’s tough rhetoric on violent suppression of dissent, why do we not see a similar response concerning Chechnya?

Over the last year and a half or so, we have observed a dramatic increase in violence in the North Caucasus, in particular, in Dagestan, Ingushetia, Chechnya, and Kabardino-Balkaria. Attacks against law enforcement, suicide bombings, and kidnappings and disappearances have become all too common. When violations of human rights have occurred in the region, the Obama Administration has spoken out publicly and raised these issues privately with Russian government officials.

As students of international relations, we learn about the theoretical viewpoints from which international politics can be viewed i.e. the realist, liberal, and constructivist perspectives. Can you help us understand the theoretical perspectives you draw upon and how you use them when making policy?

As a former and future academic interested in these theories, I have observed many times senior government officials making arguments that seem to be to be informed by realist, liberal, and constructivist perspectives. At the same time, what is also striking to me now inside the government is how a militant commitment to any one of these perspectives to
explain government or state behavior limits rather the illuminates one’s understanding of international relations. As to whether President Obama is a “realist” or “liberal” – a question I get frequently from my academic colleagues – he has tackled this question directly in his Nobel acceptance speech:

within America, there has long been a tension between those who describe themselves as realists or idealists – a tension that suggests a stark choice between the narrow pursuit of interests or an endless campaign to impose our values around the world. I reject these choices. I believe that peace is unstable where citizens are denied the right to speak freely or worship as they please; choose their own leaders or assemble without fear. Pent-up grievances fester, and the suppression of tribal and religious identity can lead to violence. We also know that the opposite is true. Only when Europe became free did it finally find peace. America has never fought a war against a democracy, and our closest friends are governments that protect the rights of their citizens. No matter how callously defined, neither America’s interests – nor the world’s – are served by the denial of human aspirations. So even as we respect the unique culture and traditions of different countries, America will always be a voice for those aspirations that are universal. We will bear witness to the quiet dignity of reformers like Aung Sang Suu Kyi; to the bravery of Zimbabweans who cast their ballots in the face of beatings; to the hundreds of thousands who have marched silently through the streets of Iran. It is telling that the leaders of these governments fear the aspirations of their own people more than the power of any other nation. And it is the responsibility of all free people and free nations to make clear that these movements – these movements of hope and history – they have us on their side. §