

Hillary's Big Trip

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July 4, 2010

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's trip to several former Soviet and Communist bloc states this week occurs at a particularly notable time as it follows almost immediately after Russian President Dmitri Medvedev's trip to the U.S. and the break up and arrest of members of a Russian spy ring in the U.S. Accordingly, this trip will help further define the U.S. role in the region and relationship with the state's there.

Assistant Secretary of State Philip Gordon has already said that Clinton's trip is [not going to be a "sort of reassurance tour"](#). Gordon was referring primarily to the Poland and Georgia part of the trip as those two countries have both raised concerns about the Obama administration's commitment to their security and import. Gordon's comments are appropriate as Clinton is America's top diplomat, not America's top reassurer. [That role seems to belong to Vice-President Joseph Biden.](#)

Clinton will undoubtedly reassert U.S. support for the countries she is visiting, particularly Georgia and Poland, but it seems that the leadership of these countries would be better served by focusing on other things. The U.S.-Russia reset which has been the primary source of much of the Georgian and Polish concern has not meant that the U.S. has abandoned other countries in the region leaving Russia to determine their fate. Rather it means that U.S.-Russia relations will not be allowed to deteriorate to the point where the two countries cannot communicate and that some effort will be made to delink some of the many issues on which the two countries need to work.

The challenge this raises for the U.S. and the post-Soviet countries in the region, but not Poland which as an EU and NATO member has a stable and clear relationship with the U.S., is to recraft their bilateral relationship in light of the evolution of the U.S.-Russia relationship. This does not require any kind of radical changes to these relationships, but should still be addressed. Moreover, domestic politics in some of these countries, such as the election of Viktor Yanukovich as president of Ukraine will affect bilateral relationships with the U.S. at least as much as the reset.

U.S. policy in the former Soviet Union is defined more by continuity from Bush to Obama, than it is by change between the two administrations, but the latter seems more open to viewing the region with some nuance. This means that issues such as democracy and NATO membership while still important to the U.S. may be viewed differently by the new administration. Of course, that also means these issues may not be viewed differently, but these are the kinds of questions that should be discussed during this trip.

For example, Clinton like her predecessors will undoubtedly emphasize the continued need for democratic reforms, in most of the countries she visits on this trip but it is not entirely clear what is meant by this. In the previous administration anti-Russian feeling

was treated as a surrogate for democratic development thus allowing governments in Azerbaijan and Georgia to win kudos beyond what was appropriate based on the level of democracy itself. The current administration seems less committed to this view, but the evidence that democracy is truly important in these relationships is still somewhat scant.

Similarly, while Ukraine's new leadership has chosen not to pursue NATO membership, this remains a goal of the Georgian leadership as well as of some political forces in Ukraine. The U.S. has maintained, rhetorically at least, its position supporting eventual NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine while not aggressively pushing NATO to expand.

The U.S. has made its views on these issues clear in the big picture, but the details and meaning of these positions have still not, in some cases, been clarified. Working towards clarifying these views and continuing the bilateral cooperative relationships with these countries which reflect the priorities and views of the current administration in Washington seems a far better use of time for both sides than simply requesting and receiving yet another firm, but somewhat amorphous, reassurance of American support.