Maybe U.S.-Russian ‘Reset’ Isn’t About Iran

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Last July, on his way home from a trip to Ukraine and Georgia, Vice-President Joe Biden gave an interview with the Wall Street Journal. The interview, in which Biden described how Russia is weak, and how the U.S. “vastly underestimate(s) the hand that we hold” was widely understood in the U.S. as another gaffe by the gaffe-prone Biden. Biden’s remarks only qualify as a gaffe if we use Mike Kinsley’s definition of a gaffe as when a politician accidentally tells the truth.

In that interview Biden, perhaps inadvertently, revealed quite a bit about how the Obama administration, not inaccurately, views Russia. It is difficult to look at Russia and not see, as Biden did, the declining influence, even in the former Soviet Union. The failure, for example, of any post-Soviet state to join Russia in recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states following the Russia Georgia war is strong evidence of this. The former Soviet countries of Central Asia where the rising economic, and political, power of China at the expense of Russia cannot be ignored, is another example of this phenomenon. Similarly, while the global economic crisis did not lead to the abject collapse of Russia, it has certainly reduced Russia’s economic power in recent months.

Additionally, in a period where the UN and EU issued a number of high profile reports, the recent UN Human Development Report on Russia was a little overshadowed, but it offers a demographic argument that supports Biden’s essential thesis that Russia is confronting a broad and serious decline.

All of this may bring satisfaction to many who fear a powerful Russia and the havoc in could reek in its neighborhood, but it does not make crafting Russia policy, or turning the reset button into some kind of reality, particularly easy. Russia’s decreased ability to influence international politics does not mean that the US has a clear path to do what it wants in the region. Russian influence and power may be waning but it is still a force with which to be reckoned, particularly in the former Soviet Union.

The Obama administration’s relations with Russia are still a work in progress, but there is some reason to be encouraged, and some suggestions that Biden’s views lie at the core of the administration’s views as well. Thus far, the administration has avoided trading off anything important to the US, such as support for Georgia or recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The administration has conceded things to Russia that they either they did not have, such as a realistic chance of bringing Georgia and Ukraine into NATO, or things they did not want, such as missile defense in Eastern Europe. This reflects the understanding of relative power of the two countries suggested by Biden’s comments.

This cannot yet, however, be described as a fully successful strategy because it is not yet clear what the US has received in return. Cooperation with Russia on sanctions for Iran,
which has been the administration’s major public goal with regards to Russia, seems increasingly unlikely. Similarly, calls for more openness and democracy in Russia, like those made by Secretary of State Clinton in Kazan this week seem little more than pro forma at this point.

The less discussed issue is, not surprisingly, Afghanistan. Russian cooperation and support for U.S. and NATO efforts in Afghanistan will be extremely valuable. Perhaps while hopes for cooperation with Russia on Iran seem more distant every day, the U.S. has changed its focus with Russia to cooperation on Afghanistan. Continuing to allow U.S. planes to use Russian airspace and encouraging Central Asian countries to support the U.S. effort are among the ways Russia can be supportive of this effort. The support Russia can provide to the Afghanistan effort is, in this respect, significantly more concrete than with regards to Iran where Russian leverage may not be what we would like to think it is.

If the Obama administration is going to commit to an even larger war in Afghanistan, which is likely to occur and even more likely to be a mistake, it would be foolish to do it without an understanding from Russia. Perhaps this, not the more dubious hopes for Iran, have been driving the reset all along.