

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## Forecasting the Obama-Medvedev Summit: Will It Reset U.S.-Russian Relations?

This week has created a wave of anticipation inside the global community with Obama's first presidential visit to the Russian Federation. U.S.-Russian relations have deteriorated to new levels since the Georgian conflict last August, and both countries came to the four-day summit between Presidents Obama and Medvedev in hopes that it will alleviate tensions.

On Monday July 6<sup>th</sup>, the first day of the Obama-Medvedev Summit, the Harriman Institute held a forum titled: "Forecasting the Obama-Medvedev Summit: Will it Reset US-Russian Relations?" Coincidentally the forum began during the last moments of the first live press conference between the two leaders. Moderated by Barnard College Professor Catharine Nepomnyashchy, former Director of the Harriman Institute, the panel consisted of Thomas Graham, of Kissinger Associates, Inc., New School Professor Nina Khrushcheva, and Barnard College and Harriman Institute Professor Alexander Cooley.

"Anybody who was in Moscow recently will tell you that the mood about U.S.-Russian relations, in general, is deeply skeptical," Thomas Graham commented, having just returned from spending a week in Moscow. "Russians are very suspicious about what America's motives are, clearly they like some of the things Obama has said in terms of tone, his willingness, at least rhetorically, to reach out, but there is a great sense of concern about where this relationship is actually headed." Mr. Graham suggested that in order for us to see a real shift in relations between the two countries, both need to work on a positive agenda over the next few of days. While a treaty will significantly increase trust between the two countries, it will not be enough to fully repair relations: "An arms control agreement implies that the two countries are in some way rivals. You have an arms control agreement in order to give each side confidence that the other side does not intend to use its arsenal against the other. That's not the basis for long-term cooperation." Instead, the two countries need to figure out something they can work on together within the global context.

"At the end of these four days, if we're going to put this relationship on a new track, there ought to be an indication of at least a few areas in which the United States and Russia share a strategic vision, and can articulate how they are going to work together to achieve that goal. We need to hear something like that, which we haven't heard so far." Graham discussed the announcement of a new structure, which as he understands it, will be headed by the two presidents, with the real work conducted by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and

Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov. They will oversee a series of working groups, assigned to work on a set of concrete issues. "We've had many of these structures over the past eight years and they fell into disuse because both sides had nothing to talk about," Graham said, pointing out the necessity for a concrete, clearly defined task for each sub-group, as well as a time frame for its completion. "If working groups fail to meet regularly," Graham said, "it can make the relationship appear less serious."

Graham stated that while the relationship between Russia and the U.S. has taken a more positive tone over the past few months, it is still very fragile. "We need to make this relationship crisis proof over this summit," he said. "Chances of a crisis in the next six months are very high, given the current state of world affairs." If a crisis happens to occur in a former Soviet region, the odds are strong that the U.S. and Russia will land on opposite sides of the conflict. In order to avoid this, the two countries must establish a regularly operating channel of communication through which they can alert one another of potential crisis situations.

Professor Cooley opened his presentation with a comment on the two countries' agreements over reduction of nuclear weapons and cooperation in Afghanistan, announcements he deemed welcome, but not groundbreaking: "It seems to me the low-hanging fruit has already been picked... these were the areas where they saw the most potential for cooperation." The thornier issues, such as missile defense in Eastern Europe, NATO expansion, and relations with Georgia, are the ones the countries really need to tackle, Cooley said.

Cooley also discussed Russia's current role in the global context. The crisis in Georgia last summer engendered widespread fear of Russia's intentions to reassert dominance within the former Soviet bloc. Professor Cooley argued that while this may have been a valid concern during the weeks immediately following the conflict, the passage of time has brought about the opposite development: "The aftermath of the Georgian war has considerably weakened Russia, especially in Eurasia. It's spooked a lot of countries and driven them even further into a multi-vector type of politics; those who can be actively playing all cards at the moment: Russia, the U.S., Europe, and increasingly China." Cooley cited Medvedev's failure to secure recognition for Abkhazia and South Ossetia at the Dushanbe summit for Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) at the end of last August as an example of Russia's decreasing influence.

Another demonstration of Russia's weakening hold over Eurasia is the recent Manas Air Base affair with Kyrgyzstan. Just a month ago, immediately following the Kremlin's promise of aid to Kyrgyzstan, President Baikiev announced plans to evict U.S. troops from its Manas Air Base. Once Kyrgyzstan secured \$350 million from Russia, Baikiev reneged on the eviction and established a new contract with the United States, significantly raising U.S. rent on the base: "In fact what this showed was real savvy on the part of the Kyrgyz to play off the Kremlin's fears, or its desire of reestablishing control of the former Soviet space, and use this for short-term economic advantage," Cooley said. He also mentioned Russia's shaky relationship with Turkmenistan. Russia had been complaining about overpaying for Turkmen gas, when there was a mysterious explosion in the Central Asian Pipeline, which Turkmenistan has blamed on Gazprom. "I think we are in a context where Russia is fighting a rear guard action to keep things together in the Caucasus and in Central Asia," Cooley concluded.

Segueing to the topic of America's relations with Georgia, Professor Cooley mentioned the "values agenda," and its relatively low priority for the Obama administration: "There has been some real debate about whether President Obama should stress the importance of human rights and democratization, how far he should go with it, how critical Washington should be," Cooley said, "ironically for a Democratic administration, the decision was made pretty early on that the 'values agenda' was not going to be very high on the list." One of the reasons for this, according to Cooley, is our relationship with Georgia, and Saakashvili's constant assertion that the U.S. and Georgia share the same values: "In reality, Georgia's democratic credentials leave something to be desired," Cooley said.

Professor Cooley discussed President Obama's reference to Georgia in his opening statement, highlighting Obama's mention of Georgia's territorial integrity, alongside his neglect to bring up the disagreement over Georgia and NATO expansion. Cooley thinks this may be a sign that the U.S. is putting a politically difficult matter aside and agreeing to disagree with Russia. "Maybe I'm reading too much into this as an omission," Cooley said, "but we'll look at how the Georgia issue progresses."

Another cause for concern, Cooley mentioned, is the effect that this summit will have on Tbilisi. Cooley mentioned that President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia has already voiced feelings of abandonment by the U.S. Cooley quoted Saakashvili as having said that "the U.S. has let its idealism be overtaken by pragmatic *real politique*." The Georgian President feels that the U.S. will trade the Georgian issue for something like missile defense. Cooley projected that Saakashvili is bound to face numerous reports discrediting his position in the Georgian conflict on the one-year anniversary of the invasion this August. "I really think that we should be careful about what is going on in Tbilisi over the summer," Cooley warned in the final notes of his presentation.

Professor Khrushcheva, who just spent a month in Moscow, shifted the discussion to the domestic political situation in the Russian Federation. "There is consistent talk about the new thaw coming and the new perestroika coming," Khrushcheva said. "People believe that the new Kremlin leader Dimitry Medvedev's lack of a KGB

background suggests that in fact Medvedev does hold some sway, and it's going to be two democratic leaders leaving Putin behind and charging on to a bright future." Khrushcheva noted that she is skeptical of these assumptions, and feels that "the reset button on U.S. Russian relations is going to be difficult to push in the long term." While interactions between the two countries will remain good for the time being, Khrushcheva argues that both Khrushchev and Gorbachev responded to dire circumstances and the conditions within Russia right now are insufficiently calamitous to prompt something as drastic as a perestroika or a thaw. There is also no prospective Russian leader equipped to take these steps: "There is no Khrushchev or Gorbachev looming on the horizon," Khrushcheva stated.

Russians point to Medvedev's meetings with human rights groups, as well as his willingness to talk with *Novaya Gazeta*, as signs of progress; however, the Russian government is far from transparent, Khrushcheva said. In addition to human rights groups and liberal media, Medvedev is also meeting with former KGB members, and the Khodorkovsky trial is taking strange turns. "Despite Obama's hopes, there is little evidence that Medvedev has his own agenda," Khrushcheva said. The system of government set in place by Putin, "a system driven by the desire to avoid public discontent and maintain social stability," continued Khrushcheva, "pushed citizens further from politics and policy making." She mentioned the lack of diversification in the Russian economy and the wasted oil boom opportunities as further indications that the Medvedev government is not going to revolutionize Russian politics.

Despite Russia's problems and the harsh results of the economic crisis, the approval ratings for Medvedev and Putin remain over 70 percent, and opposition forces are too timid and fragmented to make a real difference. Graham agreed with Khrushcheva, stating that Russia will not be seeing a challenge to the current political regime any time soon, and stressing that there is no viable political alternative for Russia at the height of the global economic crisis: "There is no other political system for Russia to aspire to, it's hard to point even to the U. S. model for success," Graham said.

From the audience, Princeton University Professor Stephen Kotkin raised questions about Obama's comment, differentiating Putin and Medvedev, and about the current administration compared to the previous, in its dealings with Russia. Both Professor Khrushcheva and Professor Graham responded negatively about Obama's comment, Khrushcheva stating that she was "not particularly impressed with the policy decision to wedge a difference between the two leaders." Professor Graham added: "Americans don't play Kremlin politics very well...Medvedev and Putin are politically dependent on one another at this point, and neither one of them has an interest in being driven apart, particularly not by the U.S. president." Graham continued: "the idea that an American President can empower someone in the Kremlin against a potential political rival is nonsense."

Graham commented that Obama's policies in Russia have been less controversial than those of the previous administration, because while Obama has been meeting with a broad range of people in Russia, including opposition groups, he has done so in a much milder manner than the Bush Administration. Graham pointed to the example of the Bush administration sending high-level officials to "The

Other Russia” conference in 2008, saying that it was clearly intended as a slap to Putin: “This ended up working to our disadvantage in Russia,” Graham said. “The way Obama has structured his policy is not as problematic for the Kremlin, and we will get much milder results,” Graham concluded.

Professor Cooley commented that the Obama administration’s handling of its relationship with Georgia also diverges from that of the Bush administration. While Georgia was strategically important to the old administration, it was not strategically vital, Cooley said. The main reason for the strength of America’s relationship with Georgia was political: “the previous administration did not have a lot of friends, and when this young charismatic guy comes out of the Rose Revolution, talks common values, sends more troops to Iraq, supports the agenda, this gives a lot of access.” Now, with the rising global popularity of the Obama administration, this relationship is becoming less important: “I think we’ll see the same commitments upheld,” Cooley says, referring to the aid package and the strategic partnership agreement, “but to say that Georgia is of the same political significance as it was over the past eight years, is just not true.”

The “Question and Answer” portion of the session ended with a brief discussion of the Russia-Ukraine relationship and its implications for U.S. and Russia relations. Graham stated: “Ukraine certainly has the potential to stress U.S.-Russian relations. In part because we have radically different visions for what Ukraine’s future should be, and also because the Ukrainian political elite is intent on bringing the U.S. into this context in some way.” The current leaders play on pro-Western sympathies, Graham said, and they will inevitably draw us into this relationship in some way. The key, Graham urged, “is to do something on an official level to contain this issue as much as possible,” otherwise the diverging views on Ukraine will affect the broader relations between Russia and the U.S.

Professor Cooley agreed with Graham’s statement on the potential of being drawn into Russia-Ukraine relations, going on to say: “I’m not sure Moscow is so unhappy with the state of affairs in the Ukraine,” pointing out that Yushchenko’s polling numbers are only in the single digits. Cooley feels that the January elections are not a huge threat, because whoever wins will be an improvement as far as Moscow is concerned. Instead Cooley pointed to the territorial dispute over the Sevastopol Harbor, referring to it as a more interesting issue, and stating that the Ukraine needs to start its lobby efforts to the European Union immediately, informing European leaders of this issue and what it’s going to require. Cooley predicts that it will not be resolved by 2016 and will probably result in a lease extension or bridge agreement.

Professor Khrushcheva concluded the day’s discussion with a statement that Tymoshchenko is the only real politician in the Ukraine. However, Khrushcheva added, “No one knows where she is going and how.” As a result, Khrushcheva said, Tymoshchenko will probably be only a transitional leader. Khrushcheva concluded the panel on a positive note, saying that the fact that Ukraine has politicians like Tymoshchenko is a positive sign, and might mean that the Ukraine will eventually join the West.