

# A Russian 'Reset' Gone Awry

When President Obama sold the United States' "reset" with Russia to the American people in 2009, he labeled it, among other things, an important effort aimed at securing Russian support in the fight to stop Iran from going nuclear. By resetting relations, Obama argued that the U.S. could secure Russian support for sanctions against Iran, reduce nuclear stockpiles and "find common interests that form a basis for cooperation."

Evidently no one translated that message into Russian.

Less than three years removed from the "reset," Russia has vowed to nix any further sanctions against Iran, and it is using its veto power in the U.N. Security Council to protect the Assad regime in Syria. The Russians are vilifying Michael McFaul, the new U.S. Ambassador to Russia and architect of the "reset," throughout state-sponsored media. And just in case Washington didn't get the message, Alexei Pushkov, Chairman of the State Duma International Committee, told reporters late last month that "there are no serious prospects for the reset." Ouch.

That the "reset" is failing should come as no surprise. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has two primary interests: holding onto power and securing his and Russia's monetary fortunes. Putin is interested in an improved relationship with the U.S. only insofar as it would help further those aims — and at the outset of the "reset," it could have.

In 2009, the Russians had much to gain from the "reset": admittance into the World Trade Organization, an increased sphere of influence and the ability to prevent the U.S. from establishing missile defense bases in Eastern Europe. Now achieved, these gains have helped Russia both economically and strategically, and in turn made the Russian leadership more secure as well. Now, though, Putin looks at the shifting international landscape and sees his interests threatened by the tide of regime change sweeping the globe. In Putin's own backyard, there are 120,000 Russian protesters braving sub-zero temperatures and calling for him to go.

With this in mind, it's hardly surprising that Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev have undertaken a foreign policy primarily aimed at protecting their own rule, even if that means bucking the "reset." In the Security Council, Russia is now blocking any and all initiatives that seek to exert foreign influence over sovereign states' internal affairs. In the media, Putin is decrying the West and its penchant for "interference," likening its behavior to "a bull in a china shop." And because Putin doesn't want to be the bull's next victim, his government is prolonging the conflict in Syria by honoring arms agreements with the Assad regime and blocking an Arab League-backed resolution aimed at ending the violence.

Of course, the Kremlin's actions vis-à-vis Syria are not solely aimed at stopping the tide of foreign interference in sovereign states — they are meant to secure roughly four billion dollars worth of arms contracts between the two nations as well. Russia is also ostensibly protecting its military interests in Syria, where it maintains an active naval base. And despite his tenuous position, Assad does remain one of Russia's strongest allies in the ever-volatile Middle East, which renders the Kremlin's support somewhat more understandable.

But even these "pragmatic" considerations point to a Russian leadership whose ultimate interest is self-preservation. If the Russian leadership were truly interested in securing Russian national interests in the region, would they lend so much support to a Syria that seems sure to fall? Probably not, considering that a new regime in Syria would almost certainly remember Russia's role in prolonging the conflict. More significantly, if Putin were interested in Russian national interests, would he so flip-pantly spurn a relationship with the United States after

that relationship helped secure concessions in areas like missile defenses? Again, from the standpoint of protecting Russian national interests, it wouldn't seem so.

But if the Russian leadership is acting primarily out of self-interest, then the decision to stay on a sinking Syrian ship makes sense. There are, of course, those highly lucrative arms contracts at stake. More importantly, by taking



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a hard-line stance on Syria, Putin hopes to stop a tide of foreign interference that may one day threaten his own grip on power. And if Putin assumes there will be few ramifications for Russian intransigence, then playing the anti-American card allows him to appeal to large swaths of older Russian voters who still harbor animus toward the West.

In assessing the future of the "reset," the Obama administration would be wise to consider Churchill's counsel about Russian action in 1939. Churchill remarked that the key to unlocking the "riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma" of Russian action is understanding "Russian national interest."

Today, "Russian national interest" often means "Putin's personal interest." The future of the "reset" depends on appreciating that reality.

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# The No Child Left Behind Masquerade

I was 10-years-old when President George W. Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act into law. Since my mother is a public school teacher, the words "no child left behind" almost immediately became common parlance in my family's dinner table conversation. Whenever the talk turned to public schools, those words were there without fail: no child left behind. I was too young to know what they meant, but to me, those words *were* the debate.

As I've grown older and angrier about our schools, I've come to understand what the words "no child left behind" really mean, and, more importantly, what they don't mean. The No Child Left Behind Act

How much flexibility should states have in allocating federal funds? Should funding be contingent on a school making "Adequate Yearly Progress?" Essentially, they all boil down to one question: How do we divide up federal funding? How do we slice up this pie?

So Congress goes on making noise, as it does, and we interpret this noise as a debate about how to fix our schools. Sooner or later (probably later), Congress will come to some contentious compromise, and the federal budget will shift a little bit, spending a little more or a little less on our schools. We'll wipe our hands of the matter and get on with our lives, satisfied that education has had its day in court. If

poorer school than for a wealthier school, but on average, all this No Child Left Behind noise is an argument about seven percent of a school's budget.

We primarily fund our schools with local property taxes. States dump whatever money they can spare into the poorer neighborhoods, and the federal government drops a few pennies in the bucket. These pennies soon come to dominate the national discourse on education reform, because, let's face it, we're easily bored by state and local politics. Even after these attempts by state and federal governments to level the playing field, funding disparities between the schools in the suburbs and those in the ghettos remain enormous, and students are left holding the bill.

The results? The wealthiest 10 percent of our school districts spend nearly 10 times more than the poorest 10 percent. African American students graduate from high school at a rate of 54 percent, Latinos at 56 percent and Native Americans at 51 percent, while our white students graduate at a rate of 77 percent. And according to the National Center for Education Statistics, our African American and Latino 12th graders are at the same reading and math levels as our white eighth graders.

The achievement gap is not new. We've been arguing about its causes for a long time now: segregation, the tracking system, culture, curriculum, not enough testing, too much testing, not enough school choice, too much school choice and, of course, unfair allocation of federal funds. No one ever seems to talk about the profound structural injustice staring us in the face, though: We fund our schools with local property taxes.

Really, guys? No one's freaking out about this?

We couldn't create a better system for perpetuating inequality if we tried. We call it public education, and imagine it to be some great social equalizer, and then we ask each neighborhood to foot the bill for its own children. The rich kids go to rich schools because the rich kids have rich parents, while the poor kids ... well, you get the idea.

Educational injustice runs deep in this country, and a few more billion dollars from the states or the feds is not going to fix it. This is immediately obvious to anyone who looks at how our schools are funded. Arguing over how to allocate federal funds is like debating what color Band-Aid to put on a gunshot wound. It is worse than useless, because it masquerades as a solution.

America will not make meaningful progress in closing the achievement gap until we radically restructure the way we fund our schools. Personally, I'm in tentative favor of privatizing the whole damn thing and letting the federal government distribute universal school vouchers. Under this system, a parent would be reimbursed, up to a certain extent, for the tuition of his or her school of choice.

I won't pretend to have all the answers, though. I just want to make sure that no one misinterprets the debate surrounding No Child Left Behind or Race to the Top or any other federal funding distribution scheme, as a debate about how to fix our schools. It is a sham, played out by Congress and the President at the expense of the poor. Let's recognize it as such.

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of 2001 was a bipartisan effort to close the achievement gap by increasing federal funding for public K-12 education. Schools receiving this funding are required to test their students ad nauseam, and if a school repeatedly fails to improve its students' test scores, its funding gets slashed, and parents are given the option of sending their kids to a different public school. So there it is: No Child Left Behind. You love it, you hate it, but if you're interested in education reform, you talk about it endlessly.

Ten years later, No Child Left Behind is up for reauthorization, and they're hashing out the same old questions in Congress.

the achievement gap widens and our international rankings fall, we'll blame the feds, and if the gap closes and our rankings rise, we'll credit the feds.

This would all be well and good, if we had a federal school system. If we lived pretty much anywhere in Europe or Asia, this would be a legitimate conversation about education reform, because almost every country in the industrialized world funds their schools centrally and equally.

But not America. Federal funding makes up about seven percent of the average public school budget in America. Seven percent. Of course, federal funding makes up a higher percentage of the budget for a