

What a 'reset' can't fix in US-R

A real reset of relations will require intense discussion and some serious give-and-take — s

*U.S. relations
Russia*



By David Ignatius

THE Obama administration has talked about a "reset" in Russian-American relations. But a Russian analyst shrugs when he's asked about the term. "What happens when you press the reset button on a computer?" he muses. "It goes dark, and then after a while the same screen comes back again."

That sceptical comment offers the right perspective on President Obama's visit here, which starts tomorrow. Both Russians and Americans want to avoid a public failure, and the summit is likely to yield a joint "presidential

commission" and other modest agreements. But neither side is ready to address the other's fundamental security concerns. And until that changes, this week's reset will mean more of the same - and perhaps even a new jolt of static.

Russian leaders have been simmering with anger since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. A top Kremlin adviser voiced a litany of complaints to a group of Western visitors: Russia needed American help during the chaos of the 1990s, but it never came; Russia tried to aid America after Sept. 11, 2001, but, he claims, an ungrateful United States helped Muslim terrorists in Chechnya by giving them passports and money; Russia wanted to cooperate on security, but the Bush administration pushed NATO expansion to Russia's borders and plotted to build missile defence sites in nearby Poland and the Czech Republic.

"America owes Russia, and it owes a lot, and it has to pay its debt," grumbled this key adviser to President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. His message was that America's past actions had threatened Russia's security and the Kremlin wasn't about to forget it.

Given what they see as American disdain

for their interests, the Russians drag their feet on US security worries such as the Iranian nuclear programme. "Iran is an American mania," says another Putin adviser dismissively. "Maybe it goes back to your fear of the Indians

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(in the Wild West). We don't know. Iran is a problem of yours, not of ours."

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and allow some creative bargaining. "The Russian agenda is largely a set of negatives - things they don't want us to do," says Tom Graham, a Russia expert formerly at the State Department and now with Kissinger

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Associates. America's goals are a similar list of "don'ts," Graham says. "You can't build a long-term relationship on negatives."

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Russia relations

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the ice, but some pre-summit moves have added to the chill. The normally sure-footed Obama stumbled last week when he contrasted his "very good relationship" with Medvedev against Putin's "outdated" Cold War attitudes. This will look to Russians like an effort to play internal politics, and it will complicate both meetings.

Another peculiar pre-summit move was the administration's public statement that it wouldn't bargain on the issues that concern Russia most. "We're not going to reassure or give or trade ... anything with the Russians regarding NATO expansion or missile defence," White House aide Michael McFaul told the Wall Street Journal. That lowered expectations, but at the cost of narrowing discussion.

The resentful Russians have been even more undiplomatic. Last month, Putin abruptly withdrew Russia's application to join the World Trade Organisation, in part because Russia fears that membership would block special trade deals with former Soviet republics. That was the latest warning that Russia wants a privileged sphere of influence on its borders.

Russia's efforts to muscle its neighbours,

Georgia and Ukraine, aren't just a Putin problem. They reflect a general nostalgia here for the bygone days of empire. Russian journalist Valery Fadeev underscores the existential nature of Russia's angst by quoting a warning from Putin last year that "Russia would either return to the group of leading world nations or disappear."

The emotional core of Ukraine policy was expressed by a top Kremlin adviser when he described pleas from ethnic Russians there who demand, "When are you going to stop our humiliation?" Those are the kind of sentiments that can draw countries into conflict.

"We are entering a period in Russian-American relations that's more dangerous than what preceded it," warns Ivan Krastev, a Bulgarian who heads the Centre for Liberal Strategies, which organized a conference here last week on these issues.

The Obama magic, so evident in his other trips abroad, isn't likely to work in Moscow this week. A real reset of Russian-American relations will require intense discussion and some serious give-and-take — something that neither side is ready to offer. COURTESY THE WASHINGTON POST