
America in Russia's back yard

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Hillary Clinton tests the waters in ex-Soviet states after the 'reset' with Russia

A YEAR ago a group of intellectuals and politicians from ex-communist European countries wrote an open letter to President Barack Obama, who had just returned from his first Moscow summit. The message conveyed palpable nervousness and criticism: will America sacrifice the interests of its allies for the sake of better relations with Russia? Would it not be wiser to show strength and determination in the face of Russian authoritarianism, as Ronald Reagan did in the 1980s?

These days the picture looks surprisingly different. America's relations with Russia, which were in tatters by the end of the administration of George W. Bush, have improved, and Russia's neighbours have benefited from it. Now even Radek Sikorski, Poland's foreign minister, advocates a rapprochement with Russia. At a recent conference on democracy, he conspicuously avoided numbering Russia among the offenders against democratic rights. Russia, in turn, has been less belligerent towards the West.

America's 'reset' with Russia, Mr Obama's officials like to argue, has yielded valuable gains, including a new nuclear treaty and greater support from Moscow for America's policy in Iran and Afghanistan. The sceptics say these came easily and Russia had its own reasons to co-operate. The true test for the reset, they argue, is in Russia's neighbourhood, which Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's president, has called Russia's 'sphere of privileged interest'.

This month Hillary Clinton, America's secretary of state, ventured deep into this sphere, visiting Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia, as well as making a stop in Poland. On the one hand, the tour was meant to reassure Russia's neighbours of America's support; on the other, it was aimed at defending democratic institutions. It was watched closely in Moscow, but the reaction there has been placid.

The Bush administration had tried to drag the countries of Russia's 'near abroad' into the West's camp, poking Moscow in the eye and, by implication, acknowledging the Kremlin's claim over its former vassals. The Obama administration, by contrast, argues that America should be able to strike up strong bilateral relations with these countries on their own merit, without seeming to be anti-Russian. 'We can walk and chew gum at the same time,' Mrs Clinton said in Tbilisi.

The risk is not that America would ever accept Russia's claim of special influence, but more that in trying to balance it out and pursue its interests in post-Soviet states, America may be less tough with many governments in the region, particularly in addressing their internal problems and democratic shortfalls.

The dilemma could not have been clearer in Ukraine, where the authoritarian tendencies of Viktor Yanukovich, elected as president in February, have been more pronounced than economic reform. In private Mrs Clinton is said to have raised concerns about restrictions on civil liberties. But in public she has been softer, allowing Mr Yanukovich to claim: 'I am very happy to know that the United States assess positively political stabilisation in the country'.

One reason Mr Yanukovich got off lightly, perhaps, was his pledge to get rid of highly enriched uranium, given at a nuclear-security summit in Washington, DC, in April. Another factor may be the fear of making Ukraine more economically dependent on Russia. The day after Mrs Clinton left Kiev, the IMF agreed on a \$14.9 billion financing deal for Ukraine over two and a half years. This surprised many who thought that Ukraine would first have to adopt serious fiscal reforms. The gaffe-prone Mr Yanukovich, who addressed Mrs Clinton as 'general secretary' a couple of times, appears to have masterfully played Russia and America against each other. He has also lobbied Mr Obama to help bring American energy companies to Ukraine, and America is keen to help make Ukraine independent of Russian energy imports. However, attracting American firms would require Ukraine drastically to improve its investment climate, something that no Ukrainian leader has managed to achieve, perhaps because trading in Russian gas has been one of the main sources of enrichment for Ukraine's elite groups.

The task of balancing the promotion of democracy with safeguarding America's security interests became harder still as Mrs Clinton travelled eastward to Azerbaijan - an authoritarian state, yet an important provider of non-Russian oil and gas and a vital transit route for America's troops to Afghanistan. The last secretary of state to visit Baku was James Baker in 1992. Since then it has been the field of secretaries of defence and energy. One of Mrs Clinton's tasks was to mend fences with Ilham Aliev, Azerbaijan's president, offended at not being invited to the nuclear summit, where Mr Obama met the president of Armenia - Azerbaijan's number-one enemy. (Just before Mrs Clinton's visit, Robert Gates, the American defence secretary flew to Baku with a letter from Mr Obama.)

The secretary of state trod carefully, meeting youth groups but not opposition parties. In private she discussed two bloggers who were jailed after ridiculing state officials; in public she said, 'there has been a tremendous amount of progress in Azerbaijan', a statement questioned by a brave local journalist.

The dominant issue, however, was the dormant conflict with Armenia over Nagorno Karabakh, a disputed enclave populated by Armenians. No sooner had she sat down with Mr Aliev in his seaside palace, lit by giant chandeliers, than he vented his anger at Armenia. A few hours later, it was the turn of Armenia's president, Serzh Sargsyan, to denounce Azerbaijan. Tension between the two countries has risen in recent months, resulting in a firefight that killed five people on June 18th. The conflict is also holding back the normalisation of ties between Armenia and Turkey, a process strongly supported by America. Russia's President Medvedev has spent much time mediating between the Armenian and Azeri presidents; now the Obama administration is taking an interest too. Mrs Clinton's visit will not of itself resolve the 20-year conflict, but it may help prevent an escalation.

Reassurance in Tbilisi

The same applies the more recent and better-known conflict in the Caucasus - between Russia and Georgia. Mrs Clinton did not mince her words when she arrived in Tbilisi, describing Russia's military action in August 2008 as an 'invasion' and an 'occupation'. She declared: 'I want to say publicly what I have said privately. I came to Georgia with a clear message from President Obama and myself. The United States is steadfast in its commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The United States does not recognise spheres of influence.'

Russia's unilateral recognition of Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, she argued, does not exempt the Kremlin from the 2008 agreement brokered by France, under which Moscow agreed to withdraw its troops to pre-war positions. Russia, which has now built permanent military bases in the territories, will be in no hurry to do so. Mrs Clinton also made the more subtle point that America's support for Georgia is not based on personalities. Her talks with the tempestuous president, Mikheil Saakashvili, were preceded by a long public meeting with Georgian women, some of whom have publicly and loudly criticised him. She also met opposition leaders.

The success of Mrs Clinton's stop in Georgia, the most sensitive part of her voyage, was helped in some ways by the vibrancy of Georgian civil society. Georgia has more reason to worry about America's rapprochement with Russia than any other country. And it fell to Mr Saakashvili, Moscow's hate-figure, to vindicate the reset. 'You know, ultimately, if it leads to a more modern, more open Russia, that's only good for all of us around it,' he said.

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