

Russia must re-focus with post-imperial eyes



Zbigniew Brzezinski

Published: July 1 2009 20:04 | Last updated: July 1 2009 20:04

President Barack Obama should have three central goals in mind when he meets Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin next week: first, to advance US-Russian co-operation in areas where our interests coincide; second, to emphasise the mutual benefits in handling disagreements between the two countries within internationally respected "rules of the game"; and third, to help shape a geopolitical context in which Russia becomes increasingly conscious of its own interest in eventually becoming a genuinely post-imperial partner of the Euro-Atlantic community.

Of the three, the first is the easiest; the second is sensitive but needs to be faced, lest there be repetitions of what happened last August, when Russian troops invaded Georgia; and the third can only be sought indirectly – but the effort has to be strategically deliberate. In any case, it is evident that both countries would benefit from better relations. Fortunately, the financial crisis has made the Russian elite aware that, for the first time in its history, Russia's well-being depends on the well-being of the outside world and especially of America. That reality of inter-dependence creates a felicitous setting for the summit.

Moreover, on some important issues collaboration is not only possible, but mutually beneficial. That is especially true with reciprocal reductions in nuclear weaponry, a compromise on US plans for an anti-ballistic-missile shield and joint efforts to enhance the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, among other security arrangements.

Unfortunately, on Iran, it is uncertain that the conventional wisdom – which asserts that Russia genuinely wants to be helpful – is correct. To the Russian leadership, the two long-term challenges to its power come from the US and China. Both countries would suffer grievously, while Russia would greatly benefit, if a US-Iranian crisis triggered a surge in energy prices. Hence Russian willingness to be helpful may be more formal than real.

Nor should one ignore the reality that there are serious – though not war-threatening – geopolitical conflicts of interest between the US and the Russian Federation. The bottom line is that Mr Putin resents and wants in some fashion to reverse the disintegration of the Soviet Union. Gaining control over Ukraine would restore in effect an imperial Russia, with the potential to ignite conflicts in Central Europe. Subduing Georgia would cut the west's vital energy connection (the Baku-Çeyhan pipeline) to the Caspian Sea and to Central Asia. Azerbaijan then would have no choice but to submit to Moscow's control.

Indeed, in the summit meetings, Mr Putin and Mr Medvedev will be looking for signs that the new US administration disowns the charters on partnership with Ukraine and Georgia signed by former President George W. Bush. Even an unintentional signal to that effect would be seen as a green light for more muscular Russian actions against these two countries.

Hence a frank discussion is needed to lay down some mutually accepted "rules of the game". The US can indicate that Nato membership is not imminent for either country, but that the US and Russia have to respect Ukraine's or Georgia's right to make that choice. In the meantime, Russia must understand that the use of force or promotion of ethnic conflicts to destabilise Ukraine or Georgia would poison American-Russian relations.

Clarity on these matters, achieved through respectful but realistic discussions, would reduce the risks of Russia trying to restore an imperial system in the space previously occupied by the Tsarist empire and then the Soviet Union. Gradual consolidation of the existing national pluralism in that space would accelerate the fading of historically futile imperial ambitions.

Using the Moscow visit to identify America's vision of the future with Russia's own but still partially repressed democratic aspirations should be part of the summit ritual. Presumably there will be some chance to convey that message, either through a speech or gesture to honour the many (and currently in Russia ignored) victims of Leninism-Stalinism. That would also help shape a political context for Russia's

evolution towards a genuine partnership with the world of democracy.

A final point: the previous US administration favoured trivial personalisation of its relationship with Russia (such as references to Mr Putin's "eyes" or "soul") and highly over-stated claims of breakthroughs ("the best relationship ever" between the two countries). A more serious strategic approach that produces Russia's acceptance of its new post-imperial realities and encourages its democratic evolution is more likely to yield enduring results, while not unleashing unrealistic public expectations.

The writer was US National Security Adviser 1977-1981. He is co-author with Brent Scowcroft of the recently published 'America and the World'

Copyright The Financial Times Limited 2009

"FT" and "Financial Times" are trademarks of the Financial Times. [Privacy policy](#) | [Terms](#)
© Copyright [The Financial Times](#) Ltd 2009.