By George Friedman

A months-long White House review of a pair of U.S. ballistic missile defense (BMD) installations slated for Poland and the Czech Republic is nearing completion. The review is expected to present a number of options ranging from pushing forward with the installations as planned to canceling them outright. The Obama administration has yet to decide what course to follow. Rumors are running wild in Poland and the Czech Republic that the United States has reconsidered its plan to place ballistic defense systems in their countries. The rumors stem from a top U.S. BMD lobbying group that said this past week that the U.S. plan was all but dead.

The ultimate U.S. decision on BMD depends upon both the upcoming summit of the five permanent U.N. Security Council members plus Germany on the Iranian nuclear program and Russia's response to those talks. If Russia does not cooperate in sanctions, but instead continues to maintain close relations with Iran, we suspect that the BMD plan will remain intact. Either way, the BMD issue offers a good opportunity to re-examine U.S. and Western relations with Russia and how they have evolved.

Cold War vs. Post-Cold War

There has been a recurring theme in the discussions between Russia and the West over the past year: the return of the Cold War. U.S. President Barack Obama, for example, accused Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin of having one foot in the Cold War. The Russians have in turn accused the Americans of thinking in terms of the Cold War. Eastern Europeans have expressed fears that the Russians continue to view their relationship with Europe in terms of the Cold War. Other Europeans have expressed concern that both Americans and Russians might drag Europe into another Cold War.

For many in the West, the more mature and stable Western-Russian relationship is what they call the "Post-Cold War world." In this world, the Russians no longer regard the West as an enemy, and view the other republics of the former Soviet Union (FSU) as independent states free to forge whatever relations they wish with the West. Russia should welcome or at least be indifferent to such matters. Russia instead should be concentrating on economic development while integrating lessons learned from the West into its political and social thinking. The Russians should stop thinking in politico-military terms, the terms of the Cold War. Instead, they should think in the new paradigm in which Russia is part of the Western economic system, albeit a backward one needing time and institution-building to become a full partner with the West. All other thinking is a throwback to the Cold War.

This was the thinking behind the idea of resetting U.S.-Russian relations. Hillary Clinton's "reset" button was meant to move U.S.-Russian relations away from what Washington thought of as a return to the Cold War from its preferred period, which existed between 1991 and the

deterioration of U.S.-Russian relations after Ukraine's 2004 Orange Revolution. The United States was in a bimodal condition when it came to Russian relations: Either it was the Cold War or it was post-Cold War.

The Russians took a more jaundiced view of the post-Cold War world. For Moscow, rather than a period of reform, the post-Cold War period was one of decay and chaos. Old institutions had collapsed, but new institutions had not emerged. Instead, there was the chaos of privatization, essentially a wild free-for-all during which social order collapsed. Western institutions, including everything from banks to universities, were complicit in this collapse. Western banks were eager to take advantage of the new pools of privately expropriated money, while Western advisers were eager to advise the Russians on how to become Westerners. In the meantime, workers went unpaid, life expectancy and birth rates declined, and the basic institutions that had provided order under communism decayed — or worse, became complicit in the looting. The post-Cold War world was not a happy time in Russia: It was a catastrophic period for Russian power.

Herein lies the gulf between the West and the Russians. The West divides the world between the Cold War and the post-Cold War world. It clearly prefers the post-Cold War world, not so much because of the social condition of Russia, but because the post-Cold War world lacked the geopolitical challenge posed by the Soviet Union — everything from wars of national liberation to the threat of nuclear war was gone. From the Russian point of view, the social chaos of the post-Cold War world was unbearable. Meanwhile, the end of a Russian challenge to the West meant from the Russian point of view that Moscow was helpless in the face of Western plans for reordering the institutions and power arrangements of the region without regard to Russian interests.

As mentioned, Westerners think in term of two eras, the Cold War and the Post-Cold War era. This distinction is institutionalized in Western expertise on Russia. And it divides into two classes of Russia experts. There are those who came to maturity during the Cold War in the 1970s and 1980s, whose basic framework is to think of Russia as a global threat. Then, there are those who came to maturity in the later 1980s and 1990s. Their view of Russia is of a failed state that can stabilize its situation for a time by subordinating itself to Western institutions and values, or continue its inexorable decline.

These two generations clash constantly. Interestingly, the distinction is not so much ideological as generational. The older group looks at Russian behavior with a more skeptical eye, assuming that Putin, a KGB man, has in mind the resurrection of Soviet power. The post-Cold War generation that controlled U.S.-Russian policy during both the Clinton and Bush administrations is more interesting. During both administrations, this generation believed in the idea that economic liberalization and political liberalization were inextricably bound together. It believed that Russia was headed in the right direction if only Moscow did not try to reassert itself geopolitically and militarily, and if Moscow did not try to control the economy or society with excessive state power. It saw the Russian evolution during the mid-to-late 2000s as an unfortunate and unnecessary development moving Russia away from the path that was best for it, and it sees the Cold War generation's response to Russia's behavior as counterproductive.

The Post-Post Cold War World

The U.S. and other Westerners' understanding of Russia is trapped in a nonproductive paradigm. For Russia, the choice isn't between the Cold War or the Post-Cold War world. This dichotomy denies the possibility of, if you will, a post-post-Cold War world — or to get away from excessive posts, a world in which Russia is a major regional power, with a stable if troubled economy, functional society and regional interests it must protect.

Russia cannot go back to the Cold War, which consisted of three parts. First, there was the nuclear relationship. Second, there was the Soviet military threat to both Europe and the Far East; the ability to deploy large military formations throughout the Eurasian landmass. And third, there were the wars of national liberation funded and guided by the Soviets, and designed to create powers allied with the Soviets on a global scale and to sap U.S. power in endless counterinsurgencies.

While the nuclear balance remains, by itself it is hollow. Without other dimensions of Russian power, the threat to engage in mutual assured destruction has little meaning. Russia's military could re-evolve to pose a Eurasian threat; as we have pointed out before, in Russia, the status of the economy does not historically correlate to Russian military power. At the same time, it would take a generation of development to threaten the domination of the European peninsula — and Russia today has far fewer people and resources than the whole of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact that it rallied to that effort. Finally, while Russia could certainly fund insurgencies, the ideological power of Marxism is gone, and in any case Russia is not a Marxist state. Building wars of national liberation around pure finance is not as easy as it looks. There is no road back to the Cold War. But neither is there a road back to the post-Cold War period.

There was a period in the mid-to-late 1990s when the West could have destroyed the Russian Federation. Instead, the West chose a combined strategy of ignoring Russia while irritating it with economic policies that were unhelpful to say the least, and military policies like Kosovo designed to drive home Russia's impotence. There is the old saw of not teasing a bear, but if you must, being sure to kill it. Operating on the myth of nation-building, the West thought it could rebuild Russia in its own image. To this day, most of the post-Cold War experts do not grasp the degree to which Russians saw their efforts as a deliberate attempt to destroy Russia and the degree to which Russians are committed never to return to that time. It is hard to imagine anything as infuriating for the Russians as the reset button the Clinton administration's Russia experts — who now dominate Obama's Russia policy — presented the Russian leadership in all seriousness. The Russians simply do not intend to return to the Post-Cold War era Western experts recall so fondly.

The resurrection of talks on the reduction of nuclear stockpiles provides an example of the post-Cold generation's misjudgment in its response to Russia. These START talks once were urgent matters. They are not urgent any longer. The threat of nuclear war is not part of the current equation. Maintaining that semblance of parity with the United States and placing limits on the American arsenal are certainly valuable from the Russian perspective, but it is no longer a fundamental issue to them. Some have suggested using these talks as a confidence-building measure. But from the Russian point of view, START is a peripheral issue, and Washington's

focus on it is an indication that the United States is not prepared to take Russia's current pressing interests seriously.

Continued lectures on human rights and economic liberalization, which fall on similarly deaf Russian ears, provide another example of the post-Cold War generation's misjudgment in its response to Russia. The period in which human rights and economic liberalization were centerpieces of Russian state policy is remembered — and not only by the Russian political elite — as among the worst periods of recent Russian history. No one wants to go back there, but the Russians hear constant Western calls to return to that chaos. The Russians' conviction is that post-Cold War Western officials want to finish the job they began. The critical point that post-Cold War officials frequently don't grasp is that the Russians see them as at least as dangerous to Russian interests as the Cold War generation.

The Russian view is that neither the Cold War nor the post-Cold War is the proper paradigm. Russia is not challenging the United States for global hegemony. But neither is Russia prepared simply to allow the West to create an alliance of nations around Russia's border. Russia is the dominant power in the FSU. Its economic strategy is to focus on the development and export of primary commodities, from natural gas to grain. In order to do this, it wants to align primary commodity policies in the republics of the former Soviet Union, particularly those concerning energy resources. Economic and strategic interests combine to make the status of the former Soviet republics a primary strategic interest. This is neither a perspective from the Cold War or from the post-Cold War, but a logical Russian perspective on a new age.

While Russia's concerns with Georgia are the noisiest, it is not the key Russian concern in its near abroad — Ukraine is. So long as the United States is serious about including Ukraine in NATO, the United States represents a direct threat to Russian national security. A glance at a map shows why the Russians think this.

Russia remains interested in Central Europe as well. It is not seeking hegemony, but a neutral buffer zone between Germany in particular and the former Soviet Union, with former satellite states like Poland of crucial importance to Moscow. It sees the potential Polish BMD installation and membership of the Baltic states in NATO as direct and unnecessary challenges to Russian national interest.

Responding to the United States

As the United States causes discomfort for the Russians, Russia will in turn cause discomfort for the United States. The U.S. sore spot is the Middle East, and Iran in particular. Therefore, the Russians will respond to American pressure on them where it hurts Washington the most.

The Cold Warriors don't understand the limits of Russian power. The post-Cold Warriors don't understand the degree to which they are distrusted by Russia, and the logic behind that distrust. The post-Cold Warriors confuse this distrust with a hangover from the Cold War rather than a direct Russian response to the post-Cold War policies they nurtured.

This is not an argument for the West to accommodate the Russians; there are grave risks for

the West there. Russian intentions right now do not forecast what Russian intentions might be were Moscow secure in the FSU and had it neutralized Poland. The logic of such things is that as problems are solved, opportunities are created. One therefore must think forward to what might happen through Western accommodation.

At the same time, it is vital to understand that neither the Cold War model nor the post-Cold War model is sufficient to understand Russian intentions and responses right now. We recall the feeling when the Cold War ended that a known and understandable world was gone. The same thing is now happening to the post-Cold War experts: The world in which they operated has dissolved. A very different and complex world has taken its place. Reset buttons are symbols of a return to a past the Russians reject. START talks are from a world long passed. The issues now revolve around Russia's desire for a sphere of influence, and the willingness and ability of the West to block that ambition.

Somewhere between BMD in Poland and the threat posed by Iran, the West must make a strategic decision about Russia, and live with the consequences.