

Appointment of new US ambassador heightens tensions with Russia

Clara Weiss
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The appointment of Michael McFaul as the new US ambassador to Moscow has fueled fresh tensions between Washington and Moscow. The Kremlin fears that through McFaul the White House is signaling its intention of exploiting political instability in Russia by fostering opposition elements.

McFaul, who has served as an adviser to President Obama on Russia and Central Asia since May 2011, is a former Stanford professor and fellow at the Hoover Institute. While regarded as the “architect” of the Obama administration’s reset policy aimed ostensibly at easing tensions with Russia, McFaul is an expert on the so-called color revolutions carried out with US backing in the territory of the former Soviet Union.

In Georgia and Ukraine, pro-Western forces came to power with Washington’s support at the expense of political forces with close ties to the Kremlin. In 2006, McFaul co-authored *Revolution in Orange: The Origins of Ukraine’s Democratic Breakthrough*.

While his appointment as ambassador was controversial, both Republicans and Democrats pressed for his assumption of the post after a protest movement developed in December in Russia against rigged parliamentary elections and the Kremlin’s authoritarian rule. The demonstrations, largely drawn from layers of the urban middle class, are led by Russia’s liberal opposition. Organized around the demand for “fair elections,” these forces are pressing for an opening up the political process, closer ties with the US and the imposition of right-wing reforms that combine austerity with the creation of a more favorable investment climate for international finance.

McFaul has close personal ties with several opposition leaders, among them the leader of Parnas, Boris Nemtsov, since the 1990s. In mid-January, along with US Deputy Secretary of State William Burns, he met with oppositionists and human rights activists to discuss the state of “civil society” in Russia and express US support.

The Russian state media launched a campaign against the new ambassador only two days after his arrival in Moscow. The *New York Times* commented on January 24 that the honeymoon of a newly appointed ambassador had rarely been so short.

Shortly after his meeting with the opposition, Russian Channel One proclaimed that the new ambassador had been sent to Moscow to foster a revolution. Andrey Izayev, a deputy of the ruling party United Russia, called McFaul a “specialist in Orange Revolutions.” The government’s youth movement “Nashi” also sharply attacked the US ambassador for his meeting with the opposition.

In an interview with the liberal daily *Kommersant*, McFaul emphasized that, in his view, the reset was not only about improving bilateral relations with the Kremlin, but about deepening the ties to “the opposition, businessmen, and artists” in Russia. He rejected the claim that the US has financed Alexei Navalny, the fervently nationalist anti-corruption blogger who has become a centerpiece of anti-government demonstrations, while observing that “the 21st century will belong to those who will be capable of using clever people for their purposes.”

As “priorities” for his diplomatic work, he first identified the conflict over the US missile defense system in Europe, which has been a contentious issue between Russia and NATO for years. While Moscow feels threatened by the missiles stationed close to its European borders, NATO, in an act of deliberate provocation, has refused to grant the Kremlin a guarantee that the missiles will not be directed against Russian territory.

Second, McFaul pointed out the conflict over Syria and Iran as a pivotal focus of his work. “We need to stop the bloodshed in Syria; we mustn’t just stand by and watch. We have to work on this together with Russia and other major powers. And we have to deal prudently with the situation in Iran. In this respect, we have achieved

significant progress, but this year will be decisive for finding a solution to this question. The US and Russia have to stand on the same side in this,” he said.

For the US and the Western European NATO powers, the opposition of Russia and China to their plans for military intervention against Syria and Iran is still a serious obstacle. The ouster of these regimes would significantly undermine the interests of Moscow and Beijing in the Middle East, threatening to spark a regional conflagration that might eventually lead to another world war.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has repeatedly condemned the tougher UN sanctions against Syria. The Kremlin maintains close economic and military ties to the Assad regime. In January, Russia pointedly signed a \$550 million deal with Syria to provide 36 Russian fighter planes.

Lavrov also opposed the EU oil embargo against Iran, calling it an “attempt to strangle a whole sector of the Iranian economy.” A military strike against Iran would be “a catastrophe,” Lavrov said recently.

In December, the Russian liberal newspaper *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* reported that the Kremlin was expecting a US-backed military strike by Israel against an Iranian nuclear facility in the near future. To prepare itself for an attack, Moscow has deployed the warship Admiral Kusnetsov to its naval base in Tartus on Syria’s Mediterranean coast, and strengthened its military presence in Armenia, which borders on Turkey and Iran. Furthermore, the Russian state budget for 2012-14 plans for a doubling of military and defense expenditures.

The newspaper, moreover, cited the military expert General Vladimir Popov, who said that a military engagement by Russia in the conflict was possible, if Iran came close to military collapse due to the actions of the US.



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