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US sees Iran, Afghanistan as gains of Russia reset

By Michael Stott

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Russia's support for fresh U.N. sanctions against Iran and its help on Afghanistan show how Washington's "reset" of relations with Moscow is delivering results, President Barack Obama's top adviser on Russia said.

Moscow had strongly resisted applying further international pressure on Iran over its nuclear programme, but has now agreed to a fresh set of sanctions and criticised Tehran's lack of cooperation.

"We believe that's a concrete achievement of resetting relations with Russia," Obama's senior director for Russian affairs, Michael McFaul, told reporters late on Thursday night. McFaul, in Russia to meet government officials and civil society leaders, also attributed other foreign policy successes to Obama's move to start afresh with Russia after rocky relations during the Bush presidency.

Russia's help in allowing supplies through its territory to NATO troops in Afghanistan, its agreement to a treaty cutting nuclear arms, its support in curbing nuclear proliferation and its cooperation over North Korea were all examples, he added.

"We're trying to establish a substantive relationship with the Russian government ...," McFaul said.

"We're not aspiring to a 'good' relationship or a 'happy' relationship ... it's about substance. We believe that if there is real substance, that will change the mood."

Disagreements remain over issues such as the former Soviet republic of Georgia. Russia has recognised two pro-Moscow rebel regions of Georgia as independent states while Washington wants to see them back under Georgian sovereignty.

"To be very candid ... I don't see us having a strategy that can actually achieve that goal of reunifying Georgia's borders," the White House official said.

PERSONAL RELATIONS

McFaul said Obama had established a good working relationship with President Dmitry Medvedev -- whom he described as the U.S. leader's principal interlocutor in Russia.

"By getting a lot of this stuff done, they've now managed to get to know each other fairly well and got into some incredible levels of detail when it comes to arms control and Security Council resolutions," he said.

Within Russia, Medvedev is widely viewed as the junior partner in a ruling "tandem" with the prime minister, former Kremlin chief Vladimir Putin.

But McFaul said protocol dictated that Medvedev should be Obama's main point of contact and added that "it would be foolish of us to play a game between Putin and Medvedev".

McFaul conceded that domestic affairs in Russia presented a more mixed picture. "There's some good things, there's some bad things and there's most things that haven't changed," he said.

Among "atrocious, tragic things", McFaul mentioned the death in pre-trial detention in Moscow of Sergei Magnitsky, a lawyer for what was once the top foreign investment fund in Russia. But he also noted Medvedev had signed a new law limiting pre-trial detention for economic crimes.

Some Russian opposition figures have criticised Washington for playing down human rights and democracy issues in order to improve the relationship with Moscow, but McFaul insisted that the Obama administration gave equal weight to contacts with Russia's civil society and political opposition.

During this week in Moscow, McFaul said he had met opposition politicians, opposition media, human rights activists, Magnitsky's mother and a lawyer acting for jailed YUKOS oil tycoon Mikhail Khodorkovsky.

A U.S. source, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Washington's top priorities now for Russia were to help secure its membership of the World Trade Organisation, to agree cooperation on missile defence and to resolve economic disputes including getting access for U.S. poultry to the Russian market.