

Opinion

Hitting the Reset Button in Russian-US Relations

By Hans-Henning Schröder, Bremen/Berlin

Little Sympathy for Bush

Among the Russian public, skepticism towards the US is widespread. During the crisis in South Ossetia, approval rates for the US reached even lower levels than on the occasion of the US invasion in Iraq in 2003. Not even a quarter of those surveyed described their feelings towards the US as “good” or “mainly good”. More than two-thirds stated flatly that their sentiments towards the US were “bad”. This was a reversal for Russia, where the US has traditionally been regarded in a favorable light. Despite (or maybe because of) decades of Soviet propaganda depicting the US as an implacable enemy, the overwhelming majority of Russians was favorably disposed towards America. As a rule, between 60 and 70 per cent of the Russian population had a positive image of the US. But that esteem eroded during the Bush presidency. The Iraq war, the efforts to expand NATO to the borders of Russia, the intention of establishing a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic, and finally the aggressive statements of US politicians during the South Ossetia conflict did not go down well among the Russian public.

The political leaders had always regarded the US as a competitor and opponent. Although there were occasional phases during which Russian foreign policy consciously strove for cooperation with “the West” – for example, under President Boris Yeltsin at the beginning of the 1990s and under President Vladimir Putin after 11 September 2001, this conciliatory policy repeatedly ended in frustration. When Putin acquiesced to the establishment of US military bases in Central Asia in autumn 2001, he assumed that this concession would be rewarded by the US politically and that Russia would play a significant role in a coalition against terrorism.

However, in December 2001, Bush abrogated the ABM treaty and thus made clear that the US government was not interested in constructive cooperation with Russia. One year later, in November 2002, seven countries, including the three Baltic republics, were invited at the NATO summit in Prague to join the alliance. Their accession was completed in April 2004, with NATO advancing up to the borders of Russia. Russia’s foreign policy-makers regarded this move as threatening. Accordingly, they no longer aimed for cooperation with the US, but looked for ways to obstruct Washington’s policies.

For a “Just and Democratic World Order”

The key terms in the policy that Russia developed as a counterweight to US strategy were “equality” and “multipolarity”. The Russian Federation’s 12 July 2008 foreign policy statement designated as the main goals of Russian foreign policy “influencing global processes with the aim of creating a just and democratic world order based on collective resolution of international issues and on international law [...]” This phrase targeted the US, whose “strategy of unilateral action” and “ignoring [...] the basic principles of international law” were sharply condemned. As late as October 2008, speaking at the World Policy Conference in Evian, Russia’s President Dmitry Medvedev defined US economic egoism and efforts for a “unipolar world” as key causes of the global financial crisis.

In the final years of the Bush administration, there were two proposals in particular that disconcerted the Russian leadership: The first was the plan to station elements of a missile defense system in Poland and the Czech Republic, while the other was the determined effort to prepare the way for Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO via a Membership Action Plan. Russian security policy experts regarded these moves as elements of an encirclement strategy. As far as Russian observers were concerned, US support for Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili was only the capstone of a policy seeking confrontation with Russia.

A slap in the face of the president-elect

Concerns about US encirclement and irritation at a US foreign policy that ignored Russian apprehensions also help explain the statement of intent to station nuclear-tipped short-range missiles in Kaliningrad, which was announced by Medvedev in a move that took US president-elect Barack Obama by surprise. Medvedev said:

“I would add something about what we have had to face in recent years: what is it? It is the construction of a global missile defense system, the installation of military bases around Russia, the unbridled expansion of NATO and other similar ‘presents’ for Russia – we therefore have every reason to believe that they are simply testing our strength. [...] Therefore I will now announce some of the measures that will be taken. In particular, measures to effectively counter the persistent and consistent at-

tempts of the current American administration to install new elements of a global missile defense system in Europe. For example, we had planned to decommission three missile regiments of a missile division deployed in Kozelsk from combat readiness and to disband the division by 2010. I have decided to abstain from these plans. We will not disband anything. Moreover, we will deploy the Iskander missile system in the Kaliningrad Region to be able, if necessary, to neutralize the missile defense system. [...] And finally, electronic jamming of the new installations of the US missile defense system will be carried out from the territory of the same westernmost region, that is from Kaliningrad. [...] I want to emphasize that we have been forced to take these measures. We have repeatedly told our partners that we want to engage in positive cooperation. We want to act against common threats and to work together. But unfortunately, very unfortunately, they did not want to listen to us.”

It was surely no coincidence that the Russian president chose the day after Obama’s election for his show of strength against the policies pursued by Bush. The fact that the Obama camp regarded the missile defense project with a degree of reservation did not seem to matter much to Medvedev. Such a move can be seen as a diplomatic slap in the face. While it may have been a genuine mistake – the date of the speech had been moved several times due to internal disagreements over its domestic and economic policy sections – it could also have been intended as a deliberate snub. In any case, the timing is evidence of a surprising lack of diplomatic tact: Amid a general spirit of hope and optimism, the Russian leaders acted according to old habits that have been rightly regarded as antiquated for the past 20 years. At least, the statement also conveyed a positive message, since the Russian president concluded by signaling unequivocally his willingness to engage in negotiations.

Mixed signs

Two and a half months later, after Obama’s inauguration on 20 January 2009, the Russian reaction was much more positive. The Russian Foreign Ministry signaled optimism that there was an opportunity for a new start in Russian-US relations. Among the Russian public, skepticism towards the US continues to be significant, but according to surveys, the new US president has left a predominantly positive impression. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, too, voiced careful optimism in an interview with Bloomberg TV. In particular, he noted the changed US position concerning the station-

ing of ABM systems in Poland and the Czech Republic, as well as in the matter of NATO expansion, which he regarded as positive steps. Putin indicated that he saw opportunities for collaboration in the area of disarmament and in combating the international financial crisis.

A week after Obama took office, the Russian leadership decided that it was appropriate to send a positive signal of its own to Washington. A representative of the Russian General Staff told the media that the Russian side had ceased its preparations to base Iskander missiles in Kaliningrad. Thus, the Russian government retracted its threatening gesture and signaled a willingness to cooperate. With the new US president having declared in his first press conference that Russia and the US should resume nuclear disarmament talks, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov also responded positively. He stated that Russia was prepared to resume negotiations immediately, as soon as the new US administration had appointed its disarmament team.

The Russian position was somewhat overshadowed by the Kyrgyz initiative to shut down the US airbase at Manas. Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiy announced this decision in Moscow immediately after having been promised a US\$2.15 billion financial aid package by Russia. Western observers suspected – probably not altogether wrongly – that Russian interests were involved in this matter, too. In view of the Obama administration’s intention to strengthen its military engagement in Afghanistan, for which it requires supply bases in Central Asia, this move must be regarded as an unfriendly act. The signals coming from the Russian side were therefore mixed ones.

Biden and Ivanov in Munich

An initial meeting of leading politicians from both sides occurred on the occasion of the 45th Munich Security Policy Conference in early February, which was attended by First Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov of the Russian Federation and US Vice President Joseph R. Biden. Ivanov, whose speech preceded that of Biden, used the opportunity to lay out the Russian position and indicated which areas Russia was interested in discussing with the US side. He highlighted the necessity of negotiating on strategic nuclear weapons with the goal of arriving at a new overall agreement. He pointed out that sensitive issues remain, such as the stationing of nuclear missiles on foreign territory and the matter of payload increases. He also reiterated his concerns about the US plans for a missile defense system. The latter, he claimed, was part of a global strategic infra-

structure directed against the Russian strategic nuclear capability.

At the same time, Ivanov joined the US administration in affirming the importance of non-proliferation policies. In this context, he also commented on the issue of intermediate-range nuclear forces (INF). The US and Russia had agreed in the INF Treaty to abolish and dismantle these weapons systems. However, in the meantime, they have seen North Korea, China, Pakistan, India, and Israel acquire weapons of this category. Ivanov therefore argued in favor of an expansion of the INF Treaty to these countries. In conclusion, he called on the countries of the West to change their stance on the matter of conventional disarmament in Europe.

Vice President Biden's speech did not immediately engage with the agenda proposed by Ivanov. While the latter's speech had dealt exclusively with issues to be negotiated between Russia and the US, the scope of Biden's remarks was broader, referring to change in Iraq and initiatives vis-à-vis Iran, and laying out a political concept for the US to combat poverty worldwide, to eradicate education shortfalls, and to promote sustainable agriculture. Only a small part of the speech was devoted to relations with Russia. In this section, the vice president suggested that it was "time to press the reset button" and rebuild the relationship.

He offered a policy of cooperation in numerous areas and proposed new START talks as well as a joint campaign against terrorism and against the Taliban. However, he also made clear that differences of interests remained. The US, he said, was not prepared to accept spheres of interests; nor was it willing to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as sovereign states. But he concluded on a conciliatory note: "[...]the US and Russia can disagree and still work together where our interests coincide."

Limited Results of the "Reset"

The encounter in Munich illustrated the opportunities and difficulties of US-Russian relations. On the positive side, both the Obama administration and the government of Putin and Medvedev are seeking dialogue. But when the speeches of Biden and Ivanov are compared, the discrepancy between the respective international standing of the two countries becomes evident. In Biden's presentation, Russia did play a role; after all, the vice president devoted nearly half a page to relations with Russia. But it was only one topic among many others. Biden's agenda included global challenges such as climate change; global poverty, education, and hunger; the Middle East conflict; Iran's nuclear issues; Afghanistan; Pakistan; the future of NATO; and also Russia. Ivanov's speech was limited to a single topic: Russia's security policy relations with the US. His speech lacked a global scope. Russia's first deputy prime minister did not indicate a willingness on the part of Russia to take on international responsibility, but merely stated a claim for recognition by the US as a partner on equal terms. The comparison of the two speeches illustrates the discrepancy between Russia and the US in terms of the two countries' relative international influence: The one is a global actor and superpower, the other a regional power whose elites refuse to accept their declining importance.

Therefore, the "resetting" of US-Russian relations as announced by US Vice President Biden will result in both sides entering into a dialogue on nuclear disarmament, reconsidering European security, and possibly engaging in selective cooperation over Iran and Afghanistan. But the fundamental dilemma – the Russian leadership's claims for a leading role that it cannot fulfill either politically, militarily, or economically – will not be resolved in the short term.

Translated from German by Christopher Findlay

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Further reading:

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