

## Analysis

### What Next After Warheads and Ideologies?

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#### Abstract

Barack Obama's rise to power relaxed the atmosphere surrounding US–Russian relations, which by the fall of 2008 had reached their lowest point in the last 25 years. The beginning of negotiations on a new agreement to limit strategic offensive weapons, an understanding on Afghanistan, and Washington's decision not to locate missile defense sites in Central Europe, as well as the convergence on Iran, provide a basis for optimism. However, a new model of cooperation between Moscow and Washington, which would address the realities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century rather than simply echoing the Cold War, has not been established. The two themes that determined the parameters of Russian–US relations earlier – nuclear parity and ideological confrontation – have lost their previous importance. Today both states are interested in harmonizing their priorities regarding regional conflicts in Eurasia. Such agreements are possible, but there have yet to be any attempts to achieve them.

#### Changing Places

Let's start with two quotes.

First: "Democracy cannot be imposed on any nation from the outside. Each society must search for its own path, and no path is perfect. Each country will pursue a path rooted in the culture of its people and in its past traditions."

Second: "States ... should know each other as well as possible and have the right to evaluate critically not only each other's foreign, but also domestic policies and maybe even point out insufficiencies in these policies if they can lead to problems at the international level or ignore generally accepted ethical norms and the principles of humanism."

The first quote seems very familiar. During the middle of this decade, at a time when the Russian state implemented a policy of "sovereign democracy," Russian high level politicians constantly spoke about these things – the uniqueness of Russia's path toward democracy and the inadmissibility of intervening in a country's internal affairs. The second quote is practically a word-for-word expression of Washington's answer to Moscow.

Nothing new? Almost. The difference is that the first quote comes from US President Barack Obama. This is an excerpt from his speech to the UN General Assembly on September 23, 2009. The second quote is part of Dmitry Medvedev's speech at the Yaroslavl Political Forum on September 14. The leaders of the two countries have literally changed places.

Does this mean that the "reset" between Russia and the US has produced results and that there is mutual understanding between the countries? No, more likely this surprising transformation has a different meaning. In the relations between the two countries there is now much less of the ideology that constantly existed in the

1990s and particularly in the 2000s. After the departure of the Bush administration, the White House essentially does not make any evaluations of the state of democracy and human rights in Russia. Even the State Department's annual report on this topic had a routine character and drew little attention in Moscow.

During Barack Obama's July visit to Russia, he demonstrated a mastery of lexical and political tight-rope walking in order to say what he needed to say about rights and freedoms, while not injuring with such words the mutual understanding on principle questions that he was seeking. He succeeded in this, to the joy of the Russian leadership, which now has enough self-confidence to pose questions about openness and perfecting democracy. Of course, little will come from posing the question in this way.

This transition affects more countries than just Russia. Obama's cabinet has decisively rejected the idea of "promoting democracy," which was the main ideological pivot of the activity of his predecessor. The reason is clear – the results of the neo-conservative course were so miserable that Barack Obama now must undo the damage done by the Republicans. For this task, it is necessary to have more than the propaganda of ideals – America needs help in solving the vast majority of its foreign policy problems and needs to win support from those who are able to provide this help. It must find partners regardless of their socio-political structure.

#### Three "Easy" Problems

It makes sense that Russia is one of the top priorities in Obama's new course. It is not that Washington considers Moscow to be so important. Rather, the strategists of the current administration decided that among the numerous difficult problems Obama is facing, establishing

improved relations with Russia is achievable (progress is much more likely than say in the Middle East) and might provide a useful demonstration effect.

So far, Obama was not mistaken. In Russian–American relations there are several possibilities that could bring quick results without heavy costs on either side. Efforts in all these directions are under way.

First is the new agreement on reducing strategic offensive weapons to replace START I, which expires in December 2009. On this topic, the two parties can organize a loud and winning campaign showing how the two nuclear superpowers are again seeking to reduce their arsenals and call on other countries to follow their example. The actual parameters of the reduction always can produce numbers that do not require any serious concessions by either side. Ultimately, even the most extreme hawks do not believe in launching a nuclear war. But the symbolic factors and support for deterrence represent a great resource. As in the past, Russia and the US have many warheads and launchers and it is always easy to carry out cosmetic reductions. According to all indicators, such reductions will make up the content of the new agreement, which will be prepared by the end of the year.

Second is the question about the missile defense system designated for Central Europe. The project's technological weaknesses, strategic senselessness, high costs, and political provocations made it a prime target for elimination. This does not mean the rejection of missile defense as such, stop the development of the new technology, or prevent the appearance of a shield in the future, but it does give the administration the ability to make a beautiful gesture and expect something in return. Many in Russia assumed that Obama would overturn Bush's initiative, but nevertheless, Moscow appreciated the move and feels obligated to respond. Above all, the American president most likely won over the Kremlin by doing what he promised to do. During the previous administration, Russia no longer expected such an approach or that American leaders were at all interested in what other participants in international relations thought.

Naturally, if work on US national missile defense – an effort to defend America and its military-political allies – continues, we would quickly return to the stand-off that existed a year ago. A resolution can only come from creating the kind of joint missile defense system now discussed in Moscow, Washington, and Brussels. If these plans develop in a serious manner, there could be a fundamental transformation of relations. If these discussions are to be productive, China should be included in them from the very beginning. Otherwise, Beijing,

without doubt, will interpret the defenses as being directed against them. Most likely, Washington would not be against taking measures that reduce the level of cooperation between Moscow and Beijing, pulling Russia into a system which would elicit China's displeasure. But, objectively Russia simply cannot allow China to lose confidence in bilateral relations. Moreover, preserving stability in Eurasia is impossible without including China.

Third is the problem of Afghanistan. Here the interests of Russia and the US (and all players in global and regional politics including Iran) are similar, even if they do not coincide exactly. No one has an interest in the return of the Taliban to power in Kabul. Therefore, opening transit routes for the American air force, which presidents Medvedev and Obama agreed to in Moscow, does not contradict Russia's goals and provides a convenient opportunity to show good will.

Of course, one should not overestimate the degree to which Russia is interested in NATO's success in Afghanistan. In Moscow, most analysts believe that sooner or later NATO and the US will have to leave the country because they will not be able to achieve anything there. In practical terms, Russia is working to the best of its ability to support America and NATO in Afghanistan, but at the same time is preparing for what will happen in the region after they leave. In this connection, they are working to turn the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) into an effective military-political alliance and not just a "club of Russia's friends."

While these three topics are important, they do not define the entire agenda either for Moscow or Washington; however, beyond them, the field is undefined. One illustration of the objective difficulties that Russia and the US face in the search for cooperation is the situation with Iran.

### The Iranian Conundrum

Russia's strengthening position on the Iranian question, which took place this autumn, definitely resulted from Obama's decision to reject placing missile defense sites in Poland and the Czech Republic. Moscow definitely felt it necessary to respond positively to this friendly gesture. However, it is one thing to announce support for sanctions and quite another to agree on their specific contents. If Washington expects a radical change in the Russian position, it will be disappointed. This is not a result of Moscow's desire to trip up its American partner or even particular sympathy for Iran. Simply, in formulating their policies, Russia and the US operate in completely different contexts regarding their re-

lations with Teheran. America looks at the situation with a global view, while Russia operates from a regional position.

For the US, problem number one, whose importance is an order of magnitude greater than the rest, is the possibility that Iran will acquire nuclear weapons. Such a development would qualitatively increase the threat to Israel; launch a domino effect throughout the entire Middle East with a likely massive race for nuclear status among Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Turkey and possibly others; and undermine American influence in this key region. The stakes are increased by the fact that the inadmissibility of Iran obtaining nuclear weapons sits at the center of American policy. Accordingly, if it happens, it will be a serious blow to the prestige of the superpower. And this would damage its global position.

Russia also considers a nuclear Iran to be a very unpleasant and undesirable development of events, but not as catastrophic as the Americans see it. For Moscow, Iran is a neighboring regional power whose influence is growing. Russia's experience of practical cooperation with Teheran in the post-Soviet period is generally positive: the joint effort to end the civil war in Tajikistan and also Iran's restrained position in regard to the Chechen wars.

Teheran's potential opportunities to create problems in the Russian sphere of interests are great: take, for example, the unresolved problem of the status of the Caspian Sea. Fighting with Iran means introducing additional instability along Russia's southern borders. Moreover, if now Moscow does not particularly believe that Russia could be a target for Iranian rockets, following a deterioration in relations, the probability of such a strike would increase. Already, Iran considers Russia to be an unreliable partner, one that makes decisions with a constant eye on the US and Europe and uses the Iranian question as a bargaining chip with the Western powers.

The negotiations in Geneva, which followed the most recent outbreak of concern around Iran, increased hope in the possibility of coordinated action, in which each of the sides is able to play a positive role. At the same time, Iranian diplomacy has rich experience in maneuvering and skillfully playing on contradictions, which constantly push problems into a new cycle.

### Taking Interests into Account

Despite the objective differences between Russia and the US connected to the Iran problem, the very fact of dis-

cussing it marks a new base for relations. It is a potential area of agreement regarding regional interests.

The list of foreign policy priorities for the US and Russia are similar in structure and geography, but vary considerably in content. At the center of attention for both countries are regional conflicts, many of which have the potential to spill over to the global stage. But their lists are different. For Washington, it is above all Iran, Afghanistan, Middle East peace, and North Korea. For Moscow – Ukraine, Central Asia, and the Caucasus. American priorities are on the Russian list, but much lower in the hierarchy. And vice versa.

In both Moscow and Washington, there is no understanding that the entire regional spectrum should be viewed in a unified context. Doing so means that in each individual case there is more room for maneuver. It is not simply a matter of linkages and exchanges. The answer is much more sophisticated. If one adds up the existing concrete challenges, only a comprehensive solution is capable of providing stability in Eurasia, where the disappearance of the USSR and the end of Cold War ideological confrontation removed the system-forming pivot.

In general, global political tendencies, which were visible at the beginning of the twenty-first century and were accelerated by the crisis, are forcing Washington to intensively search for new approaches. Relations with Russia are part of this broader effort.

Despite the presence of numerous weaknesses threatening the future development of the state, Russia is one of the few remaining countries in the world capable of strategic thinking and the potential to use force. Europe lost these qualities and China is focused on self-development, at least for now. The absence of alternatives makes Moscow both a potential opponent of Washington, and a potentially important partner.

For such a partnership, both sides should go beyond the limits of the ideological conceptions passed down from a previous era. Zero sum game logic dominates relations, while there is minimal attention paid to mutual interests. But it is possible to agree on interests: since many of them do not match in terms of priorities, each side can give up the ones it considers secondary in order to address the most important ones. However, this outcome is only possible if the inertia of the Cold War gives way to an understanding that the twenty-first century will be completely different for both the US and Russia.

#### *About the Author*

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