

Mending Relations With Washington: How Ready is Moscow in the 21st Century

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Abstract

Relations between Russia and the United States have a long history of distrust and lack of faith. In spite of the Soviet era perestroika and glasnost, America still believes that Russia has yet to come out of the “iron curtain”, and Russia has not stopped accusing the United States of wielding undue influence in world politics, economy and security. Russia is seriously holding on to countries of the former Soviet Union and her former allies and is determined to ward off any possible American influence on them. In this piece, efforts are made to review and analyze the level of preparedness of both countries in creating more trusted relationship in the face of great threat on world peace in the 21st century.

Introduction

Prior to the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the country and the United States of America, through arms control, have successfully helped in regulating the superpowers’ strategic nuclear forces. With Moscow’s fall from superpower status, the bipolar structure that had shaped the security policies of the major powers for nearly half a century vanished, and the United States emerged as the world’s only superpower (Wohlforth 1999). This present structure has generated a lot of reactions among world political observers. The former American Secretary of Defense, William S. Cohen (1999) described it as a period of strategic opportunity for the United States.

The end of the Cold War ushered in a new era in U.S.-Russia relations, though it has not led to major changes in nuclear doctrine or policy of Russia. Russia’s great military strength is still dependent on nuclear weapons. The country’s former Prime Minister and now the President, Vladimir Putin, speaking at a ceremony marking the 50th anniversary of the detonation of the first Soviet nuclear weapon, said that Russian

nuclear weapons remained the guarantor of national security and global peace in the current geopolitical setting (Interfax 2000). Fundamental rethinking is required across the foreign policy agenda; structures designed to pursue Cold War strategies must be reinvented. Since the mid 1990s, both countries have been making efforts to create a new non-deterrence-based nuclear relationship with a view to drastically reducing nuclear arsenals.

The result was positive as could be seen in the consolidation and dismantling of large tactical nuclear arsenals, the cooperative denuclearization of Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan, and also the negotiation of the START 1 and II Treaties which was an indication of a radical shift on emphasis of nuclear weapons in the relationship of the two countries.

This, however, does not present Russia-American relations as being very cordial. As far as U.S. National Missile Defense (NMD) plans and programmes, the dominant view in Moscow is clearly that America's intentions towards Russia are hostile and, correspondingly, that NMD is not for counter proliferation purposes. There is suspicion that the United States has something else in mind than defending its national territory from potential Third World proliferators (Yereskovsky 2012).

Russia-America interaction in the 21st century revolves around the issues of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) enlargement, nuclear arms control, summed up in European security, security in and around the Eurasia landmass (especially the post-Soviet area), nuclear security, and energy security. In a joint communiqué issued on April 1, 2009, American President Barak Obama and Russian President Dmitry Medvedev promised to work together to reach a "legally binding" agreement to succeed the first strategic Arm Reduction Treaty (START I), launch "a comprehensive dialogue" on strengthening Euro-Atlantic and European security, "boost the Global Initiative to combat nuclear terrorism, and find a "comprehensive diplomatic solution" to the Iran problem (Roberts 2009). Neither Mr. Obama nor Mr. Medvedev (and even Mr. Putin) wanted to see Iran emerge as a nuclear power, setting off a destabilizing arms race in the Middle East. Both also wanted a stable Afghanistan, with al-Qaeda pushed out of sanctuaries there and in Pakistan. Russia has been a useful conduit for Western supplies of troops. Both have worked to

safeguard nuclear and other weapon materials in the Old Soviet Union and are cooperating usefully in their countries (The Economist 2009).

With the introductory remarks above, it is pertinent that a critical analysis of relations between the United States and Russia in the 21st century is necessary, especially now that the world is yet to be purged of the fear of nuclear free world. In this work therefore, relevant sources from both East and West are critically analyzed with a view to having a balanced judgment on the subject matter. To effectively discuss the topic, the key issues are categorized and analyzed under the following sub- headlines:

NATO's Expansion

Since the time of the Soviet Union, Russians have this perception that the West had always been hostile to Russia; that Mikhail Gorbachev, the last president of the Soviet Union, was wrong to see Western partners as allies, and that NATO's expansion into Eastern Europe encouraged Western countries to meddle in Russian affairs. NATO's eastward expansion since the end of the Cold War – it now numbers three former Soviet Republics among its members, and most of the East European states that were once bound to Moscow in the Warsaw Pact – has been a dreadful blow to Russian pride. Officially, Moscow says it does not mind the U.S. having friends among the former Soviet satellites, but Russia draws the line at both Ukraine and Georgia joining NATO (Time 2009). The fears and resolve of Russia to stick to this conviction was heightened when, on the day after Barak Obama was elected president, Dmitry Medvedev accused America of using the conflict in Georgia as a pretext for moving NATO's war ships to the Black Sea and speeding up the imposition of its middle defense system in Eastern Europe.

For the West, enlargement was about bolstering security in Europe. In Moscow it was seen as a sign of mistrust and neglect of Russia's aspirations. A new security structure could have been built to include a democratic Russia, but never was. Instead, NATO enlargement was coated in soothing language about Russia's co-operation with the alliance inside the Russia – NATO council (Economist 2009).

Nuclear Arms Control

Both Washington and Moscow are deeply concerned about how best to strengthen the nuclear non-proliferation regime and how to prevent Iran

and North Korea from further eroding it. They should also be concerned with the need to minimize the risk of nuclear proliferation as more and more states look to nuclear power to meet their energy needs – sometimes as an excuse or a cover for developing nuclear weapons programmes – thereby giving themselves the potential ability to enrich uranium.

Of overriding importance to this security is further reduction in the number of the nuclear weapons while accommodating strong pressure to address the threat to both the U.S. and Russia of ballistic missile attacks by the rogue states. For this reason, the two countries should commit to holding negotiations on both a START 111 (or new START) and the Anti Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty to accommodate the new strategic arms control framework similar to the January 1985 Gromyko-Shultz agreement to negotiate START, Defense and Space and INF-three “baskets” (Economist 2009).

The speculations and belief that the U.S. and Russia no longer aim their missiles against each other do not in any way explain that it is yet Uhuru. The immediate threat is from thousands of Russian and U.S. warheads on a hair-trigger, thereby creating the risk of starting a nuclear war through the possibility of an accidental or unauthorized launch which could be caused by one or more of the following:

- the wrong assessment of a threat (for example, the Cuba missile crisis)
- mistakes in the early warning systems
- internal rivalries within the former Soviet Union
- lack of controls on ballistic missiles leading to accidents
- a human error in judgment
- nuclear terrorism (Yereskovsky 2000)).

Faced with this catalogue of issues of global concern, the leadership of both countries should move beyond cold-war mentalities and chart a fresh start as was done in the 1980s. The two countries should insist on aiming to bring their deployed arsenals down below the 1,700 – 2,000 by 2012 agreed in the 2002 Moscow treaty (Roberts 2009). They could go down as low as 500-600 warheads deployed permanently in their forces with the rest being stored, perhaps under mutual inspection. Missiles and aircraft which are without nuclear warheads will be more like

conventional dual purpose systems which will no longer be considered a part of combat-ready arsenals but rather will be a part of reserve forces. When Obama and Medvedev met in London in April, they voiced an eagerness to conclude a new nuclear weapons treaty before the end of the year, and the expiration of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which restricts the number of nuclear weapons both countries can deploy (Yereskovsky 2000).

The absolute commitment of both countries in achieving this goal recently cast some doubts as Medvedev and his foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, recently said that nuclear – weapons reductions are possible only if the U.S. drops its plans to expand its missile – defense shield into Eastern Europe (Roberts 2009). The United States has argued that such defenses, including installation in Poland and the Czech Republic, are necessary to protect the West from a possible missile attack by Iran; an explanation Russia has dismissed with a wave of hand, saying that the shield is designed to give the U.S. an edge over Russia. Under this quagmire, the U.S. must collaborate with Russia on missile defense.

Russia should also be keeping a watch on Russian radar systems to help monitor Iranian Missile tests. Moscow on the other hand should be receptive to America's demand to limit any possible leaking of nuclear technologies and material out of Russia. Again, the United States and Russia will have to lead any effort to establish a broader multilateral arms control regime designed to reduce the hazardous aspect of the nuclear postures of the other nuclear powers, particularly those weapons systems in China, India, and Pakistan that blur the line between conventional and nuclear attacks.

Energy Security

The question of energy dialogue between the United States and Russia has been very necessary but has long not received the needed attention. The need was first muted in 2002 but overlooked, and then partially revived during the last year of the Bush administration. It is pertinent that both countries should discuss ways to bring Russian oil and liquefied natural gas to the North American market to enhance cooperation within the consortia developing Caspian Sea oil which should be based on cooperative relationship.

As Roberts (2009) puts it, addressing the enormously complex issue surrounding the politics of oil and gas from Russia and the Caspian Sea basin only makes sense as part of a three-way dialogue among the United States, Russia, and Europe (Europe is Russia's largest oil and gas market, and Russia is Europe's largest supplier).

Impact of Technological Development

The effect of major technological breakthrough in military capability on control of nuclear weapons worldwide cannot be ignored. Yereskovsky (2000) argues that the impact of applied automation and computers, electronic warfare, "brilliant sensors" and other technologies will lead to the rise of a military-techno culture in which time, area (space), distance, speed, and other fundamental conditions are radically changed. Nuclear weapons are being tested on the basis of scientific and technical progress: sub-critical experiments at the nuclear test ranges, super computers for mathematical simulation of complex process of nuclear and thermonuclear explosions, powerful lasers, x-rays and gamma systems and devices. It is feared that if this trend is not checked, the 21st century could witness the discovery of more nuclear weapons of higher accuracy that can distort the already existing level of accuracy and speed. Efforts should be geared towards achieving full and credible checks on nuclear weapons worldwide with a view to preventing, deterring and handling these threats before they get late.

The Near Abroad

There is no question that cuts more deeply to the core of the current tension in the U.S.-Russian relationship other than the issues of mutual security in and around the Post-Soviet area. A frank and sincere discussion between the two countries must address the specific sources of friction: NATO's activities, the claims and counterclaims surrounding the separatist conflicts in Moldova and the Caucasus, the role of Western nongovernmental organizations in the region, Russia's leverage over its neighbors and competition over oil and gas. The discussion must also explore ways in which the United States and Russia can work together to manage the two most explosive issues: the future of Ukraine and the way toward a more stable and constructive Russian-Georgian relationship.

The United States should convince Russia that America's ties with Ukraine and Georgia are based on shared values – they are both democracies and have strategic interests, including the protection of vital oil and gas supply routes. However, explanation that jettisons Ukraine and Georgia's interest in joining NATO, and their convictions of the enormous influence of the United States in making them realize the objectives could risk being interpreted as a betrayal by the duo of Ukraine and Georgia, who seek protection of NATO membership.

The China Factor

The growing interest of China in developing and further improving its nuclear built-up is an important factor in the U.S.-Russia relations. The United States once threatened to deploy a National Missile Defense (NMD) and a Theatre Missile Defense (TMD) in the Western Pacific. Such a development would negatively affect not only the U.S. but also Russia. In reaction to this, Beijing has adopted a \$100 billion package for nuclear built-up, and it has also jilted other countries like Russia, India and even France and others to oppose what they call “U.S. hegemony following the Cold War and have attempted to create a counterbalance” (Roberts 2009). Consequently, China and Russia are strengthening other security relationship with each other in spite of strong countervailing factors that might otherwise prevent a close collaboration. Former Russian Prime Minister, Primakov even conceived of a somewhat fanciful Russian-Chinese-Indian alliance.

Nuclear Non-Proliferation

One of the fundamental issues in Moscow and Washington relationship is how best to strengthen the nuclear nonproliferation regime and, most immediately, to prevent Iran and North Korea from further eroding it. The former UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan warned on April 24, 2000 at a start of a conference to review the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty that “nuclear conflict remains a very real and very terrifying possibility at the beginning of the 21st century. This is the stark reality confronting you today”(Yereskovsky 2000). And again, there is the need to minimize the risk of nuclear proliferation. Efforts to check this will require working with suppliers in the nuclear power industry to develop reaction less easy to use for weapons development and concentrating nuclear fuel services in facilities monitored by the International Atomic Energy Agency

(Roberts 2009). The importance of this demands that Russia and the United States should be serious about moving toward a world without nuclear weapons by reviving the stalled negotiations for a so-called 123 agreements, which would promote peaceful commercial nuclear activities between the two countries.

It should be noted that Iran is strategic to Russia. It is her entry point to the Middle East politics and Russia is not ready to upset it. Unlike the U.S., Russia does not see Iran's nuclear programme as a major threat. Rather than try to halt Iran's nuclear programme, Moscow has offered to enrich uranium for Tehran and the mullahs have politely turned that down.

If the battle of nonproliferation of nuclear weapons should be won, both the United States and Russia must eschew emotions and self interest for global safety and protection. The entire world, especially weaker nations, look up to them for global peace maintenance and sustenance.

Defense System

It is noticeable in the recent past that U.S. Russian relations soured. This is not because of frictions between Washington and Moscow over issues such as NATO enlargement, the status of Kosovo, and Washington's plans to place a ballistic missile defense system in Central Europe, but what Russia sees as Washington's excessive unilateralism and disposition of use of force also did more than its share of damage. Russia has resisted all plans of U. S. in placing a ballistic missile defense system in Central Europe, especially in countries considered as allies of the former Soviet Union. Russia believes that such action would erode its supposed influence in more territories. The United States does not view it as being confrontational, but as the only alternative of defending herself from possible recklessness of Iran and North Korea, whose acquisition of nuclear power is evidently supported by Russia.

Economic Crisis in Russia

Economic crisis that started to engulf Russia since September 2009 has softened the Russian leadership's demeanor. Russian President himself acknowledged that a more respectful dialogue between the leadership and the public is required. As Roberts (2009) puts it, the Kremlin no longer boasts of turning Russia into the world's fifth largest economy or

Moscow into a leading financial centre. “Patience” and “sacrifice” have become the new watchwords. Russian leadership, however, still insists that it is the Americans, more than Russians that need to shift position on the issues that agitate them – NATO enlargement, ballistic missile defense in Central Europe, and the failure to ratify the conventional forces in Europe Treaty. But the truth is that as soon as the Russian leadership realizes that the country’s near-term economic future will entail low or negative future, that its security depends largely on economic transformation at home than on fending off external threats, and that further delaying internal reforms is detrimental to the economic growth of the country, Russia will be more likely to welcome relief from quarters it previously scorned.

The Crisis in Afghanistan

Another important and urgent issue in U. S. -Russia relationship is dealing with mounting crisis in Afghanistan. Russia is yet to show seriousness in support and commitment in West’s efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Russia must not fail to realize that should those efforts fail, that its southern border would be subjected to the threat of an Afghanistan in shambles or in the grip of the Taliban. This should be seen as more imperative than indulging in an effort to expel the U. S. military from Central Asia. Russia’s readiness to allow the transit across its territory of nonmilitary supplies to U. S. troops in Afghanistan helps, but military goods should also be permitted to move along this corridor, a step the Russians have signaled they are prepared to take. It is expected therefore, that the United States should reach out to Russia, China, and other members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and encourage them to contribute more to the coalition of states active in Afghanistan (Roberts 2009). A larger U.S. and Russian collaboration is suggested in order to address the turbulence in and around Afghanistan and its potential reverberations in Central Asia.

Conclusion

There are indications that U.S.-Russia relations that have suffered and retarded since the period of the Cold War are yet to be reviewed and placed on cordial and trusted level. Of note is that Russia has been looking and is still looking, for partners and allies abroad in the next century in order to solve its complex economic and political problems.

And if Russia does not find such a partner in the United States, then it will be looking for partners among its nearest neighbors; China, Iran, Iraq and United Europe. Russia and the U.S. up till now have not become formal or informal allies, although they are no longer enemies.

In this 21st century, the leadership of both countries should present to the whole world their strategic vision for their relations and where they would like these to be several years from now. They should engage themselves in a frank wide-ranging discussion of how to get there. They should also be able to prove that they can succeed with the agenda they set in April, 2009 and must be able to end a friction-ridden and barren decade in U. S.-Russia relations. This is imperative because it is a general perception that when Russia and the United States do not get along, the rest of the world has every right to feel uneasy.

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