



BULLETIN

No. 15 (15) • March 19, 2009 • © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski (Editor-in-Chief), Bartosz Cichocki, Mateusz Gniazdowski,
Beata Górka-Winter, Leszek Jesień, Agnieszka Kondek (Executive Editor), Łukasz Kulesa

Prospects of US Policy towards Russia

by Bartosz Wiśniewski

Intense US efforts to strengthen cooperation with Russia have been balanced by moves emphasizing differences of both countries' interests. The recent gestures from the new administration are aimed at building a favorable atmosphere in bilateral relations on the eve of important decisions about the future of nuclear arsenals, Iran policy, and the missile defense programme. But more likely than spectacular agreements is the prospect of pragmatic collaboration, reflecting only partial concurrence of both countries' interests.

The United States has declared readiness to “reset” its relations with Russia and achieve a new, positive dynamics, of which the strongest indication so far has been an unequivocal pronouncement to resume cooperation in the forum of the NATO–Russia Council. An intention to highlight the priority nature of relations with Russia may also be reflected in the way President Obama’s letter was delivered to President Medvedev (handed over personally by a senior US diplomat). The US emphasizes the importance of cooperation with Russia on further reduction of nuclear arsenals and on prodding Iran to abandon its military nuclear program. But no major decisions should be expected prior to the Obama–Medvedev meeting scheduled for April.

Conciliatory gestures of this kind go hand in hand with US declarations which are clearly in contradiction with Russian interests—on rejecting the idea of zones of influence or recognizing every state’s freedom to choose alliances it wants to join. These declarations are consistent with, for instance, continued US readiness to implement the 9 January 2009 Charter on Strategic Partnership with Georgia, which contains provisions about US support for that country’s territorial integrity and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. The confirmation of US support for Georgia coincided with the consent given by the authorities in South Ossetia to post Russian border guards on its territory. These differences, though, are unlikely to stand in the way of pragmatic US–Russia collaboration.

New Agreement on Nuclear Arsenals. Both parties now recognize the need for an agreement that would replace the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) once it expires in December. The reductions provided for under START were achieved back in 2001, but its major advantage remains to be an extended system to verify and monitor how its obligations are fulfilled, which has helped to increase the level of confidence between the parties (one reason why the 2002 accord SORT cannot be START’s successor is precisely the absence of such mechanisms). But neither country has been interested, albeit for different reasons, in prolonging START or moving its mechanisms into a new agreement. The Bush administration had reservations about the extent of information required to be disclosed under the treaty (which in fact dealt with details of the US nuclear doctrine) and it questioned the advisability of keeping similar regulations today. As for Russia, the treaty indeed provided a major foundation of a strategic balance in relations with the US, but at the same time it barred Russia from rolling out a new type of multiple-warhead missiles, capable of piercing through the US missile defenses (MD).

The Obama administration declares readiness to resume procedures for monitoring nuclear arsenals and to consider their further reduction—although without specifying the extent to which it would like to draw on the START arrangements. But as Russia sees it, a new agreement would provide a major step towards increasing the credibility of the “reset” pledge; in addition, it makes its consent

on this matter contingent on a change in the US approach to MD. The likely prospect, though, is now for an interim arrangement, under which the major START mechanisms would stay in force pending the adoption of the new treaty. A Nuclear Posture Review is currently underway in the US, with its findings expected to impact on decisions about the size of the nuclear arsenal, and the approach to a new treat, also it is unlikely that the ratification procedure in the US Senate could be wrapped up before December.

The Future of MD's European Component and the Iranian Nuclear Program. As stressed by members of the Obama administration, the basic determinant for the deployment of the missile defense system in Europe (along with receiving proof that its respective elements work) is Iran's capacity to come into the possession of nuclear weapons. A host of factors raise a real possibility of delays in MD base construction in Poland and the Czech Republic. But a linkage between, on the one hand, drawing Russia into efforts to persuade Iran to give up its nuclear ambitions and the US readiness to abandon/suspend the construction of MD bases in Central Europe on the other does not look seem feasible, despite reports on the contents of the previously mentioned letter from Obama to Medvedev. It is not clear what kind of Russian assistance (backing additional sanctions; suspending civilian nuclear cooperation with Iran) or what kind of its possible final effect (slowdown, suspension or abandonment of the programme by Iran) could prove sufficient for the US to influence its MD decision. What is more, for the Iranian nuclear program issue to reach a breakthrough point, broader changes in Iran's internal and external determinants may turn out to be a matter of greater importance than Russian assistance. Realizing it is not of decisive importance for the US initiative on Iran, Russia is unlikely to show interest in taking a political risk of exerting pressure on that country, the more so as a fiasco of diplomatic endeavors could strengthen the hand of proponents of the European MD or advocates of a military solution. At the same time, a success of the initiative, i.e. the abandonment of a nuclear programme by Iran, would contradict Russia's interests too, since it would offer Iran an opportunity to limit its international isolation. Hence Russia is primarily interested in maintaining the status quo. As proof of its influence, Russia could, for instance, refer to its decision on suspending sales to Iran of S-300 missile defense systems. The decision may suggest that Russia appreciates the Obama administration's announcements of MD reconsideration, but the only satisfactory solution for the country would be a definite abandonment of the system's European component. Such a decision, however, is not possible without a breakthrough on Iran.

Transit of Supplies for Afghanistan. Given the deteriorating security conditions along Pakistani transit routes and plans to considerably step up its involvement in the Afghanistan operation, the United States has been forced to look for alternative overland supply routes for its troops in that country. And its logistic leeway (as well as the potential of NATO allies' contingents) may further narrow if the Kyrgyzstan government sticks to its decision—taken right after obtaining huge financial aid from Russia—to cancel the lease agreement on the Manas airbase, the main Central Asian post for carrying people and materiel to Afghanistan. Russia's simultaneous consent to the transit of US non-lethal cargo via Russian territory (with the first railway transport sent in March) may indicate its interest in bringing the Afghan situation under control (at least in part), thus constituting a gesture towards the new administration, but it may also represent an attempt to dissuade the US from plans to use South Caucasus transport corridors. At the present stage the US declared disinterest in the use of Georgian infrastructure, for instance, but such an option is left open in last January's declaration on cooperation. Of similar importance would be Russia's possible agreement to the transport of lethal supplies (such consent was granted Germany and Spain in February) or the lease of its own bases in the post-Soviet area. But that would very likely be tantamount to the de facto recognition of the region as a zone of Russia's privileged interests. That would be a tough decision for the Obama administration, but possibly not an avoidable one, given the requirements of the Afghan operation.