THE POLISH INSTITUTE
OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

BULLETIN

No. 41 (41) • July 8, 2009 • © PISM

Barack Obama's Visit to Moscow and the Future of U.S.-Russian Relations

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U.S. President Barack Obama's visit in Moscow on 6–8 July 2009 was, thus far, the most important event connected with the new U.S. administration's policy towards the Russian Federation (the policy of "reset"). A preliminary understanding was reached on the shape of a new accord on the reduction of strategic weapons, and the scope of the two countries' cooperation in Afghanistan was extended. At the same time, one should not expect any rapprochement of the two sides' positions on the future of missile defense, on policy with regard to Iran and on the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of some countries of the post-Soviet area, Georgia in particular.

U.S. Expectations vis-à-vis Russia. The U.S. policy of "reset" presupposes a reevaluation of relations with the Russian Federation. In the U.S. the opinion prevails that Russia has the potential allowing for progress to be made in the attainment of important goals of U.S. security policy, such as limiting the role of nuclear weapons in international relations (reinvigoration of the NPT regime), their non-proliferation (Iran's military nuclear program and the threat from North Korea), and also the stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan. The Obama administration intends to back up the important declarations made by the U.S. President about the first of the above-mentioned areas during his visit to Prague in April 2009 by, among other things, coming to an agreement with Russia that would replace the START 1 accords, which will only remain in force until December. The discussions on this subject, conducted on the basis of both president's mandate, are currently the main driving force behind the bilateral relations1 In addition, these negotiations are to constitute an answer to Russia's ambitions to participate in shaping global security and to confirm the importance that the U.S. attaches to cooperation with Russia. At the same time, the U.S. is voicing its views, distinct from Russian ones, about the causes and the course of the Russian-Georgian conflict of August 2008 and the motives for the possible dislocation of missile defense (MD) elements in Poland and the Czech Republic. The U.S. also rules out any formal, i.e. means of an international treaty, tying of limitations of strategic arsenals being discussed with decisions concerning the future of MD, although, in a common declaration of the two presidents of 1 April, it is stated that the connection between offensive and defensive weapons will be subject to discussion between the two parties.

Russian Expectations vis-à-vis the USA. The Russians reacted positively to the American proposal to develop bilateral relations, despite existing differences and conflicting interests. Firstly, thanks to the extensive format of bilateral relations, Russia expects to influence the U.S. position on such subjects as the future of MD and of NATO enlargement. Secondly, U.S.-Russian dialogue about global security flatters Russia, whose importance in the world has waned since the collapse of the USSR. Thirdly, according to Russia, the "reset" policy brings the U.S. closer to recognizing the international political status quo (the RF's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia). President Barack Obama's visit to Moscow was thus an event much publicized by the Russian media and served to reinforce the image of the Russian authorities' (mostly of Dmitri Medvedev) at home.

Many influential Russian experts urged the Russian authorities to enter into a "Grand Bargain" with the United States: Russia would help the U.S. address global security problems such as the war

[1] R. Śmigielski, "U.S.-Russian Negotiations on START 1 Replacement," PISM *Bulletin* No. 32 (32), 9 June 2009.

in Afghanistan, instability in Pakistan, the North Korean threat, and the Iranian nuclear program. In exchange, it would expect the U.S. to recognize Russia's sphere of interests in the post-Soviet area.

Main Results of the Moscow Meeting and Prospects in Bilateral Relations. Medvedev and Obama set important parameters of a new understanding on the size of nuclear arsenals and the number of delivery vehicles. The future treaty is to introduce limitations at the level of 1500–1675 for each country's nuclear warheads and 500–1100 for delivery vehicles. It is worthwhile to note the wide margin of maneuver given to negotiating teams about the allowable number of delivery vehicles. Russia is able to meet these criteria right now whereas the U.S. could reach them without much effort. Reserving the possibility of making very radical cuts in this area, especially on the U.S. side, in conjunction with a numerically insignificant reduction of the number of nuclear warheads in relation to existing ceilings (the SORT accord), seems to be an assurance for the eventuality that Russia might carry out its threat to block the accord on account of differences in the subject of MD. Deep reductions of delivery systems on the U.S. side could then be used to break Russian opposition whereas the number of 1500 nuclear warheads would be sufficient, from the Russian point of view, for the maintenance of its deterrence ability even if the U.S. refused to give up its European MD component.

During his talks with Dmitri Medvedev, Obama upheld the U.S. position concerning MD installations in Poland and the Czech Republic. The U.S. administration makes its construction dependent on assessments of the MD system's effectiveness as well as on the level of threat from Iran's military nuclear program. So far, U.S. overtures to initiate direct talks on this subject with Iran have been unsuccessful. New attempts to do so would most probably be made more difficult by Iran's internal situation. The United States does not seem to view Russia as a credible partner to exert effective pressure on Iran. The justification for such doubts is most clearly illustrated by Russia's attitude regarding the political crisis following the presidential elections in that country. President Medvedev extended his de facto support to president Ahmadinejad during the summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on 16 June 2009, despite the doubts about the election's results.

Russia agreed to make its airspace available for American transports of military personnel and battle gear headed for Afghanistan. The recent arrangement between the authorities of Kyrgyzstan and the U.S. administration on the subject of the continued leasing of the air base of Manas would seem to indicate that Russia does not have the influence in Central Asia that would allow it to effectively regulate American forces' freedom of action. As a result, one can expect that the new transport corridor will function without any problems, similarly to the rail route launched in March 2009. It is equally in Russia's interest to contribute to the effectiveness of U.S. actions in Afghanistan and to be seen by the Americans as a dependable partner (especially in contrast to the opportunistic attitude of the Kyrgyz authorities).

Georgia. The situation connected with Georgia will most probably remain a point of contention. Russia's position is that last year's secession of two Georgian provinces—Abkhazia and South Ossetia—is irreversible. The UN and OSCE observation missions ultimately ended their activities at the end of June after Russia refused to agree to extend their mandates. Russia conducted large-scale military maneuvers ("Caucasus 2009") that involved the above mentioned territories. At the same time, in his public pronouncements, Obama stressed United States' support for Georgia's territorial integrity and for its freedom to belong to military alliances of its choice, thus questioning Russia's concept of a privileged sphere of security interests. An impulse reinforcing American support for Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations was the inauguration meeting of the American-Georgian strategic partnership commission (29 June), called into being, among other things, to provide multilateral support for Georgia's efforts to join NATO. In addition, a visit to Ukraine and Georgia by U.S. Vice President Joe Biden was announced for the second half of July.

Assessment. Obama's visit to Moscow brought a PR success to both sides. Russia obtained a confirmation of United States' interest in the growth of cooperation in one of the few areas in which Russia continues to enjoy a status comparable to that of the U.S. Progress in the reduction of nuclear arsenals is not a foregone conclusion, however. The U.S. saw its interest in avoiding the impression that the "reset" policy, which is oriented towards pragmatic cooperation, would be associated with concessions to Russia in matters of importance to U.S. allies. At the same time, the lack of an understanding in key areas, such as MD or the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of countries in the post-Soviet area, could quickly lead to another crisis in U.S.-Russian relations.