

Russia's expectations concerning Barack Obama

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Russia wishes to use the fact that Barack Obama is taking over in the United States to change its relations with the USA. Most importantly, Moscow hopes that Washington will start to consider Russian interests, both global and regional, to a greater degree than it has so far done. This would include restoring the strategic (nuclear) balance (which in Moscow's view has been disturbed), by developing a new treaty on nuclear arms control to replace START I; in addition, the USA should also give up its plans to deploy the missile shield in Central Europe and recognise the Russian Federation's special role in the CIS area (by limiting the US political and military presence in the area, *inter alia*). For its part, Russia does not have much to offer the United States – its main asset consists in declarations of readiness to refrain from actions that would harm the USA's key interests, such as in the Middle East, whereas Russia's capacity to significantly support the USA on essential issues such as the Iranian nuclear crisis remains limited.

It is impossible to predict to what extent Russian-American relations will really change. Nor is it clear how willing the USA will be to grant Russia's demands. While agreement on selected issues such as a new arms control treaty is probable, Washington does not intend to make concessions to the Russian Federation on all points. Besides, opposition to US dominance has been the main axis of Russia's foreign policy, and even if the two sides reach a partial compromise, this need not necessarily stop Moscow from taking actions intended to weaken the United States.

Russia's expectations

Since the US presidential election in 2008, Russia has been sending two kinds of signals to the United States. On 5 November, when the results of the US election were announced, the Russian president Dmitry Medvedev threatened that Russia would deploy the Iskander short-range missiles in the Kaliningrad oblast, should the USA continue to develop its missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic¹. Moscow's intention was to demonstrate that the new US administration should not expect Russia to make

¹ This signal was obviously also addressed to Poland (the Iskander missiles could not pose any threat whatsoever to the security of the United States), however, the circumstances in which the statement was made clearly indicate that it was a propaganda message to the new US administration.

concessions. However, towards the end of the year Moscow started to speak in a milder tone, suggesting that it might be possible to repair strained Russian-US relations². High-ranking Russian officials, including the foreign minister Sergei Lavrov, the ambassador to the US Sergei Kislak and the Duma's International Affairs Committee chairman Konstantin Kosachov, indicated that they expected an improvement in relations between the two states.

Russia's most important objective seems to be to restore the Russian-American strategic balance (in the nuclear sphere), which Moscow considers to have been disturbed as a result of the United States' withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM), the imprecise and general nature of the 2002 arms control SORT³ treaty, and the USA's decision to build its missile defence system, among other moves. Russia is not in a position to outdo the United States in the arms race, and so it has been trying to mitigate the USA's advantage by other means. Moscow also expects the USA to take Russia's interests, both globally and regionally (especially in the CIS area and in Europe), into account. Specifically, this would mean that a new treaty on offensive nuclear arms control should be developed to replace START I (which expires in December 2009)⁴ and that the USA should give up its plans to deploy parts of its missile shield in Central Europe;

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The most important objective for Moscow seems to be to develop a new **treaty to replace START I**, which would lead

to a further reduction in the number of nuclear warheads held by the two states, preserve the verification mechanisms and impose restrictions on the so-called nuclear triad held by the two states (strategic bombers, submarines and intercontinental missiles). Theoretically, the 2002 Moscow Treaty (also referred to as SORT) is still in place, although it does not guarantee any real influence on the US nuclear arsenal for the Russian Federation. Russia wants to sign a new treaty that would combine the features of the START series of treaties and SORT (neither side is interested in extending START I, which would be formally possible⁵). The main differences of opinion between Moscow and Washington as regards the possible new arms control treaty concern a number of issues. Russia wishes to maintain the basic structure of the START agreement, which implies an irreversible reduction in the number of nuclear warheads held by the two countries to a certain ceiling (the Russian Federation does not want the parties to be authorised to store warheads in depots). The level of reduction in the number of warheads held is another contentious point; the Russian side is interested in making quite deep cuts, perhaps even down to 1000 warheads per party. In addition, Russia wants to keep in place the quantitative limits on any means delivery used to convey nuclear weapons (strategic bombers, intercontinental missiles, submarines carrying ballistic missiles). The objective would be, on the one hand, to reduce the costs of maintaining and modernising the Russian nuclear arsenal, and on the other, to ensure that real equilibrium is preserved between the offensive potentials of Russia and the United States. The United States, on the other hand, prefers to impose limits only on those warheads which are actually installed on means of delivery, while still being able to keep the remaining ones in storage. This would allow the United States to equip some means of delivery with conventional weapons, while retaining the ability to flexibly expand the nuclear arsenal. Washington would thus prefer a new variant of the SORT treaty, which would have only

² For example, the Russian ambassador to the United States Sergei Kislak in an interview for *Arms Control Today* published in December 2008, and Sergei Lavrov in his article published in *Newsweek* on 31 December 2008.

³ The SORT Treaty states that by 31 December 2012, the arsenals of the Russian Federation and the United States should have been reduced to 1700–2200 warheads deployed on means of delivery (although no timetable for these reductions is specified), and authorises the parties to store nuclear warheads (instead of dismantling them); it does not provide for any verification mechanisms, and theoretically may expire on 1 January 2013.

⁴ The START I Treaty was concluded by the USSR and the USA on 31 July 1991. After the collapse of the USSR, in May 1992 the Lisbon Protocol was signed under which the Russian Federation, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine (i.e. those states on whose territories the post-Soviet nuclear arsenal was located) became parties to the treaty. Under START I, Russia and the United States may hold a maximum of 1600 nuclear means of delivery each (this number includes strategic bombers, intercontinental missiles and ballistic missiles in submarines), and not more than 6000 nuclear warheads each. START I remains in force for 15 years since its period of activity began in 1994.

⁵ A large number of the Treaty's provisions have already been implemented; besides, the parties wish to repeal some of the provisions concerning verification. Russia wishes to conclude a bilateral treaty to which Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine would not be parties (any extension of START I would have to be approved by these countries).

limited influence on the shape of the US armed forces. In Russia's view, this approach would put the USA in an advantageous position and undermine the strategic balance.

As regards the **missile shield**, Russia wants the United States to give up its plan to deploy parts of it in Central Europe, and to limit the development of the global anti-missile system. This would restrain the USA's technological advantage, which enabled it to withdraw from the ABM Treaty in 2002.

Finally, Russia would also like the United States to make a commitment that the **NATO enlargement process** would not be continued in an eastward direction, and that states such as Ukraine and Georgia would not become members of the North Atlantic Treaty. Thus, Moscow in fact expects the USA to recognise the CIS as Russia's sphere of privileged interests, and to limit the US political, military and economic presence in the area (including in the energy sphere).

Russia also has a number of other postulates, although these are currently less likely to be granted. These include the following: to develop a new model for conventional arms control in Europe to replace the CFE Treaty (Russia is concerned about the USA's advantageous position in terms of conventional arms in the area in question); for the US to refrain from creating new military bases in Europe and to ratify the agreement on civilian nuclear co-operation (the so-called 123 Agreement), which then-President George W. Bush withdrew from Congress due to strong objections in the US legislature, and, finally, to start talks concerning a treaty banning the militarization of outer space.

Russia's questionable offer

As regards what Moscow could offer the United States in return for having its postulates granted, the offer is limited and at least partly propaganda. It includes Russia's readiness to refrain from actions that could harm the key US interests, and to start limited co-operation with the US on selected international security issues.

The first aspect concerns the Russian Federation's readiness to refrain from stepping up its political and military presence in Latin America (for example, by reducing arms sales to anti-American states such as Venezuela), to refrain from actions that harm US policy in the Middle East (for example, by suspending contacts with Hamas or limiting arms sales to

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Syria and Iran); to restrain the modernisation of the Russian offensive nuclear forces, and to give up its plan to deploy the Iskander missiles in the Kaliningrad oblast.

At the same time, the Russians have declared a readiness to start co-operation with the US on issues such as the Iranian

nuclear crisis (also within the UN Security Council), the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and regional conflicts (especially in Afghanistan). The Russian Federation has also maintained its proposals concerning co-operation in the field of missile defence (concerning the use the Gabala radar station in Azerbaijan). However, Russia's capacity to offer the US concrete support seem to be limited; Moscow has not so far managed to persuade Tehran to accept Russian proposals to resolve the nuclear crisis, nor does it intend to provide military support for the coalition of international forces in Afghanistan. Finally, the Russian Federation has been exploiting tensions between the USA and particular non-Western states, and is unlikely to give up this instrument of policy.

The USA's position

Currently it is not possible to say to what extent the United States will be willing to make concessions to the Kremlin. President Obama said during the presidential campaign that one of the objectives of US policy under his leadership would be to stop the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction on a global scale, to which end it would be necessary to co-operate with Russia in order to make “deep cuts in global nuclear arsenals” and “to extend the essential monitoring and verification provisions of START I prior to its expiration”. Obama’s Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has also declared a readiness to work together with the Russian Federation on nuclear issues, including further reduction of arsenals⁶.

On the other hand, however, the people Barack Obama has appointed to key foreign policy posts are rather sceptical about the feasibility of broader co-operation with Putin’s Russia, and have a negative perception of developments in the Russian Federation’s internal and external policy. During her confirmation hearing at the Senate, Clinton said that the new US administration wanted to build relations with Russia based on co-operation “while standing up strongly for American values and international norms”. She also said that Russian energy policy was a challenge for the United States, and that Washington intended to strengthen dialogue with Europe in this regard.

⁶ From Russia’s point of view, the readiness to ratify the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT), which both candidates had declared, might be a favourable factor.

Prospects for Russian-US relations

It appears that the United States does not intend to conclude a so-called ‘grand bargain’ with Russia at the expense of the post-Soviet states or Europe as a whole. The US’ position may have been influenced by the conviction that the Russian Federation is now weakened, struggling under the global financial crisis. Certainly, one should not expect the USA to be prepared to meet all of Russia’s postulates. However, there are many indications that Washington might be willing to negotiate a new arms control treaty with Russia, and perhaps to accept some form of postponement of the deployment of the missile shield elements in Poland and the Czech Republic (if Russia proves able to exert effective pressure on Iran, or approves tougher sanctions on Tehran). Moreover, establishing control over the Russian nuclear arsenal would be in the USA’s interest, too.

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However, it is not clear how Russia would respond to possible agreement with the US on particular issues. The conclusion of

a new treaty on strategic arms reduction and control would be a prestigious success for Moscow, and would truly limit the advantage that the United States has gained in recent years, and US concessions concerning the missile shield would be of similar significance. Nevertheless, Russia’s foreign policy in recent years has been largely shaped by rivalry with the United States and focused on efforts to undermine American dominance. Besides, the United States is also the main element in the ‘external enemy’ image which the Russian authorities have been constructing. It is thus not so apparent that a ‘partial’ agreement (such as one concerning strategic armaments) would alleviate tensions between Russia and America on other issues, or change the existing relations.

APPENDIX

Problems in US-Russian relations

1. **CIS:** Moscow expects the United States to at the very least refrain from actions perceived as harmful to Russia's interests in the CIS, and to recognise this area as a zone of Russia's dominant influence. The United States has accused Russia of using political, economic and security pressure against its neighbours and of attempting to limit the American political and military presence.
2. **Energy:** The USA views Russia as an important supplier of oil and gas to global markets, which is capable of influencing the prices of these energy resources. At the same time, the fact that Russia treats energy resources as a foreign policy tool, in particular in its relations with Europe, remains a source of concern. Russia, on the other hand, has demanded that the USA stops promoting energy resource transport routes that bypass the Russian Federation, and recognises the Russian energy policy as legitimate.
3. **The internal situation in Russia:** Moscow wants the USA to stop the harsh public criticism of Russia's internal policy. The USA has been strongly critical of violations of democratic principles and human rights in Russia, the checks on the activities of Russian and foreign non-governmental organisations, Moscow's policy in the Northern Caucasus, where Russia's actions have contributed to rising instability, and its insufficient control of the armaments sector.
4. **Iran:** The USA has been trying to persuade or force Russia to change its 'pro-Iranian' line (Iran is Russia's most important political, economic and military partner in the Middle East; Russia has provided *de facto* support for Iran's military nuclear programme and the development of missile technologies, and also supplies conventional arms to Iran). The USA also seeks Russia's support for a UN Security Council resolution to step up pressure on Iran (through sanctions) and, if possible, to legitimise further steps to be taken by the USA and their allies in relation to Tehran.
5. **Middle East:** The USA considers Russia's political support for Hamas and the sale of arms to Syria as obstacles to the peace process.
6. **Venezuela:** Moscow's policy towards Venezuela, the country which has become Russia's most important partner in Latin America, has caused tension to rise in recent years (the two states have developed closer political and economic contacts, especially in the energy sphere, and have been co-operating within international organisations).



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