

Comparative Connections

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U.S.-Russia Relations: Missiles of September

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U.S.-Russia relations began the quarter with an informal, yet cordial summit in Moscow in early July. The two presidents met again in New York and Pittsburgh in late September and agreed to push forward a number of agreements, most notably covering arms control and cooperation in Afghanistan. The two also appeared to agree that the incipient Iranian nuclear program needs urgent attention. In what some viewed as a huge concession from Washington, the Obama administration announced prior to the Pittsburgh G20 meeting that it was scrapping a controversial missile defense system that was due to break ground soon in Poland and the Czech Republic. This move, combined with vague Russian promises of support for sanctions against the newly emboldened Iranian regime, gave observers hope that relations could find a common strategic footing. Nevertheless, optimism surrounding U.S.-Russia relations is strictly cautious, as major areas of disagreement still remain, including most notably Moscow's hostile relationship with the governments of Georgia and Ukraine.

July Moscow summit

As mentioned last quarter, President Barack Obama's July Moscow trip could be said to have been a sizing up opportunity for the leadership of both sides. Obama seemed to place his bet on a productive relationship with President Dmitry Medvedev. He said that while Medvedev seems to be forward thinking, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin still has "one foot in the old ways of doing business." But after a one-on-one meeting at Putin's official residence, Obama said that he was "convinced the prime minister is a man of today and he's got his eyes firmly on the future," basically acknowledging assessments that Putin is still in charge.

Obama had two meetings in Moscow with President Medvedev. Arms control and Eurasian security issues dominated the agenda. Over the past several months, teams from the two nations have been earnestly negotiating an extension of the START-1 treaty, which is due to expire in December this year. Both sides agreed to reduce their strategic nuclear warheads to 1,500-1,675 within seven years of a new treaty coming into force. This new agreement would be negotiated before START-1 expires and would run for 10 years. Under the 2002 Moscow Treaty (or SORT) both sides agreed to reduce arsenals to these levels, but there was no verification process, unlike with START-1 or any new treaty. Prior to the summit, Moscow also agreed to the overflight of U.S. military supply aircraft bound for Afghanistan.

On the whole, the Moscow visit could be seen as a success for both sides. President Obama refused to fall into the trap of collegiality that past presidents seemed to lapse into with Russia's

leaders. Under his predecessors George Bush and Bill Clinton, relations seemed top-heavy at times. In Moscow, Obama made a pointed reference to the development of a civil society based on legal rights, as well as rejecting the premise of spheres of influence and Cold War thinking. Due to the high profile of the summit, Medvedev's perceived place in the political pecking order received a temporary boost among Russian citizens. But the summit achieved little in the way of actual results. Relations seemed stagnant, although not as hostile as they had been the preceding year. Vice President Joseph Biden, however, did throw some gasoline on the fire. After a late July trip to Ukraine and Georgia, where he wished to show solidarity with these up and coming democratic rivals of Moscow, he was quoted saying that Russia is basically a dying country and will do whatever the U.S. wishes it to do.

In an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, the vice president said that Russia has a "shrinking population base, they have a withering economy, they have a banking sector and structure that is not likely to be able to withstand the next 15 years, they're in a situation where the world is changing before them and they're clinging to something in the past that is not sustainable." No doubt many Russia experts in the U.S. and around the world would agree for the most part with Biden's gloomy assessment, but coming on the heels of his "reset" statement and his trip to Ukraine and Georgia, it was not the most diplomatic of statements. It left many in the West scratching their heads, it gave ammunition to hawks in Moscow, and it forced Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to issue a semi-retraction on Biden's behalf. Biden's gaffe reaffirmed in the minds of the pessimists that relations are far from good, even given the "reset" motif that the Obama administration has pushed. A July article in the *Moscow Times* described the "yawning divide" that defines the relationship, while the respected daily *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* published an article the same day saying that the "cons" of the July summit outweighed the "pros."

Georgia, Ukraine, and Eastern Europe

Biden's trip to Georgia and Ukraine in late July gave the leadership of these two nations reassurance that the U.S. would not abandon their interests, solely to press a "reset" button with Moscow. Although NATO membership for each is still years away, the two nations are confident that the assessments and decisions are being thought through in Brussels. Meanwhile, across many Eastern European capitals, leaders reacted with concern to Obama's Moscow visit and the desire in the administration for a *rapprochement* with Moscow. On July 22, intellectuals and former leaders from the region, including Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa, penned an open letter to President Obama published in the *Washington Post* asking for further U.S. engagement in Central and Eastern Europe. The nine-page letter voiced deep concern about Russia's growing assertiveness and urged the U.S. and its NATO partners to make a concerted effort to further institutionalize Article 5 of the NATO charter (the collective security clause) through contingency planning and the pre-positioning of assets and troops in Eastern Europe. The letter also calls for more attention to energy security in light of Moscow's penchant to cut-off gas supplies in times of crisis or fits of pique.

The letter's authors wrote not in a chastening tone, but as "friends and allies of the United States ... [that] care deeply about the future of the transatlantic relationship." The letter exhorts the Obama administration to stand firm against Russia. "We know from our own historical experience the difference between when the United States stood up for democratic values and

when it did not. Our region suffered when the United States succumbed to ‘realism’ at Yalta. And it benefited when the United States used its power to fight for principle.”

Officials and citizens in Eastern Europe later reacted with marked concern to the decision on Sept. 17 by the Obama administration to cancel the planned missile defense system in Eastern Europe, which called for an advanced radar system in the Czech Republic and 10 missile interceptors in Poland. Although President Obama and Secretary of Defense Robert Gates made pointed efforts to say that the decision was based solely on operational factors and new intelligence assessments – and not on a desire to placate Moscow – this assessment fell on deaf ears in Eastern Europe. The reaction was particularly acute in Poland (the Czech public had been decidedly lukewarm throughout on the system), where Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski said, “It is time now for a mature look, stripped of illusions, at our possibilities and our future. I think today we all know that if we are to look to somebody, we have to look to ourselves.” And for Poland the timing of the announcement could not have been worse: Sept. 17 was the 70th anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Poland. Although speculation about this move had been rampant for months, the Polish government learned of the official decision through the media. The Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk was reportedly so furious that he refused to take a midnight call from President Obama.

Nevertheless, the Obama administration is not alone in looking to reach out to Moscow. In September, NATO’s new Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen made a call for an “open-minded and unprecedented dialogue” with Moscow. Rasmussen envisions a strategic partnership based on cooperation in Afghanistan, on antiterror efforts across the globe, and on antipiracy operations. He also stated that he would be prepared to discuss a proposal from Medvedev for a new security architecture in Europe, and that the U.S., NATO, and Russia should consider integrating their missile defense systems. Russian cooperation in Afghanistan has practically been institutionalized, as U.S. and NATO military re-supply flights are allowed to cross Russian skies, and non-military cargo has been transiting Russia’s rail networks for six months. But in spite of the diplomatic efforts by both Obama and Rasmussen to reach out to Moscow, the fact remains that the primary sticking points between Washington and NATO on the one hand and Russia on the other is the status of Ukraine and Georgia, where Russian pressure and intimidation remain constant.

START negotiations

Arms control negotiations have at times divided Washington and Moscow, but recent trends are promising. Moscow felt burned when the U.S. unilaterally withdrew from the ABM Treaty in 2002, so the decision to halt the ballistic missile defense (BMD) system in Eastern Europe was seen as a victory in Moscow. Almost immediately the Kremlin announced that it would not be deploying medium-range *Iskander* missiles in the Kaliningrad region, adjacent to Poland, as they had threatened to do last year. But Russia suspended observance of its obligations to the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) in 2007, and it has continued to hold firm to its demands for the renewal or replacement of the START-1 treaty.

As the December deadline looms, negotiations continued in earnest over the summer, and a fifth round was recently concluded in Geneva. For a quick review: START-1 covers delivery

vehicles *and* nuclear warheads. In July, Obama and Medvedev agreed that any new treaty would limit warheads to between 1,500 and 1,675, and that delivery vehicles (missiles, aircraft, and submarines) would be limited to between 500 and 1,100. Note the discrepancy between the latter figures. This is the basis of the largest disagreement between the two sides. Washington wishes to retain delivery vehicles for conventional warheads to carry out “prompt global strikes” against targets such as terrorist camps and/or rogue states. Moscow wishes to count these against the limits imposed by a new treaty. Observers feel that the new limits the negotiators will arrive at will be 1,600 warheads and 800 delivery vehicles. Negotiators from both sides say that great progress was made over the summer, and both Medvedev and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that they feel a new agreement by the end of the year is almost certain. Although the decision by the Obama administration to abandon plans for missile defense in Eastern Europe is technically unrelated to the negotiations, there is no doubt that it will have a positive effect. And both governments have indicated that even if a new agreement is not ratified by the legislatures before the expiration of the START-1 in December, they will both honor their commitments to the agreement.

The Iran issue

While Moscow is most concerned about possible NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia, Iran’s clear nuclear ambitions are what most concern the United States. In late September it was learned that Iran had built a second, undeclared uranium enrichment facility near the city of Qom. What is disturbing, apart from the fact that the Iranian leadership attempted to keep the facility secret, is that Iran now has two enrichment facilities for what will be one nuclear energy reactor (built with Russian assistance at Bushehr). As one expert said, “This is like building an oil refinery for one petrol [gas] station.” It leaves little doubt that Iran is aiming to build nuclear weapons. Three days after this news broke the Iranian government test-launched two different intermediate-range missiles. Washington’s “Big Three” NATO partners all roundly condemned Iran for its actions. French President Nicolas Sarkozy demanded that harsh sanctions be imposed sooner rather than later, and in an oblique dig at the Obama administration, he said that any “constructive dialogue” with Iran was largely useless.

Moscow’s reaction has been predictably cautious. In a talk with President Obama at the UN General Assembly in New York, President Medvedev did not rule out Moscow’s support for sanctions saying that “Sanctions rarely lead to productive results, but in some cases, sanctions are inevitable.” This statement aroused great enthusiasm in the White House, and hope was expressed that an agreement could be crafted that would force even Beijing to come into the U.S.-led camp on Iranian sanctions. “That’s a major development,” said one senior Obama administration official. “It shows that we’ve made real progress with Russia.”

But since that time Russian officials and commentators have been more reticent in their support for UN sanctions against Tehran. A few days after Medvedev’s statement, Foreign Minister Lavrov said that it was still too early to say that sanctions were necessary. Russia’s Ambassador to the U.S. Sergei Kislyak echoed Lavrov’s guarded statement, “Sanctions or no sanctions is not the way to pose the problem. The point is how to find a political solution that would eliminate this problem.” Most pointedly, Prime Minister Putin has remained mum. His word can be considered final, and if he gives no okay for sanctions, then a Russian veto can be expected. On

the other hand, the Russian leadership has a firm grasp on Chinese intentions on this matter, and can tacitly support sanctions with an abstention, knowing full well that Beijing will veto any proposal for harsh sanctions against Tehran.

As for a quid pro quo to the U.S. decision to cancel BMD plans in Eastern Europe, many Russian observers say that although this issue certainly makes Moscow somewhat more amenable to supporting the U.S. on Iran, the fact that Moscow will not deploy medium-range *Iskander* missiles in the Kaliningrad region constitutes a measured response. Furthermore, the decision by Moscow to halt the sale of *S-300s*, an advanced anti-aircraft missile that could be deployed around Iranian defense and nuclear facilities, could also be viewed as a gesture. Pressure on this issue, however, may have also come from Israel, as Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu reportedly visited Moscow secretly in September to personally lobby the Kremlin to cease delivery of *S-300s* to Iran. Reports surfaced shortly before Netanyahu's visit that a supposedly hijacked Russian cargo ship, the *Arctic Sea*, was actually secretly carrying *S-300s* bound for Iran before having to be turned back.

Looking ahead

Medvedev was able to garner headline-grabbing attention across Russia with his trip to the United States, as Prime Minister Putin remained at home. But the fact remains: Putin is the final power broker. He has made no official announcement about the changes in the diplomatic winds. We await his reaction to the cancellation of the BMD systems in Eastern Europe, the increased calls in European capitals for strong sanctions against Iran, and whatever results the START-1 follow-on negotiators deliver to their respective governments.

Meanwhile, the Northeast Asian front has remained quiet in U.S.-Russian relations. As the din surrounding the Iranian nuclear issue grows louder, however, expect North Korea to do something dastardly, such as testing more missiles or conducting underground nuclear tests. In such a case, Russia's usefulness can be measured. There has been talk of eliminating Russia and Japan from the Six-Party talks. If Russia hopes to remain a player in Northeast Asia, then it must play a more constructive role on the Korean Peninsula.

Positive signals have emerged from the one-on-one meetings between U.S. and Iranian diplomats in Geneva in early October. There is optimism that with the strong signal from Europe and the ambiguous signals from Moscow, Tehran will feel enough heat to reach some sort of agreement on its nuclear program. Any deal might include Iran reprocessing nuclear fuel in Russia. Obama stated, however, that Iran must allow "unfettered access" to the enrichment facility at Qom. Iranian officials will meet with diplomats from the six powers (U.S., Russia, China, and NATO's Big Three) later in October where an agreement can hopefully be reached. Otherwise, Moscow may be forced to make a tough decision about sanctions, which could define the tenor of bilateral relations for the foreseeable future.

Chronology of U.S.-Russia Relations July-September 2009

July 3, 2009: Russia announces that it will open an air corridor for U.S. military aircraft to help with logistical support of U.S. and NATO/ISAF forces in Afghanistan. The agreement allows for 4,500 flights a year, supplements a previous agreement on non-military transit, and will save the U.S. more than \$130 million per year on fuel and transport.

July 6-8, 2009: President Barack Obama travels to Moscow for a summit with his counterpart Dmitry Medvedev to discuss nuclear arms control, Iran, Afghanistan, the post-Soviet space, and other issues. Obama also meets Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, opposition leaders, business students, and journalists.

July 13-14, 2009: Russia carries out test launches of two *Sineva* intercontinental ballistic missiles from *Delta IV*-class nuclear-powered submarines, located near the North Pole.

July 14, 2009: The *USS Stout*, a guided missile destroyer, visits Georgia's Black Sea port of Batumi ahead of joint naval exercises seen as a demonstration of U.S. support for Georgia.

July 16, 2009: In a show of disquiet about the warm tone of U.S.-Russian relations, a group of former leaders and influential intellectuals from Central and Eastern Europe, including Vaclav Havel and Lech Walesa, sign an open letter to President Obama calling for U.S. re-engagement in the region.

July 20-24, 2009: Vice President Joseph Biden visits Ukraine and Georgia in a show of U.S. solidarity, and warns Russia that the idea of "spheres of influence" is obsolete.

July 22, 2009: A fourth round of U.S.-Russian consultations on a new strategic offensive arms reduction treaty (START) begins in Geneva.

July 24, 2009: In an interview on his return from Georgia and Ukraine, Biden suggests that an economically and socially weakened Russia will force that country to make accommodations to the West on a wide range of national-security issues, including loosening its grip on former Soviet republics and shrinking its vast nuclear arsenal.

Aug. 4, 2009: Medvedev phones Obama to suggest that the two sides make urgent efforts to find a replacement for the START-1 treaty, which is due to expire at the end of 2009.

Aug. 26, 2009: Gen. Nikolai Makarov, chief of General Staff, says that Russia has deployed advanced *S-400 Triumph* air defense systems in the Far East to counter the potential threat posed by North Korea's missile tests.

Sept. 4, 2009: The fifth round of negotiations on the extension or replacement of the START-1 treaty ends in Geneva.

Sept. 10, 2009: General Motors changes its position and allows its ailing German subsidiary Opel to be partly bought by a consortium led by the Russian state-owned bank Sberbank.

Sept. 16, 2009: NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen calls for an “open-minded and unprecedented dialogue” with Russia to reduce security tensions in Europe and confront common threats.

Sept. 17, 2009: Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov states that Russia’s military involvement in Afghanistan is “absolutely ruled out.”

Sept. 17, 2009: The U.S. government announces that it will not be pursuing a missile defense platform in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Sept. 19, 2009: The U.S. Coast Guard cutter *Sycamore* completes a port visit to Vladivostok.

Sept. 24, 2009: At an address to the United Nations, President Medvedev says that Russia is ready to slash its nuclear delivery platforms armaments by more than two-thirds.

Sept. 24, 2009: In a meeting with executives from Exxon Mobil, Royal Dutch Shell, and Conoco-Phillips, Prime Minister Putin invites foreign investment in Russia’s gas-rich Yamal Peninsula.

Sept. 25, 2009: The U.S., Britain, and France announce that Iran has failed to disclose a secret uranium enrichment plant at Qom, putting pressure on Russia to help impose sanctions on Iran.

Sept. 28, 2009: Iran carries out test launches for two different intermediate-range missiles with ranges of 1,200 miles.

Sept. 29, 2009: President Obama says that it is important to work with Russia on a new generation missile shield.