



BULLETIN

No. 23 (99) • February 11, 2010 • © PISM

Editors: Sławomir Dębski (Editor-in-Chief), Łukasz Adamski, Mateusz Gniazdowski,
Beata Górka-Winter, Leszek Jesień, Agnieszka Kondek (Executive Editor),
Łukasz Kulesa, Marek Madej, Ernest Wyciszkiewicz

The Reset of US-Russian Relations: Progress and Prospects

Robert Śmigieński, Bartosz Wiśniewski

The reset in relations with Russia announced by the United States in February 2009 has been only moderately successful. The improvement in their mutual relations in connection with the expected strategic arms reduction treaty will foster cooperation in other areas to a limited degree. US endeavours have had little bearing on the scale of Russia's involvement in solving the problem of Iran's nuclear program or support for the operation in Afghanistan. The parties will also maintain their current standpoints with respect to the political status of the post-Soviet space.

The concept of “resetting” the relations with Russia was first presented by US Vice-President Joe Biden in February 2009. It was intended to facilitate cooperation in the short term in areas that the US administration considered to be both urgent and requiring Russia's collaboration. This was the case with respect to drafting a new strategic arms reduction treaty, especially given the approaching expiry date of the START I agreement, as well as the progress regarding operations in Afghanistan and solving of the Iran nuclear program crisis. The logic of the “reset” did not envisage reconciling the differences in policies towards the post-Soviet space—the United States has announced that it does not accept Russia's claims to a sphere of privileged interest in this region.

Strategic Armament. The post-START treaty, whose parameters have been agreed by Presidents Medvedev and Obama in July 2009, is expected to be signed prior to the multilateral nuclear security summit in April. The treaty will be the most important result of the US-Russian reset. It is vital for both parties. Russia has to reduce its aging nuclear arsenal. The treaty will enable her to maintain a parity with the United States. Meanwhile the US sees the treaty as part of a broader plan to strengthen the non-proliferation system, based on the Treaty on the Non-proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. For the Obama administration, as the initiator of the “reset,” the new treaty will serve as an endorsement of the shift in policy towards Russia, most notably towards its allies in Central Europe following the decision to reshuffle the BMD system. Although the main justification for this decision was the evolving threat assessment of a possible Iranian missile strike as well as financial considerations, and not Russian objections, it nonetheless contributed to the mitigation of one of the main areas of friction in US-Russian relations, which could have affected talks regarding the disarmament treaty. Indeed, the decision not to go ahead with the Bush administration's plans to place elements of the system in Poland and the Czech Republic was seen in Russia as an important expression of the “reset.” Nevertheless, despite Russia's demand for recognising linkage in the treaty between strategic offensive armament and strategic anti-missile defence measures, a non-binding declaration regarding this issue will probably only feature in the preamble. Any attempt to introduce restrictions on the expansion of the BMD system by the US would prompt the Senate to oppose its ratification. Therefore the treaty will not have a direct impact on the US plans in this area. During the final phases of the negotiations however the form of the mechanisms for verifying the new treaty, including in particular access to telemetric data concerning tests of new types of the Russian RS-24 and Bulava missiles will be key.

Iran. Neither the United States nor Russia is keen to see Iran become a nuclear power, although for different reasons. The United States treats Iran as a country that supports terrorism and is a threat to their allies' and their own security. Russia is worried that Iran's nuclear capability will prompt Turkey and Saudi Arabia, countries with interests and influence in the post-Soviet space, to take the same step. The United States was counting on Russia to join in the international efforts to

force Iran into compliance with the recommendations made by the International Atomic Energy Agency and the P-5 group (five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany). Russia's attitude to Iran's nuclear program did not however change a great deal in 2009. Russia is forcing its view that Iran should be enriching uranium enrichment abroad and is insisting on finding a diplomatic solution to the problem. Russia's refusal to consent to the sale of S-300 air-defence systems to Iran is a gesture of good will towards the United States. However, Russia continues to show restraint with respect to tightening of sanctions against Iran, mainly due to the negative impact they would have on important areas of Russian-Iranian economic cooperation: weapons sales and the oil and gas sector. At the same time Russia's position on sanctions is becoming less relevant, due to China's likely veto in the UN Security Council.

Afghanistan. The Obama administration identified the stabilization process in Afghanistan as an important area for cooperation. Coalition's failure is not in Russia's interests because it would present a risk of a spread of Islamic fundamentalism to the Central Asian countries and Muslim regions of the Russian Federation. Still, Russia is ambivalent towards the ISAF operation. While striving to maintain its influence in Central Asia, Russia is not interested in seeing the United States enhance its presence there. It has expressed a readiness to become more involved in the peace-keeping effort in Afghanistan (supplying hardware, repair of the infrastructure), but on a strictly commercial basis. It has also said it is in favour of NATO working with the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, but up until now the United States has not seen any need for this. Consequently, the main achievement of the reset with regard to Afghanistan was the agreement on air transit signed on 7 July in Moscow. American non-lethal supplies have been shipped by land on a commercial basis since March 2009, in line with the relevant NATO–Russia agreement signed at the NATO summit in Bucharest (April 2008). The July accord provides for transport of lethal supplies. Its practical value has thus far been limited. The intensity of transit is much lower than the anticipated 4500 flights per year, due in no small part to cumbersome bureaucracy on the Russian side and a lack of a comparable agreement with Kazakhstan.

Prospects. Further cooperation between the United States and Russia is most likely in the area of disarmament and security. An agreement for reduction of strategic arsenals may incline both parties to enter into talks to increase security and the transparency of their tactical arsenals. The reduction of those arsenals will however be problematic in light of the role these weapons play in the Russian Federation's security doctrine, Russia's attempts to link potential reductions with the issue of conventional forces, such as long-range precision weapons and missile defence, and the continuing importance attached to the American tactical arsenal in Europe as one of the signs of the firmness of American guarantees under NATO. Cooperation is possible however with regard to joint threat assessment of missile technology proliferation, provided that both sides achieve progress in a condition for which would be progress in implementation of the Joint Data Exchange Center, and in civil space technology.

There is little chance for the dynamics of the "reset" to affect other areas of the relationship. The US will not decide to grant permanent normal trade relations to the Russian Federation, for example. Continued conditional inclusion of Russia on a yearly basis in the standard procedures for contacts of that kind, although not justified from the formal point of view, is equalled to expressing US disapproval of the state of Russian democracy and conduct of its foreign policy. Establishing permanent normal trade relations is further complicated due to restrictions of access to the Russian market for American goods.

Conclusions for Poland. Continuation of the "reset" policy in the area of security and disarmament will result in greater US tolerance for certain aspects of Russian foreign policy. However, a notable decline of the US attention for Central Europe in 2009 should not be associated with the improvement in Russian-US relations. It was rather a result of focusing on key areas of US military and political engagement. Major changes to US policy towards the post-Soviet space, an area of Poland's vital interest, are unlikely. The US will avoid confrontational steps in the post-Soviet space. The *de facto* deferment of further NATO enlargement to include Georgia and Ukraine will help to reinforce this stance. but not at the expense of a change in US policy for example towards the consequences of the Russian-Georgian conflict, such as acknowledgement of the independence of Southern Ossetia and Abkhazia.