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Nuclear Tango in Geneva

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PIR Center experts Vladimir Orlov and Sergey Semenov discuss the lessons of Russian-U.S. cooperation on nuclear nonproliferation and whether these lessons may be useful for the Geneva summit

At “La Grange” villa Vladimir Putin and Joe Biden will have to go through many acute issues, which have accumulated in the bilateral relations . “We are okay with tango, but what to do if your partner is more into break dance?” – the other day Sergey Lavrov was contemplating such a scenario. The times are nervous these days. But that is why there is a demand for a new détente. Remember the well-forgotten old collocation: “international détente”? A détente is especially needed after a bad quarrel. It is not a panacea. Maybe not more than a break. But ... a true détente. Or at least premises for it.

The air of Geneva can help to reset a dialogue where interests converge or are close. These issues can be counted by fingers on one hand. But there is one key issue for global calm that matters the most: nuclear proliferation prevention. For many years bilateral cooperation in this area has been weatherproof. One may postpone a war but never NPT.

However, in recent years nonproliferation has become another battleground. The rhetoric resembles the one of the Cold War. During the last NPT PrepCom instead of a substantive conversation on nuclear nonproliferation the Americans dwelled upon the Skripal case and "green men" in Ukraine. In response, the head of the Russian delegation described the U.S. statements as "propaganda of an irresponsible state that does not make any contribution to nonproliferation". All this happened against the backdrop of dirty tricks played by the U.S., such as denial of visas for the Russian delegation members.

So, is there a chance to return to a constructive partnership? PIR Center commissioned twenty experts to examine the highways, corners and deadlocks of nuclear “rivalry-cooperation” with a magnifying glass. The diagnosis (we summarized it in a new monograph): we found much more points of convergence in the nuclear tango of Russia and the United States than points of divergence. Moreover, in all the three pillars of the regime: nonproliferation; further nuclear weapons reductions; cooperation in the field of peaceful nuclear energy. The problem is that the rust of mutual distrust corrodes a valuable baggage.

In the 1960s the two superpowers realized that it was necessary to bring the bilateral confrontation to an equilibrium and that "stabilization" was impossible without interaction on equal footing. In the 1990s, the balance shattered: in the view of Washington Russia moved from being an “exclusive partner” to just one element of the nonproliferation equation. The weaker Moscow became, the stronger was the U.S. conviction that Russia was a difficult partner, which, however, can be persuaded with a due amount of sticks and carrots. If Washington wants something to happen, Moscow would be forthcoming, – this is what the White House thought under the Bushes, under Clinton, and under Obama. Hence there is a disregard of Russian concerns and an arrogant conviction that Russia will ultimately choose not to be left behind in American initiatives.

In today’s Moscow the credit of trust to the United States has been exhausted. Russia is looking for a double bottom in any Washington nuclear initiatives. The Americans, on the other hand, do not buy in the Russian counterproposals. As a result, in both capitals there is a growing conviction that the confrontation is supported in selfish political

Russia and the United States no longer perceive each other as reliable partners. And the era of privileged interaction between Russia and the United States seems to be coming to an end: solving problems bilaterally is getting more and more difficult. The experience of the Iranian nuclear deal confirms that multilateral solutions are most fool-proof. Maybe it is for the best. Russia-U.S. cooperation is not an aim itself, but a tool, sensitive, delicate in settings and not always trouble-free. But it is indispensable crisis.

The erosion of the nonproliferation regime which was created half a century ago, the Iranian nuclear program, nuclear terrorism – these are threats and risks that are again pushing the distrustful dancers towards each other. One cannot “wait” when dealing with these threats.

Therefore, following the Geneva summit it is important - and realistic - to restore bilateral consultations on nonproliferation problems, compartmentalizing this agenda to an independent track. We have accumulated a lot of topics for a thoughtful conversation. Otherwise, the toolkit for Russian-American cooperation will fully corrode. And when the need arises, instead of a dialogue, we will get a short circuit. But this will not be that kind of détente that is needed. And the tango will be the last one.

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