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**US-RUSSIAN RELATIONS ON NONPROLIFERATION**  
**AFTER THE GEORGIA CRISIS:**  
**A SKEPTICAL RE(ENGAGEMENT) OR AN (UN(HAPPY DIVORCE?)**

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As a result of the conflict in Georgia, the Russia-U.S. relations plunged into the abyss of grave crisis. The depth of it is unprecedented for the last two decades and can even be compared to the Cold War bilateral standoffs, e.g. the time of Soviet forces deployment in Afghanistan and the U.S. countermeasures that followed.

The bilateral relations felt repeated ups and notably downs after the demise of the Soviet Union. The freezing point was the U.S. bombing of Belgrade during the Kosovo crisis (1999). However, then and later (e.g. after the launch of the U.S. aggression against Iraq in 2003) strategic cooperation issues, such as WMD nonproliferation, have always succeeded to avoid victimization and have suffered less from tensions and cooling relations. They have not been hostages of the current political developments and lived their own life: the dominating principle has always been closeness and high compatibility of the U.S.-Russian interests in the area of WMD nonproliferation. Thus, the parties have followed an unwritten rule invented and adhered to by their predecessors during the Cold War.

Therefore, at the very beginning of this memo it makes sense to ask whether the current bilateral crisis in the U.S.-Russian relations is really dramatic for their entire strategic architecture established in the last two decades, above all in the area of WMD nonproliferation and nuclear arms control. And how will the current events echo in six-month time, when the power in the White House changes? And will there be any echo at all?

In this memo I am going to analyze specific matters related to the recent history of the U.S.-Russia nonproliferation and arms control dialogue and its prospects in the next 12-18 months. However, I would like to start with a more general picture – Moscow's vision of the present-day Russia-U.S. strategic relationship (and WMD nonproliferation as its integral part). This would help to understand the context of the further deliberations.

## **PRIORITIES AND OPTIONS OF THE KREMLIN**

**First of all**, today's bilateral crisis is not a surprise for Moscow. The relations have been aggravating slowly and nearly inevitably. The parties were crawling into the crisis, could notice this, but seemingly did not undertake any efforts to prevent the emerging peril of tensions, to think anew. The Kremlin<sup>ii</sup>. was preparing its secret diplomatic and political weapons for the potential sharp decline in relations with the United States. In the course of this process, Moscow was step by step reducing the number issues (pivotal to the Russian national interests) that could suffer from such tensions. Curiously enough, the U.S. administration was not willing to give new impetus to relations with Russia either. As a result, sluggish summits took place between Presidents Putin and Bush in Sochi in April 2008 and Presidents Medvedev and Bush in Japan in July 2008.

**Secondly**, Russia of 2008 has little in common with the country ten years ago, when the Yugoslav drama was unveiling. Nowadays the state has strong economy, relies on the ideology of rising nationalism and sees no reason to set up sustainable alliances. Russia considers itself to be a country with self-reliance and an influential international actor a priori. It is important to emphasize that for the current foreign policymakers in the Kremlin the relations with Washington are not at the top of the list – they fall behind ties with the neighbors, i.e. CIS and Europe, and even behind China. Under these circumstances, confrontation with the United States, even as worse as the new cold war, is not regarded as something critical, unacceptable, as

a psychological red line that should not be crossed. On the contrary, the Kremlin assumes that the more confrontational Moscow is (by action not by rhetoric only) with respect to Washington, the sooner and better Russia would achieve its goals and accomplish the tasks it is interested in. For those who are not well aware of the Russian foreign policy particularities, but who know well the U.S. policymaking, it may help to make a spoonerism. Many in the Kremlin think of the U.S.A in the same terms as Dick Cheney thinks about Russia. Moreover, they do not hide or feel ashamed about this in Moscow and easily agree that they learn from the Americans how to behave in the modern world.

The new Foreign Policy Concept approved on July 12, 2008 maintains that “the present fundamental development trends, including the emerging multipolarity, and diversification of risks and threats lead to the conclusion that the strategic stability issue cannot anymore be addressed exclusively within the framework of Russia-U.S. relations. Objectively, the time is coming to involve major States in these endeavors, first of all nuclear ones, interested in joint actions to ensure common security.”

**Thirdly**, the Kremlin admits that there is no longer trust in the U.S. leadership. This is a new situation for bilateral relationship. Even recently, while proving exacerbating differences, Moscow has always made a reservation that “we have trustworthy relations with the White House, and the dialogue, which may be difficult but honest.” Now the word *honest* (or “truth-based”), which is so much liked by President Dmitry Medvedev, is out of the list and is replaced with the opposite. “Americans have deceived us in the confidential dialogue,” Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was outright on August 13. He was obviously meaning Georgia and South Ossetia, but his phrase reflects the present-day mentality in the Kremlin. “Washington cannot be trusted in anything – be it Georgia and Ukraine, or missile defense and arms control.” And I have to say bluntly – these claims are not only aimed against the current U.S. administration only, but against the U.S. policy in general.

**Fourthly**, Kremlin’s perception of the United States is changing further. If previously it was regarded as a key strategic partner in solving the principal issues of the international security agenda (above all, the international terrorism and WMD nonproliferation), now Washington is perceived as a major ideological and geopolitical rival of Russia. And, hence, it will allegedly and irreversibly, directly and indirectly hamper Russia’s development and strengthening. Ex-Ambassador to Washington Yury Ushakov brought back to his country such ideas and immediately occupied the post of Vladimir Putin’s aide on “U.S. affairs”. The same instructions were given to Sergey Kislyak who has left Moscow to head the embassy in Washington. In fact, his arrival in the United States was colored with the astonishing and incredible media background. “Anonymous sources” in the Russian MFA suddenly stated to the Russian news agencies that there was a need to further diminish the U.S. role in Russian foreign policy priorities and cut any dependence of Russia on the United States – the latter allegedly faces a coming “large-scale existential crisis”. The “source” argued, “the United States is at the edge of dramatic and painful changes. First, it will have to learn to live within its means... We [Russia] may in the future reach the moment when we can afford to stop discussing in substance only those issues that the Americans are interested in.” Russia and the United States, according to the stance of the Foreign Ministry, are “not enemies”, but “unfortunately, are not yet friends, and are less and less dependent on each other.”

Thus, the current crisis in the Russian-U.S. relations has turned out to be inevitable. If it hadn’t been for Georgian aggression in South Ossetia, there would have been some other pretext – a month sooner or a month later. And unlike all previous tensions, the present-day confrontation

will affect (if it has not yet affected) the entire architecture of bilateral relations, including WMD nonproliferation issues and the fate of the nuclear arsenals.

## **DISARMAMENT, NONPROLIFERATION, AND MEDVEDEV**

It is common place to assume that Russia's foreign policy is still devised by Vladimir Putin in the White House at the Moskva River quay rather than in the Kremlin. However, such statement is not fully correct. Without disputing serious formal and informal Putin's influence on major foreign policy decision-making, one has to note that this kitchen is full of chefs. All of them *cook this soup* united by the spirit of the Kremlin team and common interests. This presents a sharp contrast to the 1990s when the interests were fragmented and the pluralism of groups only weakened or even disabled any steps in this sphere.

Immediately after his inauguration President Medvedev, despite the liberal stereotype of his image, visited one of the Strategic Missile Forces base and spoke about the exceptional role of nuclear weapons in promoting Russia's national security. In his further rare foreign policy statements he always emphasized that nuclear weapons were, are and will remain in the foreseeable future the primary security pillar of the country. The Foreign Policy Concept, and other legal and intra-agency acts approved this summer elaborate on this thesis, even though they leave the window of opportunity for nuclear reductions.

Chair of the International Affairs Committee of the State Duma Konstantin Kosachev, who is close to the Putin-Medvedev tandem, was quite skeptical in his public lecture for the PIR Center in July this year about the prospects for nuclear disarmament to be included in the current Russian foreign policy agenda. He agreed that this was one of Russia's commitments under Article VI of the NPT. Nonetheless, he urged the audience to compare this noble goal to the reality and "then it would be necessary to look into the opposite direction."

According to the latest Medvedev-style official documents, Russia

- still considers its commitments under the WMD nonproliferation, arms control and disarmament treaties as key obligations aimed at maintaining and strengthening international security<sup>iii</sup>;
- "reaffirms its unflinching policy of developing multilateral foundations of nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, other weapons of mass destruction and means of their delivery";
- "promotes the early entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty";
- "promotes the prevention of deployment of weapons in outer space and the establishment of a system of collective response to potential missile threats on an equal basis, and opposes unilateral actions in the field of strategic anti-missile defense that are destabilizing international situation";
- "consistently speaks for the prevention of the arms race, opposes attempts to develop and deploy destabilizing, including new types, weapons, such as low-yield nuclear warheads, non-nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles, and strategic anti-missile systems";
- "is prepared to negotiate with all nuclear powers a reduction of strategic offensive weapons (intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles as well as heavy bombers and warheads they carry) up to a minimum level sufficient to maintain strategic stability";

- “has been consistently favoring new agreements with the United States<sup>iv</sup> on disarmament and arms control in the interests of preserving continuity of this process, strengthening confidence building and transparency measures in space activity and anti-missile defense, as well as on issues of nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, secure development of peaceful nuclear energy, broadening cooperation in countering terrorism and other challenges and threats as well as settlement of regional conflicts”;
- “will fully contribute to finding political and diplomatic ways of solving the situation regarding the nuclear program of the Islamic Republic of Iran based on the recognition of the right of all States Parties to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) to the peaceful use of nuclear energy as well as upon strict compliance with the requirements of nuclear nonproliferation regime.”

Thus, one may presume that there was no and there will be no radical shift in the WMD nonproliferation and disarmament policy during the first year of Dmitry Medvedev’s presidency. At the same time, I would attract your attention to the following details.

**Firstly**, Russia makes much more emphasis than before on Article IV of the NPT and on the need for multilateral approaches towards nuclear fuel cycle. By promoting the International Uranium Enrichment Center in Angarsk, Russia does not only advertise the project itself, but uses it as an example demonstrating that multilateralism should and can become a remedy for many nuclear proliferation challenges in the future. In a broader context, Russia has started to build up its export potential to satisfy the needs of the aggressively growing nuclear industry – Moscow acts in various regions and goes beyond the traditional set of partners. It may mean that Russia considers itself to be in tough rivalry with other exporters of nuclear power plants and technologies. Besides, the Putin-Medvedev tandem will lobby with all available means the promotion of “Russian atom” around the globe, while the MFA will primarily focus on political support, and if necessary providing rationale, for such efforts.

**Secondly**, Russia’s political leadership has become more and more disappointed with the possibilities of large-scale strategic dialogue with Iran. Despite tremendous endeavors of Moscow, the dialogue has failed and each party sticks to its position and pursues its own interests. The Kremlin assumes that Iran was not ripe for broad geopolitical compromise with Moscow that would enable the parties to launch a serious game in the nuclear and gas spheres. As far as I know, Tehran suffers the same disillusion – it blames Moscow for the lack of desire to strike the deals. Anyway Russia has expelled Iran out of the list of its priority partners in the region and insultingly put it in the same range as Saudi Arabia and Libya. Such turn of events could create new favorable terms for the dialogue with the United States on Iran. Nonetheless, the recent months have indicated little or no progress in such dialogue – it has not been intensified and on the contrary has been dying, just like the UN Security Council resolutions.

**Thirdly**, due to the increased tensions in relations with NATO, Russia has remembered its old initiative and has started to reiterate the importance of concentrating nuclear weapons within the national territories of the nuclear weapon states, “Implementing it would enable us to expand to the utmost the territories completely free from nuclear weapons.”<sup>v</sup> European security-related issues, including nuclear weapons in Europe, as well as other advanced weapon systems there, will be of primary importance for President Medvedev.

**Fourthly**, being a proponent of reliance on strategic nuclear arms, Medvedev however keeps open the possibility of finding the way to “nuclear zero” for all nuclear weapon states. For instance, Moscow studies thoroughly the Nunn-Kissinger-Perry-Schultz initiative. Let me

remind you that the official position of Russia voiced by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov at the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva in February 2008 gives a generally positive assessment of this initiative (though not without footnotes reflecting difficulties of the ongoing interagency assessment). The positivism of Kremlin's approach is prudent – such initiative can be discussed, most of its provisions at least do not contradict Russia's official position<sup>vi</sup>.

In the recent months informal ministerial and interagency discussions have commenced. At the same time, the Russian agencies cannot agree upon the motivation underlying the proposals of the *Hoover Four*. This debate will continue regardless of the current decline in bilateral relations because the horizon for the initiative is not even 2020 (the target year for many strategic development plans in Russia devised by Vladimir Putin) but decades ahead.

**Fifthly**, President Medvedev is neither ready nor willing to separate strategic arms issues and missile defense. So any new treaty on strategic offensive arms will become a hostage of the third deployment area for the anti-missile systems. There can be seen no realistic opportunities for parity-based cooperation between Russia and the United States in the sphere of strategic missile defense<sup>vii</sup>. The failure corresponding initiative set forth by Vladimir Putin in Sochi this spring is admitted. The decision on the third deployment site is seemingly irreversible for any future U.S. administration, but Moscow cannot accept it and regards as an unbreakable barrier for the dialogue. From the Kremlin perspective, the timing for the signing of the US-Polish deal on the missile deployment could not be worse.

**Sixthly**, the Kremlin is interested in the early curtailing of international programs of assistance to Russia in nuclear safety and security matters. The question is whether the Nunn-Lugar Program and the G-8 Global Partnership initiative in Kananaskis (2002) will die peacefully and by themselves, as they formally expire, or Moscow will decide to stop them earlier and incorporate this fact into its propaganda. Anyway Russia believes that it is no longer possible to be the aid recipient, particularly in such a sensitive area, and sees itself as a donor on the international arena.

## **ARE THERE PROSPECTS FOR THE DIALOGUE?**

It may seem today that the relations between Russia and the United States have reached the lowest possible point, but in fact, there is some room for further decline – the bottom is still away. It would be enough to elect John McCain to be the U.S. President.

At the beginning of the presidential campaign in the United States, many in the Kremlin and around proceeded from a simple assumption – “We don't care – McCain, Clinton, or Obama”. There was even a cautious idea that it might be easier to meet halfway with a Republican (even such Republican as McCain) on numerous issues – from post-Soviet space to a “new START Treaty”. And such Republican fans were even ready to forgive McCain for his notorious statements about the advisability of expelling Russia from the G-8.

But lately the Kremlin and its advisors have managed to radically correct their mistakes. The comments on Georgia made by the U.S. presidential candidates – rhetoric-rich by McCain and minimalistic so far by Obama -- are also attentively analyzed. Obama's “minimalism” in critical comments on Russia nicely excused by his Hawaii vacation, was appreciated by Moscow as well as the fact that the list of those who consulted him on the phone on the Georgia crisis were such reputable figures as Sen. Sam Nunn and Secretary William Perry.

Finally, there is also a matter of psychology. For Dmitry Medvedev, due to his age and vision of life, McCain is not a good partner for informal dialogue, while Obama is evidently a curious

figure for him. Traits of character and interests can eventually become more important than current rhetoric.

Moreover, initial openness of Obama to the dialogue and his interest in multilateral approaches to conflict resolution may also be welcomed by the Kremlin<sup>viii</sup>.

If the situation develops in the favorable direction, the Kremlin and the new U.S. administration could undertake a few important steps in the area of nonproliferation and arms control in 2009.

**Firstly**, they could make a joint statement on common approaches towards nuclear nonproliferation, including disarmament. The blueprints of such document can be found in the “nuclear five” statement at the 2008 PrepCom in Geneva<sup>ix</sup>, and the Russian and U.S. Presidents could go even further. For instance, Moscow assumes that the issue of CTBT’s entry into force and non-militarization of outer space must get new impetus. The statement may also reflect the ideas supported earlier by both countries at the NPT Review Conference in 1995 (“Principles and Objectives of Nuclear Nonproliferation and Disarmament” and in 2000 (the Final Document) – both documents are almost forgotten right now and are called into question due to the actual practical behavior of the states parties. An important element of such document could be the expression of support to international forums and multilateral efforts in the area of disarmament. It could also contain some points that the parties share with the *Hoover Four*. Finally, they may urge all other nuclear weapon states to share the principal clauses of the document and to join it. Such document should ideally emerge before the 2009 PrepCom, but this is hardly realistic. However, the statement should be approved no later than six months before the 2010 NPT Review Conference. For Russia and for the United States (if Obama wins) the success of the conference would be a significant foreign policy achievement.

**Secondly**, Russia and the United States should extend START I which expires in December 2009 and within the next two years negotiate a new treaty to replace it. According to some experts<sup>x</sup>, such agreement could be a certain combination of detailed SORT and modified verification mechanisms of START I, in particular:

- Each party has reduced ceilings for the total amount of warheads in comparison with SORT. The limits are introduced for the total amount of warheads, but there are no quantitative ceilings for warheads of ICBMs, SLBMs and heavy bombers, just as it is done in SORT.
- Russia agrees with the method of counting only operationally deployed nuclear warheads. The United States agrees that the delivery systems do not lose their strategic status if they are armed with non-nuclear warheads.
- The development of new types of strategic offensive arms is banned.
- There is more emphasis on confidence-building and transparency measures.
- The verification mechanisms should enable the parties to check the implementation of the treaty, but should be simpler and cheaper than the START system.

**Thirdly**, Russia and the United States commence the practical implementation of the 123 Agreement (the Agreement for Cooperation Concerning Peaceful Uses of Nuclear Energy) signed on May 6, 2008, if the document is promptly ratified by the U.S. Congress. It would be enough to launch and start carrying out one mutually beneficial project to overcome the defeatist and pessimistic sentiments.

**Fourthly**, Russia and the United States should conduct a bilateral review of the track record related to their dialogue on the Iranian nuclear program and elaborate new joint approaches that can be discussed in parallel or consecutively with Germany, France, and the U.K. Such attitude

would mean the initiation of a direct dialogue between Iran and the United States, including the issues of security assurances to Tehran and normalization of U.S.-Iranian relations, Iran's right to uranium enrichment but its own voluntary moratorium on enrichment or limitation of such enrichment, and the maximum application of the IAEA mechanisms to control the situation in Iran.

**Fifthly, Moscow and Washington should jointly initiate the work on global treaty preventing missile proliferation.**

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I would have liked a lot to conclude this memorandum with some optimistic statements, saying that such program of action in the area of nonproliferation and disarmament is in the interests of both parties and has good chances for implementation if Obama gets the post in the White House.

However, such positive conclusion would contradict my own thoughts expressed above.

Obviously, the draft of the bilateral action plan on nonproliferation should be ready and should wait for the right moment. Moreover, it is important to benefit from the change of command in Washington and the first year of the new U.S. administration.

At the same time, the current international context makes the implementation of such program of action nearly impossible.

Even if the interest in joint steps dominates the new U.S. administration, one should proceed from the assumption that

- Russia's current limited willingness to undertake joint practical nonproliferation steps with the United States is low and may even evaporate at all in the future;
- while many in the Obama camp speak now on a "skeptical engagement", or re-engagement, with Russia as "the the best course", the dominant view in Russia is that "happy divorce will be the best course" and the less interdependence in strategic issues between Russia and the U.S. the better for Russia.
- The Georgia crisis has already profoundly damaged the common nonproliferation agenda. Moscow has noticed, with a mix of disappointment and relief, the Congressional decision to freeze ratification of the 123 Agreement. "We knew it would happen. If not because of Georgia, so because of Ukraine, or Iran, or something else", says my friend in government. "Still, we were working hard on showing our willingness to cooperate with the US as much as we could on the Iran case. And now what? OK then, even if we, frankly, did not want to, we will now have to revitalize our plans of our very own behavior towards the Iran case, very much de-coupled from the U.S.", he continues, definitely unhappily.
- Last but not least, while keeping some hopes for the Obama triumph and a new start of relations then, Moscow well understands two things. First, even in that case, the time will be running out for the resolution most important nonproliferation and arms control issues probably quicker than the relations will be repaired. Secondly, and most importantly, Russia should be prepared – in its practical policy – for the worst, which will be McCain triumph. This is the scenario what Kremlin instructs Russian diplomats and the military to keep in mind in their morning planning sessions.

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ii I use this term, even though with the high degree of simplification, to identify the Putin-Medvedev tandem and broader group of ideologists of Russia's present-day strategy.

<sup>iii</sup> As of January 1, 2008 the Russian Federation possessed not more than 900 deployed strategic offensive delivery vehicles and 4,200 warheads assigned to them in accordance with the START Treaty. Russia keeps fulfilling obligations under the Russia-U.S. Treaty on Strategic Offensive Reductions which cuts the number of strategic nuclear weapons down to 1,700-2,000 by each side before December 31, 2012.

iv According to head of arms control department of the Russian MFA Anatoly Antonov, it is necessary to "make the process of strategic offensive arms reduction and limitation predictable, transparent, irreversible and accountable. In this context it is essential that in the U.S.-Russia Strategic Framework Declaration issued in Sochi on April 6, 2008 Presidents Vladimir Putin and George Bush expressed their intention to develop a legally-binding arrangement following expiration of the START Treaty as a next step to implement the obligations of the two countries under Article VI of the NPT."

<sup>v</sup> Ibid., p.7.

<sup>vi</sup> Russia has reacted positively at the NPT 2008 Prepcum when the working paper by the chair referred to this initiative, albeit indirectly, in paragraph 2 and then mentioned it in paragraph 28, where the proposal of the U.S. patriachs is interrelated with 10 recommendations on disarmament elaborated at the international conference in Oslo in February 2008.

<sup>vii</sup> See: Anatoly Dyakov, Yevgeny Myasnikov, "Strategic Arms Control between Russia and the U.S. after 2009: is a compromise possible?" – A manuscript to be published in *Security Index* journal in Winter 2008/2009 issue.

<sup>viii</sup> The scope of this memorandum does not imply the assessment of the vision of relations with Moscow by the U.S. presidential candidates.

<sup>ix</sup> The joint statement by the *nuclear five* at the 2008 NPT Prepcum - for the first time in the last eight years – was considered in Moscow as a great success. The document was prepared in painful discussions. The work was launched by the Russian delegation and every day it met additional impediments – other members of the *nuclear club*, especially the United States, could not agree with this or that paragraph. Due to U.S. objections, the parties had to cast away the initial wording on the CTBT and confined to the promise to maintain the moratorium on nuclear tests. However, this two-page document with all the reservations is an important sign – its emergence was noted by experienced diplomats from different nations (from New Zealand to Egypt), who praised most of its wording in this or that form. Some officials in the lobby asked astonishingly how the Americans could agree to sign such a joint statement, as it contained the following phrase: "We wish to address the proliferation challenges through Treaty-based multilateralism"; or with respect to the Middle East, the document restated support to the 1995 NPT resolution on the region.

<sup>x</sup>See: Dyakov and Myasnikov, "Strategic Arms Control..."