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BREAKING VICIOUS CIRCLE OF THE US-RUSSIA RELATIONS

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Despite relative normalization of the US-Russia dialogue in early 2013 and their impressive cooperation on Syria and Iran later that year, the relations on the whole remain extremely fragile, volatile and at the same time stagnant. Their traditional agenda, based on arms control, is crumbling; leadership in both countries is not regarding positive US-Russian partnership as central for their vital national interests fulfillment; and the share of contradictions is growing. At best, this deprives the sides of many opportunities to advance their interests through cooperation. At worst, this could spark a new serious crisis by. The author argues that the fundamental problem of the US-Russia relations is their old-fashioned philosophy, centered on strategic deterrence and balancing. This philosophy, the paper claims, in its turn predetermines an agenda of the relations, which poorly reflects the real challenges that US and Russia face in the world of today and tomorrow. The author claims that the new philosophy of the US-Russia relations should be based not on strategic deterrence and strategic balance in a Cold war understanding, but on clear recognition that the sides need each other and need to cooperate in order to deal with real challenges and achieve real opportunities.

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Vicious circles

Since the end of the Cold War, Russia and the United States have not been able as yet to create a relationship model reflecting true challenges and opportunities they encounter in the increasingly chaotic and volatile international system. They are developing in a vicious circle mode, when every next attempt to forge partnership, usually taken at the dawn of new administrations in Washington and Moscow, fails, and the positive swing of the relations itself lasts not more than 2-3 years. After that they face some serious contradictions and start crumbling, and ultimately result in a crisis. This was the case in the 1990-s under Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin, the same happen in 2000-s under George W. Bush and Vladimir Putin, and the same pattern was reproduced under Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev succeeded by Vladimir Putin again in early 2010-s.

The “reset”, announced in 2009, brought a number of positive results, but, much like previous attempts to improve relations, it ended in failure. Already in 2011, the process of gradual improvement in relations stalled, and in 2012 a new sharp deterioration occurred, which as termed a “mini-crisis” by Yury Ushakov, an international affairs aide to the President of the Russian Federation. This “mini-crisis” was exemplified by sharply negative rhetoric, especially on the Russian side, and adoption of “Magnitsky Act” in the US, introducing sanctions against a group of Russian citizens allegedly involved in this loud case, and the so-called “Dima Yakovlev Law” in Russia, banning adoptions of the Russian children by American families.

Instability in Russian-American relations may be blamed on the instability of the international system and the position the United States and Russia occupy in it. The international old system collapsed in 1991, a new stable one has not been formed. The system is becoming increasingly chaotic and the great powers their alliances, institutions and forums of global management are unable to manage it. The United States attempted to solidify its hegemony but suffered a failure, and the country is currently having difficulty adapting to a multi-polar world. Russia, likewise, has progressed from the from collapse in the early 1990s to asserting itself in the late 2000s as a great power, independent of the West and China. Since then, however, its progress has stalled.

Such changes indeed did not encourage stability in Russian-American relations. However, this excuse was relevant until 2008-09, Thereafter, taking into account changes made in US foreign policy by the Obama Administration - such as a shift away from claims of hegemony and unilateralism as a doctrine of foreign relations - as well as a slowing, if not stalling, of Russia’s recovery on the international arena, continued changes in the outside world have stopped being

an impediment and should have encouraged more constructive relations between Russia and the United States. Both sides are losing their relative weight and are suffering negative effects from diminishing global governability and regional destabilization.

The fact that under such conditions their relations have not become stable means that global instability is not the main issue. Russian-American relations are fundamentally flawed. Their underlying philosophy and agenda have been stuck in inertia and suffer from stereotypes formed by decades of Cold War and the 1990s and 2000s, when the United States was accustomed to looking at Russia as, at best, a junior partner. As a result, they do not reflect what the two sides actually face in the world of today and tomorrow. The old philosophy and agenda prevent Russia and the United States from building trust, make them see each other as potential enemies and “natural” geopolitical rivals and skew their relations, focusing them on past problems and not future ones.

As long as this flaw endures, Russian-American relations are doomed to drift and go from crisis to crisis every three or four years. The vicious cycle can be broken only if a fundamentally new philosophy of their relations is accepted, one that is rooted in real challenges and opportunities that face Russia and the United States in the world of today and tomorrow, and with an understanding that cooperation in those issues will strengthen their international position and security, as well as the global order as a whole.

The “reset” and its failure

The “reset” of Russian-American relations, which began in 2009 and suffered a failure in 2011-13, provided a clear confirmation of the need to rethink their philosophy and infuse it with a new agenda. It would seem that its nature, dynamics and achievements would have resulted at last in a stable partnership between Russia and the United States. Unlike previous attempts to improve relations, the philosophical foundation of the “reset” rested on the fundamental changes in US foreign policy implemented by the Administration of President Barack Obama, such as the recognition of the multi-polar structure of the modern world and the fact that the United States needed other partners than those found among democratic states. Washington pragmatically decided that Russia’s cooperation was needed to solve at least the following problems:

- Improve the situation in Afghanistan, which was now considered President Obama’s personal war;

- Implement President Obama's Prague Agenda to reduce nuclear arms and bolster the system of non-proliferation and security of nuclear materials. This was seen by the White House as an important tool for strengthening America's soft power and leadership potential and a key part of the President's international legacy;
- Impose new UN sanctions on Iran, thus demonstrating America's leadership and avoiding a damaging war;
- Build non-confrontational relations with one of the great powers, which is necessary in conditions of multipolarity.

In Russia, too, it was decided that improved relations with the United States under its new Administration could bolster Russia's position vis-a-vis China and Europe, stop the dissolution of the nuclear arms control system and emphasize Russia's status as a nuclear superpower, help safeguard its interests in Afghanistan and in the post-Soviet area and speed up its accession to the World Trade Organization. At the time, it seemed that many of the Obama Administration's priorities (such as to improve the situation in Afghanistan and to replace the expiring START I treaty with a new agreement) were in line with Russia's interests.

Consequently, it became possible in a relatively short time to improve the climate of the bilateral relations, establish or re-establish cooperation on a number of issues and resolve or temper many old conflicts.² The issue of NATO expansion into CIS countries has been taken off the agenda. As early as in 2009, Washington downgraded the Georgia issue in its relations with Moscow, de facto agreeing to the status quo in the Trans-Caucasus region. In 2010, the United States accepted changes in Ukraine's policies with a remarkable equanimity (such as a shift away from plans to join NATO and agreement to allow Russia's Black Sea fleet to remain in the Crimea until the middle of the century), which rolled back the results of the 2004 Orange Revolution. The United States also refrained from intervening in the coup in Kyrgyzstan, which occurred with Moscow's approval and reversed America's previous success in that country. Finally, in 2011, the United States did what only recently had seemed unthinkable, accepting the reality of Russia's integration process in the post-Soviet area. On America's initiative, the Custom's Union was included in the documents prepared for Russia's accession to the WTO. The criticism of Russia over the issue of democracy and human rights was dramatically scaled back and became ritualistic in character.

² Charap, Samuel. The Transformation of US-Russia Relations. *Current History*. Oct2010, Vol. 109 Issue 729, p281-287. 7p.

As a result, by the middle and the end of 2010, Russian elites had no reason to believe that the United States presented a military or a serious political threat to the Russian Federation. It would seem that stumbling blocks for a stable partnership that existed throughout the post-Cold War period were finally eliminated.

At the same time, cooperation between Russia and the United States was launched or relaunched in many other areas. In April 2010, they signed the START III treaty, which came into effect in February 2011. They launched a multifaceted cooperation on Afghanistan, becoming a mainstay of a positive agenda in bilateral relations. In 2010, on the initiative of the United States, the fourth round of sanctions against Iran was passed in the United Nations. As a goodwill gesture, Moscow cancelled the signed contract to supply Iran with C-300 air defense missiles.

Economic cooperation also became considerably more active. Russia's accession to the WTO in 2012 was a direct result of a proactive and engaged policy on the part of the Obama Administration. Another major achievement was the establishment of a strategic partnership between energy giants Rosneft and ExxonMobile, setting up joint development of the Arctic and Black Sea shelves and an asset swap. That changed the overall picture of cooperation in the energy area, which had been stalled since the Yukos case.

The permanent body for the on-going cooperation between Russia and the United States was reestablished, the Bilateral Presidential Commission, which is currently comprised of more than twenty working groups covering a wide range of subjects, from strategic stability to health care and sports.

But by 2011 further improvements in relations began to stall. At first glance, the ship "reset" crashed against two rocks, the missile defense system and Libya. In 2011, these two problems came to dominate the Russian-American agenda and created considerable irritation and new frustrations in both capitals.

Negotiations over the missile defense system hit an impasse because of Russia's insistence on the principle of assured mutual destruction (MAD) and its understanding of strategic stability that had been formed during the Cold War, as well as because of America's determination to undermine it. The disagreement manifested itself openly in Moscow's demand to fence in the future US missile defense system with strictly defined geographic, quantitative, tactical and technical criteria of non-targeting. and in Washington's total refusal to accept any limitations. As a result, by the end of 2011 negotiations over the missile defense system stalled and in 2012, when election campaigns began in both countries, broke off.

Even in its original form, the missile defense system in Europe proposed by the Obama Administration did not represent a major threat to Russia's ICBMs. Nevertheless, Moscow wanted to preserve its strategic parity with the United States just as it existed during the Cold War and took a hard position on the issue, claiming that the opposite was the case. Russia demanded that both the missile defense system and other aspects of US military policy capable of undermining the traditional vision of strategic balance (such as high precision conventional weapons, conventional strategic missiles and space weaponry) be limited. This view of America's defense policy also laid the foundation for modernizing and, to a degree, building up Russia's strategic nuclear arsenal and creating its own missile defense system with the framework of the Air and Space Defense System. It also rejected new rounds of nuclear arms cuts after START III.

An equally serious blow to Russian-American relations was dealt by intervention on the rebel side in the civil war in Libya by the United States and NATO and their help in bringing down the Gaddafi regime. Moscow made that intervention possible by allowing, on President Medvedev's insistence, the UN Security Council to pass Resolution 1973, which created a no-fly zone over Libya and ensured the protection of the civilian population. It was a major mistake. Immediately after the resolution was passed, Russia was pushed out of the decision-making process which decided Libya's fate, while the United States and NATO openly staged a regime-change operation. Moscow saw it as a major humiliation. Its opinion on a major issue of international politics was ignored and, worse, it had been tricked. The Libyan campaign became for Russia a new example of the United States usurping the right to decide questions of war and peace and sovereignty of foreign states.

This translated into an even sharper political and diplomatic confrontation between Moscow and Washington over Syria, where the United States also wanted to effect regime change soon after the start of domestic disturbances. At the core of this confrontation was Russia's desire not to allow the United States to decide the fate of sovereign states at will - at least not by legal means - as well as to take revenge for the way it had been treated over Libya. Moscow also wanted to avoid, or at least delay, the collapse of the Assad regime fearing that if radical Islamists came to power in Syria and the country plunged into inter-ethnic and religious warfare and broke apart, the threat of terrorism and Islamic radicalization would grow in Russia, as well, especially in the North Caucasus. Russia repeatedly vetoed draft resolutions of the UN Security Council on Syria, which had been sponsored by the United States, providing military assistance to Damascus (within the limits of international law) and criticizing the United States for supporting Syrian

opposition. In Washington it was seen as a doomed attempt by the Russian Federation to save its only remaining ally in the Middle East and to create obstacles strictly because of its anti-Americanism.

In 2012, Russian-American relations were exacerbated by problems stemming from their domestic policies. In the United States this problem was thrown up by the Republicans, who were using relations with Russia as a platform for criticizing the Obama Administration.³ In Russia, anti-American sentiments were used to weaken anti-Putin sentiments, which became widespread in late 2011 – early 2012, and to marginalize the leaders of the opposition. Anti-American rhetoric became the main theme of President Putin’s election campaign, as Washington was openly accused of supporting the opposition, with the latter being portrayed as a stooge of the United States.

Finally, conflicts began to grow in an area that remained the main positive component on the Soviet-American agenda, namely Afghanistan. The closer the end-2014 deadline for the withdrawal of a large portion of the international military contingent grew, the less compatible the views held by Russia and the United States became on the crucial aspects of the future of Afghanistan and the region as a whole, its security, economic development and combating the drug industry and drug trafficking.

It may seem that the failure of the “reset” stemmed from an accidental confluence of outside factors (the Arab Spring) and domestic ones (election campaigns), as well as the fact that the “light” agenda was promptly exhausted and there was no political will to implement a heavier one. In reality, it was not exactly the case. The “reset” had been flawed from the start. It altered neither the obsolete philosophy of Russian-American relations nor their agenda that was based on that philosophy.

Having placed nuclear arms control as the cornerstone of the “reset”, Moscow and Washington not only didn’t weaken, but actually strengthened the philosophy of mutual deterrence and fear which they had inherited from the Cold War and which informs to this day the relations between the two countries. This doctrine requires the sides to use arms control mechanisms to maintain strategic parity (or, ideally, superiority) and match every step taken by the other side that could hypothetically violate this parity.

³ Deyermond, Ruth The Republican Challenge to Obama’s Russia Policy. *Survival*. Oct/Nov2012, Vol. 54 Issue 5, p67-92. 26p.

This philosophy is the main reason why Russia and the United States have been unable to establish stable positive relations. It a priori requires their military and political leaders to see each other as potential enemy and regard every military step by the opponent as directed against to it. Based on this reasoning, the main military threat to Russia and the United States comes from each other, which no longer reflects today's international reality. This philosophy is based on distrust, suspicion and search for proof that one side has tricked the other. It excludes building relations based on trust.

There is a widely held view that Russia and the United States are doomed to cling to this doctrine by the very fact that they possess large arsenals of nuclear arms and, unless they are reduced them to a certain level (which no one has ever tried to set and which can never be realistically set in any case), nuclear deterrence and MAD will continue to shape their relations. This opinion is deeply flawed. In reality, the exact opposite is true. As long as Russia and the United States continue to place arms control at the center of their agenda, this doctrine will not go away.

Unable to overcome this philosophy, Russia and the United States unwittingly laid the foundations for conflicts which in the end destroyed the "reset". This philosophy turns such issues as missile defense, Strategic Nuclear Forces, tactical nuclear arms and so forth into problems, whereas in reality they are neither major problems nor, much less, threats. Thus, at a time when the threat of a major war in Europe is historically low and NATO and Russia see their physical ability to conduct large-scale conventional military operations against each other weaken, neither Russia's tactical nuclear arsenal nor NATO's advantage in conventional forces presents an objective threat to either side.⁴

Of course, aside from arms control and mopping up old problems, the "reset" also included may important and even crucial issues: Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea, security of nuclear materials and so on. However, they didn't make it to the agenda because a deliberate policy decision. Rather, they were either included by accident, as Russia and the United States reacted to events as they happened, or came out of near-term interests of the two sides.

Even during 2009-10, which was a good time in their relations, Russia and the United States didn't have an understanding how much they could be useful to each other from a strategic point of view and what kind of relations they needed to build. Their approach was limited to how

⁴ Isabelle Francois. The United States, Russia, Europe, and Security: How to Address the "Unfinished Business" of the Post-Cold War Era. / Transatlantic Perspectives, No. 2. 52 pp.

much they needed each other here and now in order to solve certain tactical questions, with the rest to be determined at a later date. The Obama Administration saw the absence of any strategic goals on the agenda as one of the main advantages of the “reset”. However, it soon became clear that it was a wrong approach.

To be fair, it should be noted that both Moscow and Washington tried to make up for the dominance of arms control issues with talk of economic cooperation. They declared that it would make relations more stable, creating a kind of safety net. However, for all the importance of economic cooperation, it was never going to be particularly effective in Russian-American relations. For a variety of political and socio-economic reasons, Russia is not regarded as a market favorable for American investment. Nor does Russia have much of a potential to become an important supplier of energy to the US market, and, given the shale revolution, the two sides could even become competitors in energy. There is little chance of creating economic interdependence between them.

Fragility of selective pragmatic cooperation

It is highly possible that the same mistakes that destroyed the “reset” will be repeated during the 2nd Presidential term of Barack Obama Administration - only in much less favorable conditions for Russian-American relations, bringing about even more negative consequences.

Since Spring 2013, relations between Russia and the United States have adopted the model of *selective pragmatic cooperation*. They work together when their interests coincide and do not try to hide their contradictions when they don't, at the same time making sure they avoid sliding into a confrontation and maintaining working relations.⁵ They oppose each other over the future of Syrian regime and precisely the fate of Bashar Asad, on missile defense, on further nuclear arms reductions and on the post-2014 future for Afghanistan, but they continue to work together on eliminating Syrian chemical weapons and “Geneva-2” process (direct negotiations between the Syrian government and opposition on ceasefire and peace process), gradual resolution of Iranian nuclear problem, Afghanistan pre-2014, counterterrorism, management of several conflicts in Africa, Korean peninsula, the economy and so on.

The positive results of the “reset” have not been rolled back wholesale. Several new Working Groups of the Presidential Commission have been set up and new formats for high-level contacts

⁵ Stent, Angela. US–Russia Relations in the Second Obama Administration. *Survival*. Dec2012, Vol. 54 Issue 6, p123-138.

have been established, such as a dialogue between Russia's Prime Minister and the US Vice President on economic issues, a two-plus-two forum involving foreign and defense ministers of the two countries covering military and political issues and a dialogue on cyber-terror.

Throughout the whole 2013, the Obama Administration had been showing remarkable flexibility in its relations with Russia. Its reaction to the strengthening of authoritarian tendencies in the Russian Federation has been remarkably subdued. Washington accepted such steps as the ejection of the USAID from Russia and the passage of the "foreign agents" law, which could not have been welcome for the United States. Just as Russia's leaders intended, Russia is now seen in the United States as a country with a different set of values, which remains important for achieving American national interests. The "transitology" paradigm in relation to Russia is dead – at least in the observable future. The US didn't object to steps by the Russian Federation to rid the legal foundations and practice of bilateral relations from the relics of the 1990s, placing most areas of their cooperation on the basis of diplomatic parity. Washington went along with the revision of the treaty based on the Nunn-Lugar Cooperative Threat Reduction program and it has been reacting calmly, if somewhat condescendingly, to Russia's regular criticism of its human rights policies.

Finally, in early 2013 the United States made a concession to Russia on a crucial issue of the current agenda, the missile defense system. Soon after Obama's second inauguration, the White House went back on its past promises to the Republicans and its NATO allies, but fulfilled Obama's pledge to Medvedev in early 2012 by announcing that it would cancel the fourth stage of the missile defense system in Europe, which had been raising the greatest fears in Moscow. This step was seen in Washington as a convincing proof that the planned missile defense system would not undermine Russia's potential for strategic deterrence.

Nevertheless, the model of selective pragmatic cooperation was never stable, which was clearly shown by unhealthy ups and downs of Russian-American relations on Syria. By Fall 2013, when the US President started to claim that the decision to use force against Bashar Assad regime was made, the sides were back to the level of mutual irritation that had been seen during the election year 2012 and their rhetoric became tough, if not actually hostile.

Seeing that it would be unable to get Moscow to consent to the removal of Assad and that Damascus was gaining an upper hand in the Syrian civil war, Washington decided on an escalation. In late August it accused the Assad regime of using chemical weapons and threatened an air strike against Syrian army positions. For Russia it was reminiscent of a farcical repetition

of Washington's preparation for the war in Iraq in 2002-03 - which nonetheless would have had an equally devastating effect on the region, the United States and Russia-US relations. Once again Moscow concluded that the United States was unable to change, and that it could not be trusted or expected to engage in building a serious partnership.

Then followed a quick de-escalation due to the Russian initiative on establishing international control and eventual liquidation of the Syrian stockpile, which was one of the most brilliant and smart acts of diplomacy in recent history. It managed to avoid the war with very negative consequences for the whole region, and saved the face of the Obama administration, which clearly did not want to get that much involved into the conflict. This is why this initiative was accepted by Washington quickly and decisively. The US-Russian cooperation on Syrian chemical stockpile that followed showed once again how much can the side achieve while working together. A very difficult operation of bringing a country into the chemical weapons abolition regime and its disarmament was made within a couple of months.

Also this initiative was a turning point for US-Russian collaboration on the Syrian civil war resolution (Geneva process) and on Iranian nuclear program. Both were marked with impressive progress. Already in November 2013 a historic agreement on Iranian nuclear program was reached, which allowed gradual abolition of sanctions and opened the way for normalization of its relations with the West, including the US. For the 1st time since 1979 Tehran started to talk about establishing diplomatic relations with Washington. Also, already in January 2014 the 1st direct negotiations between the Syrian government and opposition took place in Geneva.⁶

Still, one should not be mistaken. Yes, this progress would not have happened and succeeded without Russia. Moscow's role was incremental for both switching the narrative, launching cooperation and in implementing it. After all, Russia on par with the US was a co-sponsor of the Geneva process. US-Russia relations were central for executing the progress over Iran and Syria and were substantially improved by it. However, fundamentally, it were not the US-Russia relations that was this progress reason. They sort of triggered it, but did not elaborate or produce. It was not Russia or US-Russia relations that persuaded Obama administration to change the mind.

The reason was the US itself, its domestic and foreign policy. Washington clearly did not want to get engaged in a new warfare with unpredictable consequences. It would have been unpopular politically, self-destructive economically and dangerous militarily. Also by Fall 2013 it started to

⁶ Madeleine Albright, Igor Ivanov. On Syria and Iran, U.S. and Russia Can Work Together // Foreign Policy, November 2013.

realize more clearly the dangers of Islamic radicalization, religious war as such and international terrorism coming to power both in Syria and in the post Arab spring countries in general. The terrorist act in Benghazi in 2012, which killed the US ambassador to the post-Qaddafi Libya, moved the US closer to understanding that the agenda, which is promoted in the region by its allies Saudi Arabia and Qatar, does not necessarily coincide with American interests. Taken together, these economic, political and foreign policy reasons, not US-Russia relations, produced a crucial change of the US policy in the Middle East in Fall 2013.

So, the US-Russia relations played a very important role tactically and instrumentally, but they were not fundamental for this change of American policy. And although the US-Russia relations benefited from this change, they did not undergo a fundamental improvement and did not achieve stability. If the US preferences change again or Russia becomes less central for implementation of the existing preferences (for instance, if Assad regime finally falls or the US allows substantial improvement of relations with Iran), the positive effect for the US-Russia relations will disappear, and the tone and substance of their discussion of the same problems will again change to the worse.

Another illustration of remaining fragility of the relations is their clash over Ukraine, which coincides with their cooperation on the Middle East. After Kiev decided in November 2013 at the very last moment to postpone association with the European Union (not without a pressure from Moscow), a severe political crises began in Ukraine, putting the country on brink of falling apart. In this situation the US immediately and openly allied with the opposition and protesters (even on symbolic level – US high officials visiting the protests in Kiev and US leaders at the level of Secretary of State conducting negotiations with the leaders of Ukrainian opposition while avoiding meeting leaders of the government) and started to demand that the Ukrainian government fulfills all the demands of the opposition, up to new extraordinary parliamentary and presidential elections. Frankly, a regime change. The situation became very reminiscent to the Ukrainian “orange revolution” of 2004, which exacerbated severe geopolitical confrontation between Moscow and Washington at the Post-Soviet space.

Moreover, the situation could even me more serious, as some in Washington could interpret the Russian role in Ukraine rejection of association with the EU as a sort of “crossing of Rubicon” in its attempts to re-consolidate the Post-Soviet space around itself and bring Ukraine in.⁷ Already

⁷ See: Kristi Govella. Responding to a Resurgent Russia: Russian Policy and Responses from the European Union and the United States. Springer; 2012. 154 pp.

in December 2012 the then departing US State Secretary Hillary Clinton called the Russian pressure on Ukraine “re-sovietization” of the region, which Washington should oppose and even contain. A year after many in the US government are likely to believe that she was right.

If so, the US-Russia relations are again in a serious trouble. One of the major positive achievements of the “reset” was relaxation of the sides’ competition in the CIS. It was this relaxation coupled with a de-facto embargo on NATO expansion to Post-Soviet countries, which allowed many in the Russian elite not to view the US as a threat and impediment for Russian development. Now this could reverse again – with fatal consequences for the US-Russia relations. As integration at the Post-Soviet space and case of Ukraine is clearly Russia’s foreign policy priority No 1, rebirth of the old competition would immediately transform the US in the Russian eyes into a very unfriendly power and maybe the major one among them. At the same time, for the US Russia’s alleged “swallowing” of Ukraine could seem a sharp revision of the symbol of their victory in the Cold war, and at the same time a dangerous signal to their allies and partners, that Washington could be passive and helpless in front of an assertive revisionist power.

It is remarkable how quickly can these old demons awake. It is even more remarkable that these old demons are increasingly irrelevant in the real international environment the US and Russia face. Indeed, it is not crucial for Russia’s long-term economic development and modernization whether Ukraine participates in the Eurasian Union integration project or not. Also, provided the rise of China and creeping geopolitical competition between Washington and Beijing in the Pacific Ukrainian integration with Russia, EU or with no one will not affect the prospects of the US global leadership at all.

The cause of this instability is the same as that, which had undermined the “reset”: they lack a proper core, the core that would stimulate them to cooperate, not counter-balance and distrust each other. The agenda of this new stage of bilateral relations remains divorced from actual challenges and opportunities facing Russia and the United States in the international system. Just like four years ago, it is based on issues inherited from the past, which have no major importance today. But this time it was largely an American mistake.

In the first half of 2013, the Obama Administration once again attempted to make further reduction in nuclear arms the key issue in relations with Russia. Implementing its Prague Agenda, the White House proposed cuts that were one third larger than ones provided for by the START III treaty, reducing the ceiling for the number of warheads in Strategic Nuclear Forces to

one thousand each. That proposal was the reason for America's previous flexibility, including concessions on missile defense.⁸

But this initiative suffered a predictable failure. Russia had not alter its reluctance to cut its arsenal below the level specified by START III, whereas the concessions on missile defense achieved the opposite effect. In order to protect its position, Moscow had present them as proof that US policy in this area was unpredictable and, therefore, dangerous for Russia.

By insisting on a new round of nuclear arms cuts and, especially, by presenting it as the main issue in its relations with the Russian Federation, the United States created a new serious conflict and further bolstered the philosophy of mutual deterrence, pushing it to the front of its relations with Moscow. The more Washington presses it on this issue, the more Russia is determined to preserve its strategic parity with the United States, reacting nervously to any factors that could hypothetically undermine it and grasping at any excuses, even artificial ones, that could delay nuclear arms negotiations.

Negative results of these misguided efforts by the United States to build relations with the Russian Federation focus on the issue of nuclear arms were fully in evidence by Fall 2013. Having encountered Moscow's reluctance to engage in a new round of bilateral reduction of nuclear arms, the White House decided to demonstrate that it had nothing else to discuss with Russia and that it would henceforth remove Russia out of its international policy priorities. A clear sign of this was its refusal to hold a bilateral summit in Moscow at the start of September and unconcealed unwillingness of the US President to meet his Russian counterpart as such. Not even because he dislikes him that much, but simply because, as he believes, there is no agenda. And Kremlin thinks accordingly.

This situation of "agenda vacuum" naturally exacerbated the conflict between Russia and the United States over Syria in early Fall 2013 and over Ukraine in the end of 2013 – beginning of 2014, pushing their relations twice on the brink of a new crisis. In both cases Moscow and Washington simply did not see anything in their bilateral relations so precious that they could not risk losing it. There was nothing in the relations themselves that could prevent the sides from a greater clash.

Preservation of the selective pragmatic competition model of the US-Russia relations provides for two alternatives scenarios of their development in the near- and middle-term future. The 1st is

⁸ Pavel Zolotarev, Sergei Rogov, Valentin Kuznetsov, Victor Yesin. Russia and the USA at the Crossroads: Obama's Initiatives and Moscow's Reaction. Russian International Affairs Council. http://russiancouncil.ru/en/inner/?id_4=2157#top

status quo, which means that the agenda of the US-Russia relations will remain to be limited, sporadic and determined by the outside factors, and the sides will continue to lose opportunities to promote their economic and security interests through cooperation. They will simply lack political will to see such opportunities.

The 2nd alternative is worse. Coupled with increasing number of contradictions, the existing instability and agenda vacuum could result in a new serious US-Russian crisis by the next Presidential elections in the US. Contradictions at the Post-Soviet space first and foremost (Ukraine, Central Asia) could resonate with the claims by some Russian officials and observers that the US defense policy (missile defense, etc.) is aimed at undermining Russian security, and ultimately recreate an image of the US as a hostile country.

The only chance to prevent this is to understand and acknowledge past mistakes. The sides need to realize that, contrary to the prevailing opinion, they can and must work together both for their own sake and for the sake of international security. But the agenda has to be replaced, which requires in turn a fundamental rethinking of the philosophy on which bilateral relations are based.

New Philosophy of the US-Russia relations

Developing a new philosophy of Russian-American relations, one that could place them on a stable and sustainable footing, should consist of establishing a link between the content, character and agenda of those relations on the one hand and major trends in international relations on the other, namely, the objective challenges and opportunities which Moscow and Washington actually encounter in the world of today and tomorrow.

Thus, the basis of this new philosophy should be an analysis and forecast of the international position of Russia and the United States as well as their objective interests, challenges and opportunities in a rapidly changing world, along with a detailed study of how Russia and the United States, acting jointly, in cooperation with third countries or in opposition to each other, could best meet those challenges and take advantage of those opportunities.

At this point, neither Russia nor the United States see a bilateral partnership as an important component of their efforts to bolster their position in the world. The US strategy at the start of President Obama's second term has been focused on consolidating two political and economic mega-regions allied with the United States, i.e. Asia-Pacific and Europe-Atlantic, by means of

NATO and the Trans-Atlantic Free Trade Zone on the one hand and the Trans-Pacific Partnership and a series of bilateral treaties with Asian countries on the other.⁹ Russia, at least for now, is not seen as part of either. Even if this strategy is only partially implemented (which is not a foregone conclusion) it is not certain that it will allow the United States to regain its global leadership. Moreover, there will be new geopolitical fault lines while old ones will be exacerbated. At the same time, it would still impossible to solve majority of global issues could without those countries who will be left out of these mega-regions, namely China, India, Russia, Brazil and other countries. Russia, on the other hand, is relying on strengthening its military and integrating the post-Soviet space. Even though economic integration in the ex-Soviet region is legitimate and necessary, it is unlikely in and of itself to secure Russia's position as a leader of the modern world. Similarly, effective military power is necessary in today unpredictable environment, but it is increasingly overshadowed by other forms of influence, above all economic and ideological.

However, an unbiased analysis of the US and Russian place in the world and of the challenges they face shows that, despite their different positions in the world, different views on the international situation and different interests, Russia and the United States have more issues that bring them together in the current international system than push them apart.¹⁰

Moscow and Washington face many common challenges and threats, both global and regional. Global ones include a declining ability to manage the international system and its growing chaotization, global economic instability, international terrorism, the spread of weapons of mass destruction and political and religious radicalization. The main regional ones are lack of clarity in China's future foreign, military and economic policy in light of its economic and military ascendancy, geopolitical polarization of the Asia Pacific, the likelihood that the civil war in Afghanistan will intensify and Central Asian countries will become destabilized after 2014, the likely deep destabilization of the Greater Middle East as a result of the Arab Spring and the broadening of simmering regional conflicts and tensions, such as those between Iran and Saudi Arabia and Israel and Iran, etc.

Thus, the new philosophy entails building cooperative relations focused on jointly meeting common challenges and threats as well as taking advantage of new opportunities. This would

⁹ Sergei Rogov. The Obama Doctrine: The Lord of Two Rings. Russian International Affairs Council publication. http://russiancouncil.ru/en/inner/?id_4=1818#top

¹⁰ Reconfiguration, Not Just a Reset: Russia's Interests in Relations with the United States of America. Valdai International Discussion Club Report. June 2009.

create a positive interdependence between the two countries based not on issues of bilateral relations and expressed not in the volume of trade, but on the need by both parties to jointly react to challenges from the outside world. It is also important that in conditions of power diffusion in the international system, when neither the United States nor Russia acting alone - or both acting jointly - can be single world leaders, meeting global and regional challenges effectively would entail creation and organization of various forms of multilateral and minilateral cooperation by major centers of power with the US and Russia in their core.

In general, a new philosophy and the corresponding renewal of the agenda of Russian-American relations will rest on three main pillars. First, the rejection of the obsolete doctrine of mutual strategic deterrence and scare tactics and the policy of parity. Second, the development of an optimal approach to solving conflicts based on this new philosophy. Third, the effort to adapt current areas of cooperation to existing international conditions and create on this basis a new agenda for bilateral relations.

The experience of the “reset” and relations between Russia and the United States during 2013 showed that the doctrine of deterrence and strategic parity will not disappear because of arms control and stage-by-stage reduction of nuclear arsenals. It is like trying to put out a fire by dousing it with gasoline. It can only be overcome if the sides cease tying their security to the preservation of strategic parity in its current state, in the form of mutually assured destruction, stop making it into a sacred cow and shift the center of gravity in their relations to meeting common threats and challenges, especially those where they don't regard each other as potential rivals.

The problem of unique Russian-US deterrence lies not in the size of their nuclear arsenals but in the heads. It has a political and psychological rather than military and technical character. The sides go on persuading themselves that even after the end of the Cold War, when the likelihood of a nuclear exchange between Russia and the United States approaches zero, only the preservation of strategic parity and MAD will ensure their security. As a result, they measure their security against each other and base their defense policies not on what they actually need to achieve overall deterrence, but on what the other side has.¹¹ The reduction of Russian and US nuclear arsenals would only make this problem worse. The sides will continue to nurse their guaranteed ability to cause each other unacceptable damage, and smaller and smaller steps by the

¹¹ S.M. Rogov, V.I. Esin, P.S. Zolotarev, V.S. Kuznetsov. On the Qualitative Transformation of Russian-American Relations on Strategic Issues. Russian International Affairs Council Working Paper № VIII, 2013

opponent would be capable of tipping that putative balance. As a result, distrust if not actual hostility will grow. This is evidenced by Russia's rejection of nuclear arms reductions past START III.

The political elites of the two countries should understand that the existence of nuclear capabilities and their physical ability to destroy each other by themselves do not automatically entail hostility. Moreover, the fact that Russia and the United States preserve a theoretical ability to destroy one another stabilizes their relations and enhances international stability. A threat emerges only when the existence of technical capabilities is overlaid with policy goals or fears. It is policy that aims technical capabilities of one state at the other or makes the other side see the technical capabilities of the opponent as aimed at it. The policy of aiming and/or perception should be reversed.

Strategic balance measured by MAD has long been an anachronism. Parity between Russia and the United States in strategic nuclear forces has long existed only in theory and in the imagination of some of their military and political leaders. They will disappear in time and efforts to extend their lifespan will be less and less feasible and increasingly harmful. Russia and the United States find themselves in a fundamentally different strategic situation, which is radically different from the symmetry of the Cold War.

The United States remains engaged militarily and politically, it does not intend to stop military interventions and encounters a large number of threats on several continents. In this respect, it is objectively needs to develop regional tactical missile defense systems, preserve its ability to project conventional military force on a global scale and maintain superiority in conventional forces over any non-nuclear opponent. Washington will continue to move in this direction in its defense policy, undermining its traditional strategic parity with the Russian Federation. To force it to change its priorities or to accept limitations does not seem feasible in the foreseeable future. In its relations with regional foes (such as Iran), the United States has the luxury of relying on its non-nuclear military power rather than on nuclear weapons and of engaging in military action rather than deterrence.

Russia has a different position in the international system, it faces a different set of military threats and pursues different goals. It relies on nuclear deterrence in an incomparably larger set of circumstances than the United States, whereas its non-nuclear forces are focused on local or, at most, regional conflicts. Moscow also relies on the nuclear factor to a greater extent than the United States or any other great power, using it as an instrument of political influence. Thus,

Russia will continue to insist on preserving guaranteed nuclear deterrence along with overwhelming superiority of its nuclear arsenal over that of all other countries except the United States.

Thus, the sides should finally put an end to the tradition of equating the military security of Russia and the United States with the preservation of strategic balance in the form of MAD and shift to the concept of *deterrence in all directions*. The latter entails maintaining Russian and US strategic nuclear forces in a state that gives them capability to inflict unacceptable damage on any aggressor, including each other. This means *shifting from the parity principle to the principle of maximum reasonable sufficiency*.

This approach will automatically empty conflicts between the Russian Federation and the United States in the strategic area of any meaning. Objectively, given the current size of their strategic nuclear forces they do not threaten each other, while ensuring guaranteed deterrence in all directions. Neither the deployment of a US missile defense system, which will not reach a very high quality in the foreseeable future, nor their superiority in conventional forces, including precision weapons, nor the mythical potential for a global lightning strike, will be able to undermine this deterrence. But if Russia and the United States make deep cuts in their nuclear arsenals, deterrence and, therefore, security, will be undermined for each side. In this case they will have every reason to fear a damaging first strike. Moreover, this will heighten the relative capability of third countries and increase the threat from them.

The only change in the two countries' nuclear capabilities that should be implemented involves not their size but in the protocols and decision-making procedures with regard to targeting and use of nuclear weapons. They are little changed from the Cold War and entail targeting Russian and US strategic carriers at each other, maintaining the great majority of their strategic nuclear forces in the state of permanent readiness and making quick decisions to use nuclear weapons, effectively on an automatic basis. It therefore makes sense to stand down a number of strategic carriers and nuclear warheads in Russia and the United States, leaving open the possibility of returning them to the state of readiness within a reasonable time period, give more leeway in protocols and decision-making procedures and increase transparency in exchanging data on missile launches and information obtained by early warning systems.

Transparency, not quantitative ceilings, should become the core of the new arms control regime in Russian-American relations. As to the size and make-up of their respective nuclear arsenals, it should be left to each side's consideration. Finally, Russia and the United States should start a

trust-based dialogue on the nature of strategic stability in the new world, which differs radically from the Cold War world.

Outline for a New Agenda

According to this philosophy, agenda of the US-Russia relations should be fundamentally revised. Its major priority should be not nuclear issues, but what Vladimir Putin proclaimed as Russia's major project for the whole XXI century: Asia Pacific, development of Siberia and the Far East. It would also provide a model of a "new type" of collaboration, as the US-Russian cooperation on Asia Pacific entails substantial participation of China.

The Asia-Pacific region has become the main source of growth in the global economy and it is also becoming the center of gravity in global politics. In 2011-12, Moscow and Washington almost simultaneously proclaimed the strategy of focusing on this region. Both countries face similar challenges there, related first of all to the rise of China and its consequences. However, they still do not see each other in the region and do not consider cooperation as an important component of their regional strategies. Washington doesn't regard Moscow as a participant in the Pacific economic community which it is currently building, or the security community which it is consolidating. Russia, for its part, regards US policy in the region with great concern, criticizing Washington for its tendency to create blocs and thus de facto allying itself with China.

Of course, Russia and the United States will never be each other's main partners in the region. Their position there is radically different. Neither Moscow nor Washington have the luxury of risking damage to their relations with Beijing while building a bilateral partnership of any kind.¹² Nevertheless, there is considerable scope for partnering in the region, covering such issues as regional security and its geopolitical and economic landscape, including the development of Siberia and the Russian Far East.

If the region splits along geopolitical lines with the United States and its allies on one side and China and Russia (as a junior partner) on the other, everybody will lose strategically. Russia could become a third force that balances the region, preventing polarization between the United States and its allies on the one hand and China on the other. The emergence of Russia as an independent center of power in the Asia-Pacific region would be good for Moscow and

¹² Roderick MacFarquhar. *Fragile Solidity. China's Strengths and Weaknesses in the Focus of Relations with Russia and America // Russia in Global Affairs*. July/September 2013.

Washington and, in the end, for Beijing as well. From the Russian standpoint, it would remove the humiliating prospect of becoming China's junior partner. For the United States, it would prevent the creation of a powerful anti-American bloc bringing together the resources of a large portion of Eurasia (which is America's old strategic nightmare). Also, China would avoid an even greater consolidation of its neighbors around the United States and the eventual geopolitical rift in the region, which would be all but unavoidable if China were strengthened by its alliance with Moscow. Finally, Russia as an independent center of power in the Asia-Pacific region would preclude an equally dangerous prospect of political isolation of China, with Russia becoming a junior partner of Washington.

The strategy of "re-balancing" towards Asia Pacific that Russia proclaimed in 2012 and started to implement in 2012-2013 is simply unrealizable without active participation of the US. After all, the majority of Asian Pacific countries, with which Moscow is eager to deepen economic, political and military cooperation, are American allies and partners, and the voice of the US could be important for their governments and companies. Remarkably, Russia makes it quite clear, that its own "pivot" to the Pacific is not a "pivot" to China only, and it is eager to balance its relations with Beijing with deepened cooperation with the others. At the same time, Russian more active participation in the region could make the US "pivot" more effective and sellable to the region, as it would decrease the danger of its polarization.

Thus, Russia and the United States would benefit by starting a dialogue on the security and strategic future of Asia-Pacific and promoting improved relations between Russia and key US allies there, including Japan. It is worth considering staging regular joint military exercises and other forms of cooperation. At the same time, Russia should not turn down strategic partnership with China, including also in the military area. The US-Russian dialogue on the Pacific must avoid even the slightest hint that they are planning to contain China. The overwhelming majority of problems related to China, as well as broader problems concerning international security and global management, can be resolved only with its constructive participation. In the future, trilateral US-Russian-Chinese cooperation, if successful, might become the foundation for a new non-confrontational security system in the region.¹³

In the economic field one of the most promising directions for Russia-US cooperation, bringing in also China, Japan, South Korea, India and other Asian-Pacific nations could be development

¹³ Feng Shaolei. China-US-Russia Trilateral Relations under the Context of International Configuration in Transition. Valdai International Discussion Club Report. October 2010

of Siberia and the Far East. This should not be limited to energy. Asian Pacific countries have a huge demand for agricultural and water-retaining products (pulp and paper, etc.) – the areas in which Siberian and East Asian potential is huge. Washington should be objectively interested in seeing its Asian allies take part in this project. First, they are objectively interested in having access to the region's natural resources as well as in its water and agricultural potential. Secondly, neither they, nor the US not of course Russia would want to see China obtaining a monopoly in this area.

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