The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

U.S. and Russia Back to Cold War Diplomacy

By Fyodor Lukyanov

May 26, 2015



Some observers have concluded that the recent Moscow visit by U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland signals a warming in U.S.-Russian relations. However, not all communications between states have the goal of reaching agreement on something.

During the Cold War, the main goal of such meetings was to understand the logic and, if possible, the intentions of the other side, which led to the system of "risk management" whenever bilateral relations worsened.

The two sides began gradually losing those mechanisms and skills when it seemed in the 1990s that they were no longer needed. However, political changes in 2014-15 showed that those hopes for an irreversible end to all confrontation were illusory. As a result, Cold War behaviors are back, but now without the tools to keep them in check.

Once Crimea was integrated into Russia, Washington essentially sought to minimize its

contacts with Moscow until the Kremlin decided to change its ways. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov and John Kerry continued to meet, but they discussed applied topics, mainly the particular situations in Ukraine and the Middle East. U.S-Russian relations degenerated into a public and backroom dispute, thereby exacerbating the situation.

That approach did not produce the desired results. Washington's expectations that Russia would change its policy toward Ukraine did not pan out, and for its part, Moscow realized that Ukraine would not achieve an acceptable level of stability without the blessing and participation of the United States.

And finally, bilateral tensions mounted, resulting in uncomfortably close "near run-ins" between Russian and NATO military aircraft and sea vessels. With any chance mishap of this type raising the risk of a major escalation, it is time to put those Cold War communications back into operation.

At the same time, no full-blown Cold War could take shape now. While it would have been strange for the Kremlin and White House to talk about "common challenges" during the last century, now such challenges not only exist, but are unavoidable.

For example, Moscow and Washington hold differing views about the root causes behind events in the Middle East, but they both agree that the Islamic State poses a threat to Russians and Americans alike. As he enters the final stage of his second term in office, U.S. President Barack Obama is now thinking about his legacy. This period happens to coincide with the accelerating breakdown of the world order, making it next to impossible for him to achieve any major success on the international arena.

That makes it all the more important for him to focus on areas that have the potential to secure him a place in history. For Obama, that primarily means Iran, and possibly Cuba. It will require painstaking work on a number of fronts for Obama to bring the Iranian saga to completion, as well as maximum cooperation from all the parties involved — including Russia.

Of course, in broader terms, Barack Obama does not want to leave office with the Middle East in its current state of chaos, and any solution there will require Russia's participation, or at least neutrality. Ukraine, on the other hand, shows no signs of adding to Obama's legacy, and he knows that no resolution will occur there soon.

The new stage of U.S.-Russian relations will probably keep open the channel of communications between officials responsible for military and political security so as to minimize the risk of accidental clashes and continue an exchange of views on the situation in the Middle East.

The two sides are unlikely to reach a common position concerning that region, but they will also avoid outright opposition to each other. They will probably work together actively on Iran. As for Ukraine, they will continue to hold opposing positions, but both parties will try to avoid an escalation of tensions.

Reaching a "modus vivendi" does not mean a softening of rhetoric. To the contrary, leaders might conclude that they must compensate for an actual reduction in tensions with

correspondingly greater levels of militaristic pronouncements.

On the whole, the situation will continue in its current form until Obama leaves office. How it unfolds after that will depend on many factors, not the least of which is the dynamics of the relations that both sides have with China. Much is happening in that area.

The documents that President Vladimir Putin signed with Chinese President Xi Jinping during his visit to Moscow in early May show a qualitatively different attitude compared to what it was before. The memoranda were specific and comprehensive.

Most important is the following point: "The creation of a mechanism of exchanges and cooperation between the administration of the president of the Russian Federation and the Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China as well as the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection of the Communist Party of China, also known as the Control Ministry of China."

That complicated bureaucratic wording essentially provides for "strategic partnership" — meaning that the two countries will cooperate in formulating their plans.

A separate document concerns the "pairing" of the Silk Road Economic Belt with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union. It is particularly significant that Beijing expressed an interest in establishing a dialogue with the EEU as a single identity, whereas it earlier preferred separate bilateral discussions with each of the member states.

The agreements focus on making new arrangements for Eurasia, with the momentum for development and new initiatives moving not from West to East, as was customary, but in the opposite direction. The rapid rise of Asia that had previously occurred in the Pacific and Pacific Rim areas has now begun moving onto the continent.

All of those inland states would like to implement major infrastructure projects so as to build up social and economic momentum. The interest shown by continental powers Russia and Kazakhstan in their own development happens to coincide with China's efforts to build a corridor to the West, toward European markets and beyond.

Significant obstacles exist. One is the condition of the Eurasian Economic Union. The number of its internal problems is more likely to increase rather than find resolution, and simply expanding the organization — as happened when Kyrgyzstan recently became a member — does not serve as a criterion for success.

The EEU needs a strong institutional and legal framework because outside partners such as China will take an interest in the organization only to the extent that it can guarantee clear rules of the game in the Eurasian region. Washington is not very enthusiastic about the changing architecture of Eurasia. Although the global era has dawned, nobody has changed the basic geopolitical understanding in which the United States cannot allow the emergence of a Eurasian power or alliance of powers capable of challenging the U.S. position.

However, that will be a headache for the next occupant of the White House.

Fyodor Lukyanov is editor of Russia in Global Affairs.

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