



Obama, Russia and Europe

By Tomas Valasek

★ Barack Obama's foreign policy is less accommodating of Russia than it appears. His scepticism on missile defence and NATO enlargement has more to do with the poor performance of the interceptor missiles and the political turmoil in Ukraine and Georgia. He also seems determined to prevent a Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

★ The US president has made it a priority to reach an accord with Moscow to cut nuclear arms. But he believes that Russian self-interest, rather than concessions on NATO enlargement, should keep Moscow at the negotiating table.

★ Senior American officials say that Moscow appears unwilling to help to stop the Iranian nuclear programme, another key Obama concern. A crisis over Iran could end the US-Russian *rapprochement*.

Has Barack Obama subordinated key elements of US policy towards Europe to the whims of Moscow? On the first glance, it might seem so. He has changed course on US policies that have most irritated Russia. First, in a letter to President Dmitri Medvedev in February 2009, Obama hinted that the US might not build missile defence sites in Europe after all. Second, the US president has poured cold water on NATO enlargement to Georgia and Ukraine, neglecting to mention the two countries in his first speech to the alliance in April. Third, Obama has discontinued the US practice of urging Russia to democratise. In his remarks after meeting Medvedev on April 1st, Obama instead stressed the need to "tolerate different views".

Obama's words and deeds have created the impression that he is accommodating Moscow in order to win its co-operation on cutting nuclear arms and stopping Iran's nuclear programme – two issues about which the US president cares deeply. The new US policy has caused concern in some corners of Europe: governments in Central and Eastern Europe, for example, worry that Obama will not speak up the next time Russia cuts gas supplies to the region, or threatens to target them with nuclear missiles, as it did in 2007. Even officials from generally Russia-friendly countries, such as France, think that Obama is naïve about Moscow's intentions.

On closer inspection, however, Obama's foreign policy is less Russia-driven than it appears. Senior US

officials responsible for Europe and Russia agree that Obama's priority for the continent is to secure Russian co-operation on reducing nuclear weapons (Obama and Medvedev, at their July summit in Moscow, were due to announce the outline of an agreement); and to obtain its help on Iran. But they also say that Obama believes that Russian self-interest, rather than US concessions on NATO enlargement or missile defence, should drive Moscow's engagement with Washington. And these officials insist that the US remains as determined as ever to challenge Russian 'spheres of influence' in Eastern Europe.

It is not all about Russia

American officials argue that while the US has become less keen to promote democracy abroad, enlarge NATO or put interceptor missiles into Poland, Obama is doing so on merit rather than to please Russia. Of course, they would say that – they are keen to protect the president from being attacked for 'going soft' on Russia. But a closer study of Obama's recent decisions suggests that there is more to the officials' words than spin. Factors unrelated to Russia are shaping US policies on Europe.

★ **NATO enlargement:** The two former Soviet republics whose candidacy lies at the centre of US-Russian disagreements, Ukraine and

Georgia, are mired in political instability. In Ukraine, squabbles between the prime minister and the president have made effective governance – one of the preconditions for NATO membership – impossible. In the case of Georgia, many NATO governments consider President Mikheil Saakashvili too erratic to be given NATO's security guarantee. These troubles, more than the desire to placate Moscow, seem to be the main reason for Obama slowing NATO enlargement. As one senior American official puts it: "The US did not take [early membership] for Ukraine and Georgia off the table, Ukraine and Georgia did so."

★ **Missile defence:** The Democrats have long suspected George W Bush of overselling the technical capacities of the programme to score political points. Ronald Reagan made missile defence ('Star Wars') a key plank of Republican electoral campaigns, and the party has supported it uncritically ever since, even though the system has performed poorly in most tests. For years, former president Bill Clinton resisted pressure to declare operational the two existing sites for interceptors, in Alaska and California, before eventually giving in to the Republican Congress. The proposed third site in Europe would be more, rather than less, technologically challenging. It would employ a new missile, which has yet to be developed or tested – and it is not clear that US taxpayers will want to pay for it in the middle of a recession. "We already have two sites that don't work; do we need a third one that doesn't?" asks one US expert on Europe close to Obama.

★ **Democracy promotion:** Obama is clearly less keen than George W Bush to give priority to democracy and human rights in US foreign policy. His secretary of state, Hillary Clinton, once said (when discussing China) that she would not let talk of democracy "interfere" with other pressing priorities like addressing the economic crisis and climate change. Russia has welcomed the change: Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov hailed Obama's "business-like, pragmatic approach". But Obama has good reasons, unrelated to Russia, for wanting to de-emphasise democracy. He seems convinced that Bush gave democracy-promotion a bad name by invading Iraq, and then, having failed to find weapons of mass destruction, using democratisation as a rationale. Worse still, because the US under the previous president was so unpopular, criticism from Washington became a badge of honour for authoritarian rulers. Obama is determined to recapture the moral high ground. The steps he has taken since the inauguration – such as the order to close the prison in Guantanamo Bay and the decision to pursue nuclear disarmament negotiations – have all been aimed at burnishing America's credentials as a country that does as it

preaches. But it will take Obama years, not months, to restore US prestige and moral leadership. People in many parts of the world, including Russia, continue to think of America as arrogant and hypocritical.

What America's Europe policy may look like

Despite the outward appearance of unity and discipline, there is a broad range of views on Russia among Obama's officials. Some indeed value good relations with Russia above other US goals in Europe. The State Department's new point person for nuclear disarmament, Rose Gottemoeller, has in the past criticised NATO enlargement for being detrimental to US-Russian relations.¹

¹ Rose Gottemoeller, 'Russian-American security relations after Georgia', *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 2008.

But the majority view in Washington is different. Most Obama officials think that the US should not go out of its way to accommodate Russia. They know that Moscow needs a deal on nuclear arms as much, if not more, than the US does. Russia is not producing enough warheads to replace its ageing arsenal so its holdings will inevitably drop; the only way for Russia to maintain nuclear parity with the US is to get Washington to cut its holdings, too. US officials say that this realisation, rather than US concessions on NATO enlargement, should drive Russia to sign a nuclear arms deal. "If changes on NATO enlargement or missile defence help with Russia, fine," says one senior foreign policy official, "but that's not the point".

The distinction is important because it suggests that the US is prepared to offer only limited trade-offs to secure Russian co-operation on nuclear arms reductions or on Iran. A proper understanding of the US views on Russia also provides a helpful guide to the likely future course of US policy towards Europe. If it were all about Russia, then Washington would be unlikely to take steps to annoy Moscow as long as the nuclear disarmament talks and the Iran negotiations continued. Conversely, if US-Russian co-operation came to nothing (and quite a few American officials believe that it will, primarily because Moscow is unwilling and unable to help on Iran), the US would rethink its view on NATO enlargement or missile defence.

Instead, a more complicated dynamic emerges. Three conclusions suggest themselves:

★ First, NATO enlargement to Georgia and Ukraine will remain on hold. Ukraine is facing presidential elections, and the two frontrunners are less keen on NATO membership than the incumbent. President Saakashvili's reputation in many NATO member-states is damaged beyond repair; new elections are not due until 2013. The

two candidate states have a mountain to climb if they are to convince this White House to make NATO enlargement a priority. Obama's Europe team is composed mostly of experts on Western Europe (with some exceptions, like Michael McFaul in the National Security Council). Unlike Bush's European policy team, heavy on experts on the former Soviet bloc to whom NATO enlargement was a matter of heart as much as mind, the Obama team has little emotional involvement in Eastern Europe.

- ★ Second, the future of the missile defence sites in Europe will be determined by developments in Iran and North Korea, as well by progress in US labs that are struggling to make the system work properly. It is less clear that it will be influenced by developments in Russia. Despite Moscow's opposition, and despite the system's technical hitches, Obama believes that it is better to have some protection against a possible attack from Iran than none. In a speech in Prague on April 5th, he said that as "as long as the threat from Iran persists, [the US] will go forward with a missile defence system that is cost-effective and proven". This may well include expanding the system across the Atlantic: the missile defence budget proposal for 2010 contains \$500 million for a new site in Europe.² The May 2009 nuclear weapon test in North Korea will only make missile defence look more relevant.

² Jenny Shin, 'Overview of the fiscal year 2010 ballistic missile defence budget request', *Center for Defense Information*, May 20th 2009.

Obama will be more open to redrafting the blueprints for the European sites to address Moscow's concerns. One possibility is that the sites could even be moved from the Czech Republic and Poland to the former Soviet republics, and possibly to Russia itself (from where, one official claimed, they could better protect Europe against a missile launched from Iran). But Kremlin officials continue to insist that missile defence is aimed at Russia rather than Iran. Under the circumstances, it is not obvious that the US and Russia will be able to collaborate.

- ★ Third, while the US will leave Russia's domestic politics to the Russians, Obama will confront Moscow over its attempts to create a 'sphere of influence' in Eastern Europe. In fact, he already has: in May, the US insisted that NATO should go ahead with a long-planned military exercise in Georgia, in the face of vehement Russian opposition to it. "Not for a second did we think of cancelling the exercise. It would have sent the wrong message to Moscow", said one Obama official. The US president is actually more hawkish on Russia than Bush in one important regard: Obama strongly implied in his Prague speech that NATO should draft military plans for a possible conflict with Russia. This has been

a controversial issue in NATO, with Central and East European allies demanding that the alliance resume planning and rehearse for the possibility of a conflict with Russia, while many other allies such as Germany or Italy are opposed. Bush never clearly stated where he stood.

Obama's stance on Russia will harden further if Moscow fails to respond to the new US president's overtures. No issue will test the relationship more than Iran. If Obama is keen to cut nuclear arms in concert with Russia, he is even keener to keep more countries from joining the nuclear club. On Iran, Obama said that he would try diplomacy at first; and offered to engage in unconditional talks with the Tehran government. But American officials also say that if diplomacy does not work by autumn, the next step will be to impose tough sanctions. In this case, both Americans and Europeans will fervently hope that sanctions work – a number of US foreign policy officials are concerned that if Iran does not take steps to stop its nuclear programme, Israel could attack Iranian nuclear facilities before the end of the year.

For sanctions to be truly effective, Obama will want them to be imposed by the UN Security Council. Russia's and China's participation has a far greater psychological impact on Tehran than US and European sanctions alone; it sends a message of widespread condemnation of Tehran's nuclear plans. But most US officials doubt that Moscow will support tough sanctions. The more optimistic ones say that it is "too early to tell". Others openly say that Russia is the "Achilles heel in America's Iran strategy". Certainly, Foreign Minister Lavrov gave the US little reason for optimism. In his remarks to the Carnegie Endowment in early May, the minister questioned whether the Iranian nuclear programme had a military application – something that is an article of faith in the US and Europe.

Russia has also agreed to sell Iran advanced surface-to-air missiles (the S-300) – precisely the sort of weaponry that would be most effective in defending against an airstrike on Iran's nuclear facilities. Moscow subsequently delayed their delivery – but this has only heightened the suspicions in Washington about Russia's intentions. "They are trying to game the US. They are taking hostages to trade off for later. For everything they give they take something away. They agreed to sell S-300 to Iran, then postponed and want us to thank them. They see the relationship with the US in completely zero-sum terms", one senior US official argues.

The more disappointments Russia serves up to Obama, the more vulnerable he will become to charges from right-wing critics in the US of being weak. The Republicans believe Obama's national security policy to be one of his vulnerabilities, and have attacked the president's handling of Russia, Iran and North Korea in a stream of op-eds and TV interviews. For now Obama enjoys strong popular

support and can afford to ignore the attacks. But some officials are beginning to sound defensive. Obama “is an idealist, but not a chump”, says one senior official. To prove the point, the president may feel compelled to revise his stance on Russia over time. This does not mean that Obama would learn to like missile defence or the enlargement of NATO. He is more likely, for example, to impose sanctions on Russian companies doing business with Iran, or finance pipelines designed to reduce Russia’s dominance in supplying gas to Eastern and Central Europe like Nabucco (see below).

What does this all mean for Europe?

A closer look at Obama’s views should provide comfort to those East Europeans who have worried about the US closing its eyes to Moscow’s attempts to carve out a sphere of influence in the region. Obama’s Russia policy is a far cry from the principle-free, transaction-based relationship that some Europeans (and conservative Americans) wrongly ascribe to him.

Germany and France will welcome Obama’s scepticism on NATO enlargement. They have argued for a slower approach, and clashed with Bush over enlargement at the NATO summit in Bucharest in April 2008. Those East European countries that have most actively supported further enlargement will be disappointed – but not too much since Georgia’s and Ukraine’s domestic political woes have become the main impediment to membership.

European governments have been divided over US missile defences. All NATO allies signed a declaration stating, in effect, that the US missile defence site in Europe could become a basis for future NATO-wide defences. But many Europeans doubt in private whether the system can ever be made to work, and whether it is worth trying and thus alienating Moscow. The doubters will be content to wait for US scientists to improve the technology before it is deployed to Europe (although the more Iran progresses towards acquiring a nuclear weapon, the more they will worry). The Czech Republic and Poland, which invested considerable political capital into securing US missile defence sites on their territory, would be displeased to see them built elsewhere or not at all. But their stance, too, is changing. The previous centre-right Czech government, which led the push for a US site, collapsed in May for unrelated reasons; the new one is less interested in missile defence. And the Poles seem resigned to losing the US base – they are busy negotiating a delivery of US Patriot anti-aircraft missiles, which would soothe the disappointment.

In theory, Obama’s views put Europe in a good position to take the lead in keeping Eastern Europe free, and making sure that it continues to democratise and strengthen market economies. With NATO enlargement effectively on hold, the EU should play a more important role in the region. But many member-states have grown wary of enlarging the EU further – France, the Netherlands and Germany have become the key opponents. And without the ability to dangle the prospect of membership, the EU lacks incentives to prod the neighbours in Eastern Europe towards political and economic reforms. The EU’s eastern policy also suffers from continued divisions over Russia. The member-states’ plan to build a new pipeline, Nabucco, bringing Caspian gas to Europe while bypassing Russia has languished because several EU member-states have signed deals with Moscow to support a rival Russia-led project, South Stream.

The US has supported Nabucco and Washington occasionally appears more excited about the project than most European capitals. The US would also like to see the EU enlarge eastward; all the more because NATO will not do so anytime soon. American officials sound frustrated that the EU is making little progress on either front. Past US presidents, when they thought that the EU dithered too much, took the lead: George W Bush and Bill Clinton prodded NATO to enlarge to Eastern Europe, rallying the European allies to support the expansion. Clinton pushed NATO to launch airstrikes in Bosnia and in Kosovo. But Obama is unlikely to pressure the EU governments into sorting out their policy on Eastern Europe – the region is not among his top priorities; nor is it clear that he would succeed (Washington’s support for Turkey’s membership in the EU seems to have only hardened the opposition in Paris and Berlin).

As a result, neither the EU nor NATO are ready to admit additional East European states. Contrary to what some Europeans suspect, Obama’s reluctance to expand NATO has little to do with Moscow’s opposition: as argued above, he is driven by different motives. But this may be of academic concern to those East European states which are leaning toward EU and NATO membership, and which, for the first time since the end of the Cold War, find themselves without a meaningful prospect of accession to either institution.

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