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## Russia-US Relationship in the Post-Cold War Era: Can it be reset?

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### **Resurgent Russia: a power to reckon with**

The collapse of Soviet Union and the end of cold war heralded a new phase of mutual relationship between the United States and Russia. This was evident from introduction of democracy and market reforms in Russia and American help for consolidation of the process. But such bonhomie did not last long and the relations are now marred by new challenges which plague their bilateral relations. Early hopes for a better partnership has waned today, in part because Russians are now concerned with perceived American disregard for Russian interests. Washington has made its disapproval of Russia's assertion quite visible and advocating an increasingly adversarial stance on issues where their interests clash (Goldman 2003).

More often than not, Russian-American relations have resembled a one-way street to proceed with caution (Cohen 1997). While America acts vigorously to enforce its global objectives in accordance with the principle that Washington had 'the right to use military force to defend [its] vital interests by ensuring uninhibited access to key markets, energy supplies, strategic resources and regions', it is not willing to accept Russian attempt to reassert its place in the global power architecture, and protect its traditional sphere of influence around its borders (Chomsky 2008).

Russia lost much of its global clout with the dissolution of the Soviet Union 19 years ago and is making an attempt to re-emerge as an energy super power with a booming economy after successfully reversing a production slump in the early 1990s. Buoyed by its vast energy reserves<sup>1</sup>,

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RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA:  
CAN IT BE RESET?

---

Kremlin is once again flexing its muscles abroad, and is assertive in global geopolitics. It is demonstrating its independence in its foreign relations. It has strengthened its economy and expanded its role in international affairs. "Russia must aspire to claim world leadership in the realm of energy," Vladimir Putin, the former president and present prime minister of Russia, told the Security Council in 2006 (McAllister 2006:23). For Kremlin, energy security has enabled Russia to deal with its national security issues in a much more realistic and assertive manner, and it would not shy away from making oil and gas a significant tool of its foreign policy. High energy prices and raw material exports have allowed Russia to become the world's tenth largest economy. The Energy exports finance about 30 percent of the Kremlin's budget, and state's share of oil production doubled during 2006-2009.

Apart from energy, there is a boom in Russian industrial exports which primarily consist of armaments, and with advanced aircrafts it accounts for more than half of industrial sales (Tymoshenko 2007: 72). With an increasing number of millionaires in Russia, the entrepreneurs have built good business in telecom, information technology, retail, brewing, food processing and

consumer credit. Russia today possesses the third largest hard currency reserves in the world, and it is running huge current account surplus and paying off the last of the debts it accumulated in the early 1990s. Russian ruble has been made fully convertible, and Russia is close to be a member of WTO. It is likely that political stability and sustained economic growth will boost the Russian confidence and enable it to participate in global issues in a much more emphatic manner (ibid, 71). The rising economy has improved the living standards of the Russians; the middle class is growing and becoming increasingly confident; and the stock market is booming. All these developments are largely due to the contribution of forward-looking leadership in Russian politics. Vladimir Putin's role has been appreciated by observers in the following manner: 'Russia is back and Putin is in charge' (McAllister 2006:17). Contrary to the policy of accommodation advocated by Boris Yeltsin (Goldman 2003), Putin has advocated a nationalist policy and has popular support, therefore, he is being projected as the best bet US can have in Russia. He has been supported by his colleague Dmitry Medvedev. There have been allegations of corruption and inefficiency against them but their commitment to democracy and

RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA:  
CAN IT BE RESET?

---

market economy makes them indispensable for Russian resurgence (Lavrov 2007: 11-12). Both Medvedev and Putin are not susceptible to outside pressure like Yeltsin, whose government survived largely on Western credits.

Putin's explicit goal after assuming power in 2000 was to reduce Russia's dependency on the West and regain its self reliance. He was of the belief that in 1990s because of Russia's extreme financial weakness, the country lost its sovereignty to a large extent. The US and its NATO allies, he argued, used the opportunity to re-constitute the world order without taking Russia into account. They expanded NATO eastward and reshaped other international institutions to serve their agenda. They treated Russia's domestic economic, political and social policies as their own project, engaging in a crusade to shape Russia in their own image for their own interests. Putin's priority during his tenure as president, from 2000-2008, was to reverse the West's leverage over Russia (Hofmann 2006).

Russia is now seeking to find a new place in the global architecture. In the last one decade under the leadership of Putin and Medvedev, Russia has pursued an increasingly assertive, if not aggressive, foreign policy. Until

Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008, the US government largely attempted to ignore Russia's increasingly bold anti-American diplomatic and economic moves (Cohen 2009). President Dmitry Medvedev's statement of August 31, 2009 on national television of Russia's new foreign policy principles were intended to send clear signals to the world that Russia had a "zone of privileged influence" and that it held the veto over the aspirations of the people living in it; that initiating democratic reforms to the disadvantage of Russia or pursuing a pro-Western policy in Russia's backyard is dangerous; and that Moscow can disrupt at will the flow of energy and goods through the east-west corridor (Cohen 2009). The regimes of Putin and Medvedev have nurtured Russians public opinion and used propaganda as a means to garner international support for Russia's foreign policy objectives. Fear and hatred of a powerful enemy is 'used' by the political elites to rally popular support and assertive rhetoric towards the United States by these leaders, in a way, boosts national pride (Young 2009). Most of Russia's policy-makers do not envision the old empire, but do see the zone of ex-Soviet republics as vital to their economic and security interests (Torbakov 2008). This view largely

dovetails with the official Russian position. But does it reflect reality? No doubt, many Russians felt humiliated by their country's loss of superpower status after the Cold War. After nearly a century of failures and upheavals, Russia has managed to regain some respect at the global level. Many people in Russia view the West and particularly the United States with a mix of resentment, suspicion, and are craving for respect. Much of the current tensions in Russia today is largely due to America's fault and they argue that the US treated Russia with a triumphalist arrogance after the fall of the Soviet Union; ignoring Russia's legitimate interests and brushing aside its security concerns; bringing NATO to its borders by extending membership to former Soviet satellites; and seeking to install missile defence systems next door in Eastern Europe (Young 2009).

### **Strategic challenges and conflict in Europe**

The cold war legacy has receded in Europe to a large extent. For long, Europe pursued a containment policy; however today the relationship between Europe and Russia has improved remarkably. Nevertheless, as per Russian perception, various attempts are being taken by US to contain Russia, through the eastward expansion of

NATO<sup>2</sup> in violation of previous assurances given to Moscow. The US drive to place missile defences in Eastern Europe is an evidence of the US effort to contain Russia. By installing anti-missile bases<sup>3</sup> on Russia's doorstep, Washington is trying to keep alive the longstanding US policy of nuclear first strike against Russia (Cherian 2007:50). For the US, it is a prerequisite to shape the Black Sea region— another area Russians are sensitive about-- as an American sphere of influence so that the NATO can take a leap forward to the Caucasus, the notorious soft underbelly of Russia. This agenda is still unfolding. The entities that were born out of Yugoslavia are being systematically inducted into NATO; the US has set up military bases in Romania and Bulgaria (Bhadrakumar 2008: 50), and has become for the first time a "Black Sea Power".<sup>4</sup>

On its part, Russia considers the initiative of US as a strategic challenge that requires a strategic response (The Hindu, 7 September 2007). Earlier, Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov had bluntly warned his American counterpart, Condoleezza Rice, that the American plan for a missile-shield would turn Europe into a "powder keg". Putin had threatened to pull out of a cold war era treaties that limit

RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA:  
CAN IT BE RESET?

---

intermediate-range missiles. In his opinion, "We may decide someday to put missile defence systems on the moon, but before we get to that we may lose a chance for agreement because of you implementing your own plans (The Times of India, 14 October 2009). In his maiden address to the Russian Parliament, Medvedev also revealed Moscow's decision to cancel the long planned dismantling of the Kozelsk ICBM Division and to place short range and medium range nuclear missiles and electronic jamming systems in Kallingrad, a Russian enclave sandwiched between Poland and Lithuania and situated a few hundred miles away from the centre of Europe. He also justified Moscow's legitimate right to deploy tanks and heavy artillery on its western and southern borders (Zarakhovich 2008). Russia also suspended participation in the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) in retaliation to George W, Bush administration's abrogation of the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty.

### **Russian approach**

Russia uses oil diplomacy to reverse unfriendly cold war relationship with the European nations particularly the West European nations. The country has the largest reserves of oil and gas, i.e., 16 percent of the world reserves and

a quarter of Europe's gas is now supplied from Russia. Several reports of Duma fit into Moscow's implicit game plan to play the US off "against" Europe. It was released on the eve of a Russian-French-German summit in Paris on 22 September 2006, where Putin announced Russia's plan to supply up to half of the natural gas from its vast Shtokman field to Europe. Previously, Russia had planned to accord priority to the US as the key market for the Shtokman gas and included America's Conoco Phillips and Chevron in a short-list of likely partners for developing what is tipped to be world's biggest gas field. It is now likely that the US companies will lose to their European rivals (Radyuhin 2006: 50-52). German Chancellor Angela Merkel has been in negotiation with Moscow for a new European Union(EU)-Russia treaty for a lasting and mutually beneficial relationship-based assured collective security (The Hindustan Times, 27 October 2007). Merkel's proposal to create a "collective energy market", which she made during a summit with Poland's prime minister in 2008, is a positive and constructive start towards building a pan-European energy security policy that includes Russia and excludes America. Many European countries signed gas contracts with Russia which will materialise by 2015. On the proposed

RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA:  
CAN IT BE RESET?

---

membership of Ukraine and Georgia, both EU and NATO have reservations as they did not want a confrontation with Russia. Moreover, in the opinion of Merkel, NATO could not include a state (Georgia) that had not resolved its territorial problems (Proxy War....2008: 7).

Germany, one of the biggest powers in Europe, is dependent on Russia and in near future, it is expected to get 80 percent of its oil and gas from Russia far ahead of its existing dependency of 44 percent. There is a direct gas pipeline<sup>5</sup> to Germany from Russia, bypassing traditional gas pipeline routes through countries like Poland—the former partner of Russia and a close ally of US today. German Institute for International and Security Affairs in Berlin reveals, German dependence on Russian energy supplies will increase, in part because of a growing belief that Russia “is the best alternative to the Middle East, if something happens in Saudi Arabia” (McAllister 2006:17). Apart from energy, German banks and companies have invested heavily in Russia. Like Germany, many European countries have signed gas contracts with the Russians that cover them until about 2015 (ibid).

Like Russia, Germany and France lined up against US decision to

invade Iraq in 2003. The Russian ‘call’ of multipolar world had even won support from France, which was until Sarkozy’s presidency a known opponent of US in Europe and world politics. Former President Putin in the Munich Conference on Security Policy, 2007 stated the obvious when he said that a “Unipolar World had failed to materialise.” Russia is against pax-Americana and imposition of American culture and civilisation. By backing a multipolar world, Russia intends to liquidate US hegemony on the world issues. Moscow skillfully mobilised “old Europe”— France, Germany and Italy, which did not want a break up relationship with Russia, against the “New Europe” of East European countries— allied to the US, to foil Washington’s efforts to set up a united anti-Russian front of western nations. As a consequence, the EU also could not take the moral high ground on Russian role in Georgia because of US and NATO activities in Yugoslavia, Iraq and Kosovo. The EU accepted Moscow’s demand to get Georgia renounce the use of force against its break away territories and presence of Russian peace keepers in South Ossetia and Abkhazia (The Hindu, 1 October 2009).

### **US in Central Asia and Russian Response**

Washington is seeking to

RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA:  
CAN IT BE RESET?

---

perpetuate its military presence in Central Asia and it has floated the idea of a "Greater Central Asia" which would include Afghanistan, oil rich Caspian region and Central Asian states to wean them away from Russia and China. Striving to change the balance of forces and keep the countries of the region in its orbit, Washington throws up ever new ideas like, establishing a transport corridor between Central Asia and South Asia. With the help of this project the US is pressing ahead to solve two problems in one go: the problem of Afghanistan's reconstruction and that of its integration with the Central Asia. As Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice explained, "the integration of Afghanistan and its northern neighbours is a very important aim of the US" (Ali 2006: 8). The idea is very much akin to White House pronouncements of a "new regional arrangement" in central Asia excluding Russia and China but with the full cooperation of Afghanistan (Ali 2005:3). To realise this idea US needs to ensure closer coordination of its policies with those of the regional countries so as to provide security for transport corridors; and this can be used by Washington as a pretext to enhance US military presence in Central Asia. In the last few years the US administration has once again sought to intensify its

attempts to strengthen its influence over, and its position in, the Central Asian states. In the opinion of Condoleezza Rice, "Central Asian region occupies a special place in the US' list of priorities and also that is a zone of American strategic interest" (Todd 2006:12). It is with that perspective, the American administration under George Bush focused its attention on cultivating the west-oriented political elite in the Central Asian states, setting up NGOs controlled by forces opposed to the governments pursuing policies independent of US designs, and imposing economic sanctions and boycott against such governments. The US position on democracy and human rights in Central Asia is also used in a strategic manner (Todd 2006:12). "Many of the former Soviet republics are governed by autocratic, corrupt, clannish regimes, whose political stability is based on different levels of repressions", outlined by C. Negroponte, the Director of the US National Intelligence Service (Ali 2006: 8). Taking this into account, the US proclaimed design of "exporting democracy" will in turn result in sole surviving super power's attempt to influence the development of internal processes in the countries of the region with the objective of enabling the American protégés to come to power, and thus get involved in "colour revolutions"<sup>6</sup>. The so called

RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA:  
CAN IT BE RESET?

---

“colour revolutions” according to General Nikolai Bordyuzha, the secretary general of the CSTO, “is a problem of the export of revolutions—intentionally brought by recognizable people, exporters of revolution (America), the so-called contemporary revolutionaries - neo Che Guevaras - in the post-Soviet space” ([www.apanfocus.org](http://www.apanfocus.org)). The encouragements of “colour revolutions” by the west in Russia’s traditional zone of influence have also angered Moscow.

Apart from colour revolutions, the US has engaged itself in strategic preparations and military installations in central Asia. As a consequence, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have offered full support: ‘base’ facility and ‘overhead flight’ to the US. Turkmenistan, which announced the policy of ‘complete neutrality,’ has not provided any military base to the US but has provided overhead-flight right to it. The contemporary leaders of Turkmenistan have been offered \$2.3 million for undertaking a feasibility study on a trans-Caspian gas-pipeline project that would obviate the need for Turkmen gas to be exported via Russia ([www.apanfocus.org](http://www.apanfocus.org)). In the light of presence of US in Central Asia, Russia is trying to strengthen its hold through CIS (Commonwealth of independent states) and CSTO. The

CSTO has conducted a large number of military bases in southern belt of central Asia and in the Caspian Sea. From Moscow’s point of view, “the CIS is an extremely important security concern for Russia, and Russia continues the right to preventive use of military forces in CIS countries. It could deliver preemptive strikes if threatened militarily and if its access to central Asian region is blocked” (Pradhan 2006: 42). On possible permanent base of US in central Asia, Col-General Valery Manilov, the first Deputy Chief of the General Staff of Russia, had made Russia’s stand clear, “if Washington does move to set up permanent military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan the new relations will have to be viewed within the context of integrated system for formulating overall political strategies for asserting Russian interest” (ibid). In 2003, Russia expressed its desire to deploy its most powerful missile-SS-19 “Shletto” armed with 6 nuclear warheads in each strategic location in central Asia. Russia has planned to establish its air base at Kyrgyzstan just 30 kilometers from the US air-base in its capital Bishkek and to deploy its 201 military divisions and early warning system in Tajikistan. Putin has increased Russian economic aid to central Asia which is primarily intended to thwart the US

Aid Diplomacy in the region. For example Kyrgyzstan's energy debts were written off in response to its willingness to make Russian the second language of the country. Russia has sought to pursue a more vibrant and consistent strategy in building political and economic linkages between Russia and the central Asian region, which is intended to promote broader geopolitical interest (ibid, 45).

### **Conflicting Interests in the Caucasus region**

Caucasus region, the soft underbelly of the Russian empire, constitutes a critically important region for the US since it straddles a busy transportation route for energy, like the Indian Ocean or the Persian Gulf. The US has developed bases in Azerbaijan and has built close military and political ties with Georgia and Azerbaijan. But Russia has resented this; the region is now deeply militarised and has become a bone of contention between Russia and the US. Since Georgia is a client state of the US, its control of Caucasus will assist NATO to cross over from the Black Sea region to the frontiers of Russia which is construed as a direct threat to Russia. The US has also declared Caucasus region as strategically quite important since oil pipelines pass through this region

(Chenoy 2008: 18). Keeping Georgia under US control is imperative for the roll-back of Russian influence in the Eurasian region. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline<sup>7</sup> project of the US avoids Iranian and Russian territory, and thus Russia is apprehensive of losing its monopoly in pipeline routes and it has strongly detested the possibility of outside military forces stationed there to protect the pipelines that traverse through the troubled terrain (Proxy War—2008:7). Russia indeed has genuine strategic interests and security concerns in the Caucasus. The Caucasian mountain range roughly divides the south Caucasus, which consists of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan from North Caucasus- a mosaic of Russian Republics. The fall of Georgia to the US means fall of southern Caucasus and loss of Russia's natural defensive position in the northern Caucasus and disintegration of Russia in the form of cessation of Chechnya and Dagestan. As a consequence, the Kodori Gorge that divides Russia and Georgia has seen years of low-intensity fighting. There are reports that arms were reaching the Chechen guerrillas via Georgia through the Pankisi Gorge, and Georgians, closely aligned with the United States, were not doing enough to stop the flow of weapons and smuggling across the border (www.offnews.info

& Chenoy 2008:18)

Russians strongly believe that the Georgian crisis in South Ossetia draws its inspiration from Washington which is against Moscow's move for independence of South Ossetia from the mainland Georgia and the West's recognition of an independent Kosovo ([www.realitysandwich.com](http://www.realitysandwich.com)). Russia has accused the US of using the former Soviet republic of Georgia as the pawn in the US game against it.<sup>8</sup> The Georgian attack on South Ossetia in 2008 and Russian interference to save South Ossetian government is a reminder of the bitter relationship that exists between the US and Russia. In the case of Kosovo, NATO had pointed out that military interference was necessary due to Serbia's "loss of sovereignty" over the region. The Russians pointed out that Georgia had lost its right to exercise sovereignty over South Ossetia. Russia reasoned that if US-backed NATO could justify hitting targets in Serbia for the independence and formation of Kosovo state, the same rationale could be used for striking Georgia. To the Serbs and Russians, in another instance, it seemed illogical that the US should back Kosovo's claim for independence while denying the same to the Serbs in Bosnia who are seeking independence. Apart from

these arguments, for legitimacy, Moscow also had the 1992 Sochi agreement, which gives Russia the mandate to "keep the peace" in the province of South Ossetia, and ninety nine percent South Ossetians voted for independence from Georgia in a referendum held in November 2006 (Kumar 2008: 25).

### **Energy politics and strategic interests**

On the issue of energy security, Putin stressed that the trans-Caspian energy pipeline, proposed by the West, must be based on consensus among the five littoral neighbouring countries consisting of Iran, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Russia. This has come in reaction to Washington-backed Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline. Russia has been unhappy with the construction of pipelines from the Caspian region that bypass its territory and Iran. There have been reports that the United States is considering attacking Iran from the territory of Azerbaijan, Iran's northern oil-rich neighbour. In the Conference of Caspian Sea Countries (2007), Putin, like Mohd. Ahmadinejad, the President of Iran, asked the Caspian countries not to offer their territories to third powers for use of force or military aggression against any Caspian state (The Hindu, 17 October

2007). Russia has assured Iran of Moscow's support for the completion of the long-delayed Bushehr atomic power plant and creating strategic alliances with Tehran (Cohen 2008). Unlike America, Russia has said, that there is no evidence to suggest that Iran is pursuing an atomic weapons programme. Besides, it has always encouraged interaction between Iran and IAEA to clear suspicion about the orientation of the Iranian atomic programme. On possible attack on Iran by the US, Russia has shown its displeasure, and assumed possibility of "spiraling instability" in the region. On a complementary tone, the President of Iran justified the role of Russia in South Ossetian crisis (The Hindu, 26 November 2008). Apart from Iran, Russia is revitalizing its role in other parts of Middle East yet again and calibrating its steps carefully within limits. Arab unhappiness with the US invasion of Iraq and stagnation in the Israel-Palestine peace process has given the Kremlin an opening to revive strong ties with many Arab governments who are glad to see Moscow as a counter weight to Washington. In 2005 Putin had made the first journey to Cairo as the first Russian head of state since Khrushchev's visit in 1964, started an Arabic-language TV channel in the Middle East to spread its influence, and sold missile to Syria—the longtime enemy of the

US. The Bush administration was enraged when Russia invited Hamas leaders to visit Moscow after they won the Palestinian elections. Hamas is still on the US terror list, and Russia has refused to brand Hezbollah as a terrorist organization (San Francisco Chronicle, 11 Jan 2010).

### **Oil politics and Russian maneuverability**

Russia is today using its newly reinvigorated economic muscles for nation building and keeping western oil companies and oligarchs at bay. The US has, in comparison, suffered a series of major reverses in the past years in the Great Game over Caspian and Central Asian energy and transit of oil through the Caucasus. Moscow's success in getting Turkmenistan to commit its entire gas production to Gazprom, Russia's state-controlled energy giant, was a stunning blow to America's energy diplomacy. Moscow has made a similar offer to Azerbaijan to buy all its gas on highly attractive terms that the western companies cannot match. Similarly, the US failed to get Kazakhstan to jettison its close ties with Russia, especially the arrangement to route its oil exports through Russian pipelines. New deals have been signed between Russia, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to work jointly on

RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA:  
CAN IT BE RESET?

---

pipelines to transport gas to lucrative western markets (Cherian 2007:49), and Russia is planning to forge a Confederative Union with Kazakhstan that will include Uzbekistan in the proposed "Gas OPEC" (The Guardian, 10 January 2010). The progress of Russia's South Stream Project aimed at transporting energy to the Balkan and Southern European countries and the failure (not abandoned) of the US-sponsored Nabucco gas pipeline project which broadly has the same orientation as Southern Stream is a further setback to Washington's energy diplomacy.(Bhadrakumar 2008: 50). For Russia, oil is an instrument to punish the errant child, reward friendly regimes and punish hostile ones (Radyuhin 2006: 50-52). For example, in 2006 by cutting off gas supplies to Ukraine after raising the price of the commodity by 400 percent and assistance on less contentious areas of education and infectious disease was solely directed against Ukraine's proposal of NATO membership. Dick Cheney, the former vice president of the United States, warned Moscow against using energy as "tools of intimidation and blackmail" (McAllister 2006:23).

### **Defense and Strategic trust**

For Russia, it is of paramount importance today to make a realistic

assessment of the military-political situation in the world and threats emanating from it. After the years of cut in defense expenditure, the Russian government since 2001 has been progressively increasing defense expenditure. Dmitry Medvedev had asked the military commanders to come up with a plan for across-the-board modernisation of the country's nuclear and conventional forces till 2020 in the light of the war with Georgia.<sup>9</sup> In his opinion, "Russia must achieve supremacy in land, sea and air power in the world under the modernisation programme" (The Hindu, September 28, 2009). The most recently concluded Stability-2008 nationwide military maneuvers were the biggest war games of Russia since end of the cold war.<sup>10</sup> In 2006, six new intercontinental missiles along with 12 launch vehicles were added to Russia's military arsenal. Putin had warned Washington that if anti-missile interceptors were installed on its borders, then Russia would be justified to retaliate. Moreover, Putin said that if the American interceptors were mobilized then "we disclaim responsibility for our retaliatory steps because it is not we who are the initiators of the new arms race which is undoubtedly brewing in Europe" (Cherian 2007:49). In 2007, Russia fired a new submarine-launched deadly variant of the Topol-M missile

in the White Sea. Its target located in Russia's far east- traveling a distance of around 8,000 km, to which even the USSR could not boast of.

The new missile, according to military experts, is so fast that the much-vaunted US missile defense system (NMD) cannot track it. The test was a riposte from Moscow against the US plans to build a missile based along its borders (Cherian 2007:49). Moreover, NATO and Russia are engaged in the biggest build-up of naval and air force bases since the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Five US strike groups have been sent to the Mediterranean and Gulf regions while Moscow has sent an aircraft carrier to the eastern Mediterranean and deployed its Black Sea Fleet that includes Admiral Kuznetsov, nuclear powered aircraft carrier, to the Syrian port of Tartus<sup>11</sup> which is close to Poti- the outlet of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline in the Black Sea (The Hindu, 18 September 2009). Putin had also ordered the resumption of Russian long-range bombers of patrols around the world, with the bombers being armed with nuclear missiles. These bombers will now resume the Soviet practice of flying in the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. As a reminder of the Cold War, the Russian bombers also flew close to the US military base of Guam in the Pacific Ocean (<http://www.khilafah.com>).

### **Strategic engagement of Russia: security implications for US**

The formation of Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO)<sup>12</sup> and Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO)<sup>13</sup> not only unites member nations of each organization on common security concerns but also prompts the countries to stand tough against foreign intervention in their regional and national interests. The persisting instability in Afghanistan, the strategic inroads made into the central Asian region by the US and NATO forces, and turmoil in the Caucasus region are some of the factors which have posed serious challenges to the region, especially Russia and China. The joint military exercise (Peace Mission-2007) of SCO members in the Ural mountain region was the largest ever military exercise of China and Russia<sup>14</sup>; and proposal was made for regular joint drills between SCO and CSTO to increase military cooperation between the member countries. In the opinion of Chief of the Russian General Staff Yuri Baluyevsky, the joint military exercise was the first step for an effective peace and stability-building mechanism in the region involving the military establishments of the member-states. China is the only member of the CSO

that does not belong to CSTO which is described as Warsaw Pact-II. Both organisations have the same goal of combating terrorism and cooperating with each other in central Asian region. A formalised partnership between them could lay the basis for a defence alliance between Russia and China in Central Asia and turn the SCO into an effective security mechanism and a counterweight to the US and NATO (Radyuhin 2007:60-61). China is primarily concerned with the Central Asian oil and US expansion in the region. China, while prioritizing economic expansion in central Asia, supports Russian security plans as they help it play a bigger role in the region and challenge unitedly the evil designs of US. Both are keen to build up SCO as a platform for harmonizing their divergent interests and equally as an instrument for pursuing their common interests; it also aims at securing stability in central Asia, preventing a spill-over of religious radicalism and violence from Afghanistan, and keeping the US out of the region (Radyuhin 2007:60-61). On the other side, the most recently concluded Malabar 07<sup>15</sup> in the Indian Ocean is seen by China as nothing but a step towards the creation of an Asian NATO to counter China's growing economic, military and strategic influence (The Times of India, 8 September 2008).

### **The Obama Way and the prospect of relationship**

The war in Georgia demonstrated the dangers of an American policy that encouraged Russia to attack what Moscow sees as its vital interests (Lieven 2009) and reckless disregard of US policy-makers to Russian interests (Cohen 2006). Unlike Bush, president Barack Obama's top foreign policy priorities today is to stop the drift in US-Russia relationship. The most significant step taken by the Obama administration includes signing of the arms treaty in 2010. The treaty is the successor of Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), 1991 which expired in December 2009. As per the agreement, each country is to shrink its strategic and deployed nuclear warheads to 1,550 over seven years, down from the current limit of 2,200. The deal will also reduce the number of bombers and missiles, the so-called delivery vehicles, to 700 for each side, and calls for a regime of 18 inspections a year ([www.rferl.org/content/](http://www.rferl.org/content/) and Cunningham 2010). Both countries pledged to cut deployed strategic nuclear warheads below 1,550, i.e., 30 percent below the current limit. They will also reduce inter-continental ballistic missile (ICBM) launchers below 800 and reduce deployed ICBMs, submarine-based launchers and bombers

RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA:  
CAN IT BE RESET?

---

equipped to carry such weapons below 700 (Cunningham 2010). Both Obama and Medvedev hailed the deal as a sign that the two countries, which together hold 90 percent of the world's nuclear weapons, are committed to responsible global leadership ([www.rferl.org/content](http://www.rferl.org/content)).

While both the presidents have sounded optimism about future cooperation, tensions around some points clearly mark uncertainty in their bilateral relationship and global politics. Firstly, while the US issued a statement allowing for the continued development and deployment of its missile-defence systems for national security, Medvedev warned that Russia could withdraw from the treaty if the United States increased its missile-defence systems in a way that poses a threat to Russia's strategic nuclear potential ([www.rferl.org/content/](http://www.rferl.org/content/) and Marcus 2010). More critically, neither the Russian statement nor the U.S. statement is legally binding on the other party; secondly, in a technical sense, the agreement focused on deployed warheads not stockpiles; strategic, not tactical and nuclear weapons; and thirdly, the treaty will not come into force until it is ratified by both countries' legislative branches. The 1993 START II treaty was not ratified by the US Senate until 1996 and by Russia's Federation Council until

2000. Russia withdrew from START II in 2002, one day after the United States withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Obama government, in particular, is likely to face ratification problem in a sharply divided partisan political climate within the senate where it has lost its overwhelming majority in Senate (Cunningham 2010).

President Obama today has set out his vision for a new post-cold war world order, and urged Russia not to interfere in neighbouring states and to move on "from old ways of thinking" by rejecting Kremlin's claim that it has "privileged interests" in post-Soviet countries and "sphere of influence along its borders" (Kramer 2010: 63). By defending state sovereignty, Obama described it as a "cornerstone" of international order. And Washington would not tolerate another Russian invasion of Georgia and independence of two breakaway regions supported by Moscow (The Washington Post, 6 July 2009). Obama justifies Georgia and Ukraine's right to choose their own foreign policy and leaders, and could join NATO if they wanted. On the other hand, Russia is deeply opposed to Ukraine and Georgia's accession, and wants the White House to rule out their future membership. More strategically, Russia wound up a full-scale military exercises next to the

RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA:  
CAN IT BE RESET?

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Georgian border amid ominous predictions that a second conflict in the Caucasus could erupt in near future in 2010 (The Guardian, 7 July 2010).

The US president needs Russian support on important issues such as Iran and disarmament. Could he then pay the price which Moscow would want? This would include concrete concessions on missile defence, on NATO enlargement and halt criticism of the ongoing problems in Georgia, Stationing of a missile defence system in Poland and the Czech Republic, admission of Ukraine and Georgia into NATO and Western involvement in the North Caucasus— none of these are bargaining chips for the Russians. Russians oppose them without qualification, and they are non-negotiable ([www.spiegel.de](http://www.spiegel.de)). For example, while Obama warned against the dangers of nuclear proliferation and “threat” of Iran and urged Moscow to join with the US to stop Iran acquiring nuclear weapons— one of the conditions for which the US may not go ahead with its planned missile defence shield, Medvedev hailed Iran as a “major partner” (The Guardian, 5 July 2009).

The sharper reductions of arms and delivery system and abandonment of missile defence shield would be

difficult for the Obama administration to accept nationally and internationally because it would represent a huge turnaround in American strategic thinking on a global missile defence system, and a massive ‘betrayal’ of key US allies in eastern and central Europe. Such a move would significantly weaken America’s ability to combat the growing threat posed by Iran’s ballistic missile programme, and appeasement to assertive Russia” (Gardiner 2009). All these indicates that if US makes concessions it risks a political backlash at home, loss of trust of allies and the charge of capitulation. If it does not, it may emerge from the US-Russia negotiation no more successful than George Bush. Obama’s attempts to reach a deal between Moscow and Washington appear to have come unstuck over the same problem that defeated the Bush administration i.e., Kremlin’s unbending hostility to the Pentagon’s planned missile defence shield in Poland and the Czech Republic. While Obama has agreed to review the plan, he is not prepared to abandon it (The Guardian, 5 July 2009). Obama’s speech at Moscow’s New Economic School in 2009 emphasized common interests between the US and Russia and predicted that the United States and Russia were not “destined to be antagonists,” but assessed the

difficulty to forge a lasting partnership between former adversaries" (Hurst 2009). On the other hand, the Russian leadership did not believe that the growing tensions between Moscow and Washington were as much due to old adversarial relationship but viewed it as an American reaction to Russia's success in reasserting itself in the global scene ([www.spiegel.de](http://www.spiegel.de)). While, the Obama government is "resetting" the relationship between the two nations, the Russians themselves have been engaged vigorously in a "reset" project of their own for the last ten years. And a little hope is expected from the President Medvedev to moderate the stance of his predecessor Putin since he is "largely" okaying the policy put in place by his predecessor, Putin, who is now Prime Minister of Russia.

### **Measures to overturn security threat and challenges**

The relationship between Russia and US is not necessarily hostile or conflicting in nature as it is seen between the sworn enemy nations. In spite of differences and challenges, both the nations have shown their interest in cooperating with each other on specific issues of common interest. For example, the memorandum of understanding

(MoU) signed between two nations in 2009 aimed at enhancing cooperation against illegal drug trafficking worldwide and disrupting and dismantling large criminal organizations that affect the drug trade both in U.S. and Russia (<http://usinfo.state.gov>). Russian peacekeepers have acquired experience in working with American soldiers, for example, during the peacekeeping mission in the Balkans, they operated as a part of the American Division North. Russia is fighting its own war against terrorism, finds common cause with the United States. Putin had made efforts to organize counter-terrorism efforts with Western nations, despite the skepticism of the Russian domestic public. After the terrorist attacks on America, Putin had offered the Americans intelligence sharing, opening of Russian airspace, and rallying Asian nations to the American cause against the Afghanistan Taliban (Tsygankov 2006:138-39). To ease tension between the two countries, Henry Kissinger and Yevgeny Primakov were appointed in 2007 to co-chair a bilateral "working group" of Russian and American political insiders to tackle issues such as global terrorism, nuclear proliferation and nuclear threats ([www. telegraph. co.uk/](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/)). Likewise, a commission headed by Obama and Medvedev is designed to quicken the pace of US-Russian

RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA:  
CAN IT BE RESET?

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engagement across a whole range of issues important to both countries (Hurst 2009). Apart from these, the American move in recent years to graduate Russia from trade restrictions under the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, something promised many times by previous administrations, is a signal of America's seriousness and Russia's cooperation in restarting the relationship (The Commission on US Policy— 2009)

Although there are divergences in approaches between Russia and the US on various issues, they can still share cordial and durable relationship if both Moscow and Washington take active measures to remove mutual suspicions about each other.

Joint strategies to promote stability in Afghanistan and curb Iran's nuclear ambitions would ultimately be in Russia's interest as well as of the US. Like the US, Iran with its suspected nuclear weapons and missiles is also not in Russia's interest. There could be a "united front" against 'suspected' nuclear weapons programme of Iran but not against its sovereign right to pursue civilian nuclear programme.

Both the countries should pursue their foreign policy objectives in

terms of absolute gains without looking into relative gains of each other in a non-zero-sum paradigm.

It is high-time for Russia and the US to think about partnership in various areas, especially in non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, control of nuclear weapons and combat international terrorism. They should have a roadmap to materialise the goal of "nuclear zero" articulated by both Obama and Putin for non-proliferation.

Despite differences on some issues related to stability and security in the central Asian region, Moscow and Washington have common interests in the region in the form of combating terrorism and ethnic chauvinism, maintaining strategic stability and conflict resolution. The United States, while involving nations on Asian security and related issues in the region, must take into account various sensibilities, phobias and anxieties that the Russians have in the central Asia region and take into account the concerns of Moscow as well. Establish European and Eurasian security structure and regional architectures based on a shared concept of security that incorporates Russian security and American interests.

While re-examining the structures and processes of engagement

RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA:  
CAN IT BE RESET?

---

between the United States and Russia, creation of permanent bilateral forums in the form of cabinet and sub-cabinet-level diplomats, military and security officials, and economic officials would facilitate better interaction and promote mutual trust between them.

Establishing the government-to-government dialogue between Russia and east European and Caucasian nations who are under the patronage of the US, with a view to developing confidence-building measures to ease bilateral tensions and demonstrate commitment to their sovereignty is the need of the hour.

There is the need for political solution to the problems while looking at all aspects to be done. Otherwise, the problems of South Ossetia and Abkhazia will continue with increasing American and Russian involvements.

The US should approach Russia for its membership in the World Trade Organization while insisting that Moscow must make its own strong and consistent effort to establish necessary conditions for foreign investment.

It is obvious that inclusion and integration of former Soviet republics

into NATO has enraged Moscow and inflamed nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in the Russian minds. It has 'restored' the atmosphere of cold war. When cold war is over, Warsaw Pact dismantled, and the United Nations is more active than before, the question arises: is the alliance of NATO really useful in the post-Cold War age? It is pertinent to argue that there is no need to continue and expand NATO as it is getting in the way of productive relations between the US, Russia and Europe.

Russia is not as central to US interests as was the Soviet Union. But Russia is important to the United States as a nuclear superpower and it plays a major role in determining the national security environment in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, and has an important role in shaping future international relations. On the economic front, Russia is potentially an important market and trading partner of US. Russia is the only country in the world with more natural resources than the United States, including vast oil and gas reserves. It has a large, well-educated labour force and a huge scientific establishment. Many of Russia's needs— food and food-processing, oil and gas extraction technology, computers, communications, transportation, and investment capital— are areas in which the

## RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA: CAN IT BE RESET?

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United States is highly competitive. Likewise, Russia's economic revitalization proceeding from its integration in the global economic system dominated by the advanced industrial democracies cannot be accomplished in an atmosphere of political and military confrontation or antagonism with the United States. Hence, any confrontationist approach either by the US or Russia will not be in their national interest.

Russia should seek genuine strategic partnership with the US, and to enable such cooperation, Russia would have to abandon its current political mind-set in which prestige is equated with challenging the United States and the US should understand that, when excluded and despised, Russia can be a major global spoiler. Ignored and humiliated by the US since the end of Cold War, a resurgent Russia today is in search of a new global order that will respect its interest in the form of regional and super power.

### **Conclusion**

The existing relationship between Russia and America is challenging and competitive in nature with geo-strategic and security concerns. Russia is resurgent although not aggressive in its global approach and approaches towards its old enemy-

the United States. The latter is either spreading its sphere of influence or challenging the sphere of American activities which are largely conflicting to Russia's national interest. Naturally, both United States and Russia in the post-cold war era want to maximize their benefits in the light of relative gains from the great game where control over strategic locations, security and resources drive foreign policy perspectives of both America and Russia. While the US promotes its interests by expanding its zones of interest, the resurgent Moscow wants to check the imperialist ambitions of US which hampers its interest. While US intends to balance the existing world order, Russia appears determined to reassert its past glory and offset the world order which has largely been defined and set by the United States. All this explains why America is supporting anti-government forces within and outside Russia, expanding NATO, aspiring to deploy missile-defence system in Eastern Europe and involving in Caucasus problems. In a reaction to Washington's "status quoist" global world order, Russia exercises a measured US policy. Russia with a new generation of leaders and thriving economy is determined about charting an independent foreign policy course and an unmatched nuclear capability.

RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA:  
CAN IT BE RESET?

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Russia is back, back with a bang since the break-up of the Soviet Union. It refuses to swallow West's prescriptions on a host of international issues, ranging from Europe to Asia. Hence, the spirit of US-Russia 'strategic partnership' of the early 1990s has been replaced by increasing tension and mutual recrimination today. The most recent involvement of Russia in the Caucasus crisis is the first instance in the post-cold war era where Kremlin has straightened its muscles against the expansionist America. What we are witnessing today is an era of challenges of competitive bargains and security concerns between Russia and the United States. Security and conflicts have not taken centre-stage in their bilateral relationship as they had during the cold war, but in the covert form, these problems have given rise to an unfriendly atmosphere to resolve long-standing disputes and emerging issues. Kremlin does not want to escalate tension again. But it is not clear whether the Kremlin is capable of preventing that. The future of US-Russia relationship depends much on the resolution of conflicting issues like expansion of NATO, stationing of nuclear missile bases by the US at the doorstep of Russia and resolution

of South Ossetia and Abkhazia problems.

Although President Obama has shown his sincerity, yet both the nations are far from working out an acceptable solution to their mutual issues of concern. There lies fundamental difference in values, interests, and outlook between the leaderships of the two countries. Obama government demonstrated a desire to develop a new tone in the bilateral dialogue and "reset" relations with Russia but there was a strong reluctance to abandon certain fundamental positions that have been the source of disagreement with the Russian leadership in the past, such as recognizing no Russian sphere of influence, maintaining an open-door policy for aspiring members of NATO, prioritizing human rights and democracy. On the other hand, the rhetoric of the Russian leaders continues to raise serious doubts about their sincerity in resetting the relations.

All these prove the difficulty of resetting the relationship between the two nations. However, it is not an impossible task. Apart from the measures as suggested above, the leaderships of both the countries should demonstrate flexibility in their approach to overcome the existing tangles and this could be possible only in an atmosphere of mutual understanding and mutual trust.

### END NOTES

1. In 2006, Russia was the world's second largest oil producer after Saudi Arabia. In gas, it is the undisputed world leader with proven reserves almost double to those of Iran which enjoys a second position.
2. As per Two-Plus Four Treaty signed between George Bush Sr. and Gorbachev in 1990, the US had pledged not to station foreign troops and nuclear weapons in East Europe. In violation of treaty, the NATO systematically integrated 10 members from the former socialist bloc in East Europe.
3. There is American proposal to construct new missile bases in the Czech Republic and Poland under the broad spectrum of NMD.
4. The NATO conducted its first-ever military exercise in the Black Sea with Ukraine in July 2008. Ten NATO warships including US Coast Guard Cutter, Dallas, have been stationed in Black Sea and are in close watch over Russia's Black Sea Fleet.
5. The pipeline is called Trans-Baltic Pipeline. After the completion of the project, the Germany can import 80 percent of its gas requirements from Russia. Another deal with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan will allow Russia to pipe natural gas to Germany under the Baltic Sea.
6. The Colour revolution is a term used to describe movements that developed in post-communist societies in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia against "corrupt" and/or "authoritarian" governments and to advocate democracy. These movements all adopted a specific colour or flower as their symbol. So far these movements have been seen in Yugoslavia (especially Serbia's Bulldozer Revolution of 2000), in Georgia's Rose Revolution (2003), in Ukraine's Orange Revolution (2004), and Kyrgyzstan's Tulip Revolution (2005). Moscow saw all these revolutions had been engineered by anti-Russian plots of CIA, acting through democracy promoting NGOs. More specifically, the US has sought to break up the Russia-led CIS by promoting a rival pro-western organisation of former Soviet Republics- GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Moldova).

RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA:  
CAN IT BE RESET?

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7. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline takes oil from the Caspian Sea across Azerbaijan, whereby it crosses Georgia then on to the Black Sea, where the oil is carried to Western Europe and the rest of the world.
8. There is growing military assistance to Georgia by the US and Israel. In July 2008, the US Department of Defense funded a military exercise with Georgia. In the last five years US has invested over \$180 million in the Georgian military sector apart from training to its army personnels. Besides purchasing weapons and electric warfare system and sharing intelligence, Georgia today has 1,000 military advisers from Israel security companies. More significantly, with the support of US and Israel, Georgia has increased defense budget 30 times more in recent years.
9. Dmitry Medvedev conceptualised Russia's war with Georgia as Russia's 9/11
10. The stability-2008 involved 47,000 troops and 7,300 pieces of heavy war gear, including aircraft, ships and nuclear missiles.
11. Tartus is strategic point where Russia could foil US attempt to attack Iran and Syria. It will be a great set back to American NMD proposal and attack against "Rogue States"
12. The SCO consists of Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. India and Iran have the Observer Status. Iran has stepped up its bid to gain full membership in the SCO, and SCO blocks Washington's bid to get an observer status in the SCO.
13. The CSTO is a defense and security treaty of Russia, Armenia, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and is regarded as Warsaw Pact II. Iran, the "rogue" state of the US list, is aspirant for its membership, and the organisation is considering the proposal.
14. Peace Mission 2007 is a pressure tactic of SCO to its two-year-old demand for Washington to set a timeline for the withdrawal of its military forces from central Asia.
15. The Six- day joint naval exercise, involving 25 warships from US, Australia, India and Japan aimed at countering piracy and terrorism but in reality the world is now locked in a strategic conflict between US on one side and China and Russia in another side.

RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA:  
CAN IT BE RESET?

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RUSSIA-US RELATIONSHIP IN THE POST-COLD WAR ERA:  
CAN IT BE RESET?

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