

U.S., Russia Can Build on "Cold Peace"

By Stanley A. Weiss

WASHINGTON—To watch senior American and Russian officials in Moscow recently, it's clear that U.S.-Russian ties—once seen as a budding strategic partnership—now exhibit all the frustrations and finger-pointing of a dysfunctional relationship.

After keeping his guests—Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Defense Secretary Robert Gates—waiting for some 40 minutes, Russian President Vladimir Putin railed against Washington for "forcing" its policies on Eastern Europe and sarcastically suggested that a planned U.S. missile defense system was feasible "somewhere on the moon".

Despite Gates' reassurance that the 10-interceptor system would have "no impact" on Russia's massive nuclear arsenal, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov warned that Moscow would "neutralize this threat," evoking previous Russian threats to target its nuclear weapons against system sites in Poland and the Czech Republic.

Moscow's recent decision to resume Cold War-style bombing patrols is "something that belongs in another era," said Rice, who called for "countervailing institutions" to balance the autocratic Russian president.

While Rice accused Iran of "lying" about its nuclear ambitions, Lavrov warned against "unilateral" (read "American") actions against Tehran, which Putin this month became the first Kremlin leader to visit since Josef Stalin in 1943.

But Russia and the U.S. have too much at stake to let their big chill harden into a new cold war. Yet, as they grow apart with different priorities—including Putin's new scheme to retain power as prime minister—a genuine reconciliation is unlikely any time soon. How, then, to make the best of this cold peace?

Going forward, Moscow and Washington should remember that, in many ways, they are made for each other. As the two largest nuclear powers—both victims of Islamic jihadis—there is no substitute for U.S.-Russia cooperation in reducing nuclear arsenals, preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction and combating terrorism.

Washington won't succeed in curtailing nuclear programs in North Korea and Iran without Moscow. Russia won't truly succeed in diversifying its oil and gas-dependent economy, or gain membership in the World Trade Organization, without American investment and assistance.

For its part, Washington might win back some Russian hearts with a little empathy for their post-Cold War trauma. After all, how would Americans react if, having lost the Cold War, their country disintegrated, the Warsaw Pact expanded to Mexico and Russia proposed installing a missile defense system in Cuba?

"In the Russian mind, their country was flat on its back after the Cold War, and the U.S. walked all over them," says Brent Scowcroft, the national security advisor to President George H. W. Bush. "The facts are almost irrelevant. That's how Russians feel."

To avoid fueling Russian paranoia, the North Atlantic Treaty

Organization should proceed slowly—if at all—with eventual membership for former Soviet states like Ukraine and Georgia. To show Moscow that the U.S. welcomes a real economic partnership, Congress should finally repeal a Cold War relic—the Jackson-Vanik amendment, originally designed to promote Russian Jewish emigration—but which continues to block normal trade relations.

For its part, Moscow must resolve its post-communist identity crisis and accept its 21st century post-superpower status rather than cling to illusions of a 19th century empire. This includes recognizing that zero-sum security thinking—including intimidation of smaller neighbors from the Baltics to Georgia—ultimately leaves Russia more isolated and less secure.

Moreover, Moscow should realize that its long-term security lies with the West, not the East. Despite deepening military and trade ties with China, Russia—with its plummeting population—could find its empty Far East and Siberian border regions with China vulnerable to enduring territorial claims by Beijing.

Fortunately, a foundation of trust—however fragile—exists on which to rebuild a relationship based on mutual interests. A former U.S. aid official in Russia highlights a range of ongoing US-Russian partnerships tackling common threats, from HIV/AIDS to money laundering to human trafficking.

Most significantly, Washington and Moscow recently marked 15 years of the Cooperative Threat Reduction program—championed by U.S. Senator Richard Lugar and former senator Sam Nunn—that has destroyed or de-activated more than 10,000 Soviet-era nuclear missiles and warheads. "But even more important than the weapons we've destroyed," Nunn tells me, "is the trust that has been built between Russians and Americans—trust that can be the foundation for cooperation in other areas."

For much the same reason, there's hope in the American proposal unveiled in Moscow for a "joint regional missile defense architecture" that includes Russia and, perhaps, Russian and American military personnel at one another's missile sites. The resulting transparency and information-sharing could hasten the greatest trust-building steps of all: removing American and Russian nuclear missiles from hair-trigger alert and further reductions in nuclear arsenals, including withdrawal of U.S. nuclear forces from Europe.

Given the icy state of U.S.-Russian relations, such progress may be hard to imagine. The roots of US-Russian friction will likely remain for years to come. Russians—flush with unprecedented oil and gas profits—will seek to restore their status as a great and global power. Americans—fearful of Moscow's authoritarianism at home and assertiveness abroad—will seek to constrain Russian ambitions.

In the meantime, to paraphrase Lavrov, these two uneasy partners don't have to experience a breakthrough in their relations, they just need to avoid a breakdown so that their mutual animosity doesn't trump their mutual interests.