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Russia-U.S.: New START, Missile Defense and More

Armen Oganessian, Editor-in-Chief of International Affairs: *The year 2011 is a notable year for Russian-U.S. relations, primarily due to the completion of the ratification of the START III Treaty. What is Moscow's reaction to the U.S. resolution accompanying the ratification?*

Sergei Ryabkov: Consideration of the treaty in the Senate took a long time and that did not come as a surprise. There was only a certain measure of concern when some U.S. politicians, including current senators, sought not only to interpret anew some of the treaty provisions but also to amend its text. Fortunately, that did not happen and one should give credit to the Obama administration that had mobilized its entire political resources to convince those in doubt and opponents about the importance of the document and its necessity from the point of view of U.S. national security interests. Significant forces were involved in that work: former U.S. state secretaries, secretaries of defense, and national security advisers. Moreover, not only from Democratic but also from Republican administrations.

In the end, the treaty was ratified but at the same time a resolution was adopted containing a number of definitions and interpretations of what the treaty is about and how the administration should implement it. Far from everything in that resolution is acceptable to us. An attempt was made, if not to rewrite the text, then to establish some boundaries for work on issues that were the most complex and difficult during the process of the document's harmonization. That situation attracted considerable attention in Moscow, significant analytical work was conducted, State Duma deputies were sending queries to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and we were making comments and offering our considerations on how all of that should be regarded.

Q: But has the text of treaty remained intact? Can it be eroded by the U.S. Senate resolution?

A: It cannot. Had the Americans – based on their own understanding of the bounds of the permissible from the point of view of international law and their national legislation – taken the path of altering the text, that would have been, essentially, a death sentence for the document as such. The treaty was born at the cost of very serious efforts on both sides – it is a fine compromise, a carefully thought through balance of mutual, I repeat, mutual concessions. It took months of negotiations on different levels to formulate some of the treaty provisions. That includes the presidential level, which is without a precedent. So it was just unthinkable that the text of the treaty should be reviewed and altered. That did not happen and the treaty remained intact; it will be carried out in accordance with all of its provisions, protocols and appendices.

This is a serious result that enabled the Russian side – at the level of the Russian president and foreign minister – to make a positive assessment of the U.S. senators' decision immediately after the Senate passed its ratification resolution. Now it is the matter of interpretation because the text contains some wording that is open to interpretation. But it is precisely the essence of diplomacy to move further on the basis of what has been achieved. There can be different interpretations but it is important simply to search for a common denominator on these disputable matters.

Q: What was the reaction from our MPs?

A: There were probably about a dozen issues that provoked some reaction on the part of our deputies. To start off with the preamble: There is a well-known reference there to an interconnection between strategic offensive and strategic defensive weapons. The presence of that link in the text of the treaty was an absolute prerequisite on our part, a condition for the completion of the work on the document, in the absence of which the treaty would simply not have materialized. In the text of the U.S. resolution, the senators attempted to call into question the legally binding nature of this link. Such attempts require a response.

The treaty is a single whole: It cannot be divided and all of its elements are legally binding.

There is also the prospect of the creation of strategic offensive non-nuclear weapons. While the work on the document was in progress the Russian side kept stressing that strategic offensive weapons with conventional, not nuclear warheads are a highly destabilizing type of weapons. It is impossible, at a distance of 5,000 to 10,000 kilometers, to determine what kind of warhead is carried by an intercontinental ballistic missile. However, the senators, essentially, called for an unrestrained, unlimited development of these systems.

The same applies to the deployment of a U.S. missile defense system on a global scale, and this is also laid down as a condition for the implementation of the START Treaty. For example, there are requirements concerning the start of negotiations with the Russian Federation on tactical, i.e., pre-strategic, nuclear weapons, within a year of the treaty entering into force. This is not a subject matter of the treaty and the appearance of corresponding wording in the text of the US ratification resolution calls for a response. In

short, there will be different interpretations on these and other issues with regard to where we are in dialogue with the United States and most importantly, in what direction we should move. Counter-interpretations are possible, to counterbalance U.S. unilateral approaches.

Q: Would it be right to say that in 2010 our countries managed to improve our relations greatly and move to constructive dialogue and cooperation?

A: I can say this unequivocally: Yes, we have managed to improve our relations. But as to how fundamental these improvements are, this issue requires a separate discussion. I do not think that we have passed the stage of sustained positive dynamics in our relations. In the second half of 2010, situations often evolved where we were confronted with recurrences of former U.S. approaches toward Russia. That was also linked to the attempts to call into question the political outcome of the Caucasus crisis in 2008 and reverse what could no longer be changed – with regard to the establishment of two independent states in that region. We argued with the Americans in the course of preparations for an OSCE summit in Astana and disputes on human rights issues continued. There is reality and it cannot simply be changed or removed by some politico-diplomatic efforts, but positive developments remained and the dynamics are generally good.

This year we have some serious tasks related to Russia's accession to the WTO. Incidentally, the U.S. administration approaches this task in a very responsible manner, understanding its importance and trying to help us. The ratification by the U.S. Congress last year of an agreement on cooperation with Russia in the peaceful use of atomic energy went almost unnoticed. We have already completed the process of putting this document into force through an exchange of official notes. For many years, the absence of such a treaty has prevented us from establishing ties in this area of cooperation with the United States that is so important in all respects, including the innovative one.

Last year, a new economic agenda was introduced in bilateral ties; there were numerous visits and contacts between U.S. venture firms and our innovation companies. Considerable interest was shown in the Skolkovo project and work is in progress on contacts between business structures on energy efficiency, new space projects, etc. In short, positive elements are growing, I would not say, snowballing but growing like a stalactite, increasing in size from week to week. Needless to say, there is still the ballast of the past and it is important to get rid of it through joint efforts; so far things are turning out well.

Q: As a result of congressional elections, President Obama lost a part of his political resource. To what extent will this situation affect his decision making?

A: In the second half of his four-year term, any American president comes up against an exacerbation of interparty struggles. This is a law of U.S. internal political life. With regard to the present administration, interparty conflicts and struggles intensified before that time. However, generally speaking, the November 2, 2010 congressional elections did not demonstrate a decisive victory by the opposition. The Republicans took control only of the lower house although they expanded somewhat their representation in the

Senate. Nevertheless, the level of confrontation in Congress after the elections has intensified. We believe that it will remain acute after both the new Senate and House of Representatives start working.

In accordance with the U.S. Constitution, the president has to cooperate very closely with Congress, especially the Senate, on foreign policy matters, particularly ties with the outside world. This includes ties with Russia and such issues as the abolition of the Jackson-Vanik amendment. It has long been discussed but no progress has been made yet. Many senators say that the issue of the abolition of the amendment as such is almost becoming a 'Senate referendum' on relations with Russia.

On domestic issues, taxes, and other matters, some compromise solutions have indeed been made. The administration adopted a centrist, balanced line. I would draw a parallel with the Bill Clinton administration, which acted in a similar way in 1994. It developed a package of economic decisions aimed at enlisting the sympathies of the political center in the United States less dependent on party affiliation and more dependent on what seemed optimal to the majority of the population. It is possible that we will see more of that in Obama's line.

Q: *Let's go back to the Jackson-Vanik amendment. To what extent is the United States ready to overcome this anachronism in Russian-U.S. relations?*

A: The administration has yet to come forward with a legislative initiative on the abolition of this amendment. We do not dramatize this circumstance. This is an issue that is at least three decades old. It should be recalled that the amendment was adopted as a reaction to the Soviet restrictions on Jewish emigration to Israel. The Soviet Union disappeared a long time ago and all those Jews who faced restrictions at that time have already left; as for Israel, we have a visa-free regime. Nevertheless, Jackson-Vanik is still alive and well, grabbing younger generations by the hands like a ghost and interfering with their work. That is indeed an American problem. Last year, I met with representatives of U.S. Jewish organizations and I know that representatives of Jewish organizations from Russia met with their U.S. partners, explaining the absurdity of this situation. However, it seems that the U.S. political machine is so organized that if there is a restrictive, essentially discriminatory amendment that is applied to our country, there will be plenty of pretexts not directly linked to the issue that brought all of that about for not abolishing this amendment. I hope that common sense will eventually prevail and that this will happen soon.

Q: *The START-III Treaty will be ratified, but what next?*

A: It will enter into force and we will need to see how it works. As for further steps, the agenda that we will discuss with the Americans includes all aspects of strategic stability. Here I would give priority to missile defense and reiterate the interconnection between strategic offensive weapons and missile defense that is recorded in the treaty. Amid the qualitative and quantitative buildup of U.S. missile defense systems, the future of the treaty as such could be uncertain. It is designed for 10 years but as for whether it will hold and whether we will have to make decisions concerning the withdrawal from the treaty – that depends on the missile defense policy that the United States will pursue.

We have plenty of topics for intensive discussion and consideration with the Americans.

On conventional weapons, we need to move further in revitalizing the control regime in Europe. This is an inherent part in the process of strengthening general security and stability as nuclear weapons in a certain sense also help rectify the imbalances in the sphere of conventional weapons. This is the approach toward the issue adopted by a large number of countries in the world.

Even during the hearings at the State Duma before the document was submitted to a plenary session we were confronted with numerous questions from our MPs as to how the U.S. document took into account the nuclear arsenals of the U.S. allies, in particular Britain and France. After all, the lower is the level of warheads and delivery vehicles permitted under the treaty, the more important the corresponding capabilities of other countries are. In other words, this becomes a key requirement for any further responsible movement down the path of nuclear arms reductions. This is a complex matter that will need a lot of working on. I am sure that we will revisit it more than once in the future.

Q: At the NATO summit in Lisbon, President D. Medvedev put forward a proposal on the creation of a joint regional missile defense system. What is the role of Russia and the United States in a future compromise on this issue and have bilateral consultations with the United States already begun?

A: Bilateral consultations with the United States on the issue never stopped. They are proceeding quite intensively along various lines. Not only the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs but our colleagues from the Defense Ministry are working actively with our U.S. partners. The concept of a Euro missile defense system, as it was laid out by the president of the Russian Federation in Lisbon, is essentially simple and should, in my opinion, be attractive to our partners. We propose establishing a single missile defense perimeter from the Atlantic to the Ural Mountains. D. Rogozin, our permanent representative to NATO, has often used a good metaphor about two knights standing with their backs to each other.

The command and control chain and the decision making mechanism – all of these issues can be discussed and resolved if there is sufficient political will. Now it is important to understand whether our partners are ready to start a discussion of such a configuration with Russia on an equal, genuine partnership basis. Assessments of missile threats and challenges do not coincide but an alternative to what our president has proposed is the creation of a NATO missile defense system based mainly on a U.S. system using some resources of the United States' NATO allies. Hence it can potentially be turned against the Russian Federation. It can be so organized as to impair Russia's strategic nuclear capability, which is, of course, in conflict with our security interests.

To reiterate, the idea is not to rush into negotiations on the specific details of the missile defense architecture – e.g., who could be in charge of that and how the information exchange will proceed. These are also very important matters and they cannot be ignored. However, at this stage it is important to understand how seriously our NATO neighbors, primarily our U.S. partners, are prepared to consider this new model.

Q: About the British and French nuclear capabilities. Can we really say today that they pose no threat to Russia?

A: We stated a long time ago – and this is recorded in official documents – that Russia and NATO do not regard each other as adversaries. The Lisbon summit of the Russia-NATO Council dotted even more “i’s” in this rather sensitive area. Intentions are one thing but potentialities are quite another. We diplomats use this logic when we conduct corresponding negotiations or consultations on such important matters. We have no plans – at least now – to create something similar to the stage-by-stage adaptive scheme for building up missile defense capabilities that was adopted in the United States and currently being implemented. What alternative can there be to the proposal put forward by President D. Medvedev? Simply react to the situation on a *fait accompli* basis?

Of course, this kind of development will do us little good and will lead to a straining of resources. Our state leaders have repeatedly warned that in the absence of progress in finding mutual understanding on missile defense, in the absence of a partnership basis for cooperation, we will simply have no other option but to build up offensive weapons. That is definitely not the kind of scenario that we would like to realize. And this is why we have declared a need for cooperation, but equal cooperation, although we cannot possibly ignore the U.S. allies’ capabilities.

Q: What role can Russia and the United States play in normalizing the situation on the Korean Peninsula? Unfortunately, it proved impossible to find a consensus within the framework of a UN Security Council session that was held on Russia’s initiative. Is there hope that Russia’s position will finally meet with understanding in Washington?

A: We are in very intensive contacts with the Americans on the situation on the Korean Peninsula along all lines, just as we are with other participants in the “six-way” negotiations. You are right in that the Russian and U.S. approaches to this problem do not always coincide. This is largely due to the allied commitments that the United States and Japan have to the Republic of Korea. But the main thing is that there is a pressing need to defuse tensions on the Korean Peninsula. Russia has made considerable efforts to avoid a new aggravation.

In the course of preparations for Security Council sessions, as well as and during the sessions, initiated by the Russian side, interaction with the Americans was very intensive. Not everything is ideal with regard to documents and concrete decisions, but this does not mean that we are disappointed. This is one example of continuous contacts and close cooperation.

Q: A question about BRIC. Sometimes it is suggested that an organization of countries so distant from another is a contrived association. Now there is also talk about South Africa joining the club. Maybe the BRIC countries are united by something other than just geographic proximity?

A: There are plenty of association formats, and it would be wrong to say that one format or another is completely inflexible. We can see this from the evolution of numerous associations, especially regional associations, in different parts of the world. Russia is a

party not only to BRIC but also RIC, without Brazil – Russia, India and China, and there is also quite an interesting and intensive agenda there. As for the BRIC group, a mere enumeration of events and activities that are conducted there shows that considerable progress has been made during a little more than two years since the first BRIC summit, which took place in Russia's Yekaterinburg.

Economically, the countries are indeed different, but all BRIC member countries have similar approaches both to reform of the Bretton Woods financial institutions and matters related to an optimal course in overcoming the consequences of the global financial and economic crisis. The BRIC group is increasingly asserting itself in the area of food security and innovation exchanges. Brazil is a country that plays a very active role in BRIC. In some areas, I would even describe that country as a driving force in our cooperation. The association's summit in Brazil last April showed how actively the Brazilian leadership works and how it values this format.

Russia welcomed the admission of the Republic of South Africa to BRIC. This important international event was made possible by the joint decision of the Russian, Brazilian, Indian and Chinese leaders. The accession by South Africa – an active participant in the G-20 and Africa's largest economic power – will not only augment the association's aggregate economic "weight" but will also help broaden possibilities for mutually beneficial practical cooperation within the BRIC framework. South Africa's accession to BRIC is in line with the basic trends of global development, including the evolution of a polycentric international system.

Q: In the past several years, many Latin American countries have displayed high activism and independence in international affairs. Were there any notable developments last year in Russian-Latin American relations? What important events are there on the 2011 agenda?

A: I will not tax your patience with figures and statistics as to how many contacts there were and what visits took place. Nevertheless, the intensity of contacts on different levels continues to grow. There were some very important visits to Russia, including the notable visit by the Venezuelan president in October. Last year, the Russian president visited Brazil and Argentina. The Russian prime minister went to Latin America, our foreign ministers are constantly in touch, and S. Lavrov made a tour of Latin America.

There is great interest in contacts on the part of those states that have been somewhat in the shadow over the past several years. These are both Central American states and countries of the Andes Community. For example, just recently a very productive meeting of a Russian-Peruvian intergovernmental commission took place. More contacts are expected with Nicaragua shortly.

A large number of documents were signed in various spheres, including economic agreements, for example, a cooperation agreement on the customs value of transit goods. A new direct container shipment line has been established between St. Petersburg and the port of Guayaquil: Not everyone has even heard about such a city in Ecuador. This shows that there is an economic underpinning – I would not say foundation, as that would be an exaggeration, but there is some basis emerging from our business contacts. This is not only interstate interaction.

I have already spoken about visa-free exchanges; there is an increasing number of agreements in this area and we are making good progress along this path. This year a series of reciprocal visits have been planned, including those linked to the continuing celebration of the bicentennial of the independence of a number of Latin American countries. We are also planning cultural activities and exhibitions of archival materials as part of that program.

Work is also in progress with ethnic Russians living in different Latin American countries and books are being published on their history. Needless to say, our Latin American partners are quite happy with the growing inflow of Russian tourists to Mexico and the Dominican Republic.

We provided substantial aid to countries in the region that were affected by different natural disasters last year: Unfortunately, there were droughts, floods, and earthquakes. You see, turning a minus into a plus is also important. This also shows that countries in that remote region are very close to us.

Q: What is your take on the situation in Afghanistan?

A: We are interested in the continuation of the stabilization process in Afghanistan. In this respect the presence of the Afghanistan International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) is a positive factor. If it was not the case, we would not have signed an agreement with NATO on direct and reverse transit of non-military shipments for the security force or bilateral agreements with the United States, Germany, Spain and other countries that are part of this coalition force. The Russian Federation is involved in many other projects aimed at improving the situation in Afghanistan: personnel training, including drug police, and the provision of assistance, including to defense and security structures in Afghanistan. All of that is a contribution to general stabilization in Afghanistan.

The common goal is that Afghanistan should as soon as possible become an independent and stable country that is no longer a source of very serious threats to us, such as drug trafficking. On the last mentioned issue, our cooperation with NATO has not been very effective with regard to our NATO partners' ability to appreciate the entire seriousness of this challenge and the need for complete mobilization of forces to deal with this threat.

Q: Russian ambassador to the UN V. Churkin has expressed concern over the fact that militants are not being eliminated in some parts of Afghanistan but are being pushed toward the Central Asian borders – that is to say, close to our own borders.

A: That is indeed a relatively new development; we are concerned about it and we are saying this openly. We regard this as a threat not only to our own security but also to the security of the Central Asian states bordering Afghanistan – our allies in the Collective Security Treaty Organization. We believe that there is still a large number of untapped opportunities. At the same time our defense, security, law enforcement and other concerned agencies are working along these lines. There are matters related to the strengthening of borders and helping our allies improve their ability to control their own borders. Finally, it is a subject for direct dialogue with the United States and other ISAF participants.