Mar 30 2010

US-Russian Relations and Disarmament

LSE Ideas

By **Sergey Radchenko**

Conclusion of a nuclear arms deal has infused US-Russian relations with a new sense of optimism reminiscent of the late 1980s amid indications that Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's bid to "reset" relations with Moscow has borne fruit, and the phantom of a new "Cold War," perceived by gloomy pundits in recent times, has faded at last. It is as if Washington and Moscow have resolved to resume their relationship from a historic point it had reached before Russia, convulsed by post-Soviet agony of defeat and impotence, spoiled America's triumphant nineties with mean barking in Eastern Europe and devious plots, hatched in partnership with China, to ruin US-led new world order. Obama and Medvedev can stand tall shoulder-to-shoulder as once Gorbachev and Reagan had stood before a dawn of new partnership, and a promising future for the world.

Yet, in some respects, recent breakthroughs in US-Russian arms negotiations bring to mind not so much the hopeful late 1980s as the sober early 1970s, when US President Richard Nixon and the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev presided over the conclusion of the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty, and the broader détente it represented for Soviet-US relations. At the time the Soviet leadership hailed détente as an outcome of US acceptance of Soviet "equality"; for Brezhnev, détente symbolized his own legitimacy as a peacemaker and a ruler of a superpower. But better relations with Washington did not constrain Soviet foreign policy. By contrast, the Soviet Union became more assertive on the international stage, supporting quasi-revolutionary movements and militant clients, especially in Africa and the Middle East. Détente also had little effect on the Kremlin's domestic struggle with dissidents of various stripes: screws were tightened, and opponents of the Soviet regime were silenced in prisons and asylums, or deported overseas.

Unfortunately, the "resetting" of US-Russian relations does not add up to a promising partnership Gorbachev and Reagan once looked forward to. There is no reason to think that the Kremlin will hold punches in the immediate neighborhood (e.g. Georgia or Ukraine) to please the Americans; by contrast, the legitimizing aura of an upbeat relationship with the United States will embolden Moscow to act with greater confidence vis-à-vis embittered foes of Russia's regional hegemony. There is no doubt, on the other hand, that whatever may transpire in US-Russian relations, the Russian leadership will ruthlessly and consistently suppress domestic dissent, which had grown considerably in the last two years in view of deteriorating economic conditions and endemic corruption.

The Obama Administration may well close their eyes to these aspects of Russia's domestic and foreign policy, and even ridicule critics for being unrealistic or moralistic, or ignoring Russia's legitimate interests. In this respect, the lessons of the early 1970s are all the more pertinent. After all, who can argue that the moral relativism of Nixon and Kissinger were exceptionally useful in the making of triangular diplomacy, which had placed the US, demoralized by the Vietnam War and economic woes, in a position to play one foe (the USSR) against the other (China). But Obama is inconsistent, for although he has been willing to push for a better relationship with Russia, come what may, he has also antagonized China by selling weapons to Taiwan and complaining about the human rights' record in the People's Republic. Triangular diplomacy of the Obama-Clinton team has not worked out so well.

Circumstances change but history repeats itself. The détente of the 1970s was followed by the Second Cold War and new lows in Soviet-US relations. The dynamic of the Kremlin's domestic and foreign policies maintains Russia on a course, which will only widen US-Russian antagonisms in the years ahead. I am not even confident that the prospects of Russia's support for the US vis-à-vis Iran and North Korea have improved significantly with the "resetting" of relations; the Kremlin will do what it has done in the last few years – look after its own interests in both regions, and these are not so much to see that the lingering problems are resolved, but that they are not resolved on US terms. In the 1970s Nixon and Kissinger pioneered the concept of "linkage": offering the prospect of better relations with the USSR in exchange for Moscow's self-imposed moderation and cooperative attitude on a range of issues important to the US. It did not exactly work then. It will not work now.

Sergey Radchenko is a lecturer in Asian-American Relations at the University of Nottingham (Chinese campus). He is based in Ningbo, China and a Fellow of the LSE IDEAS Cold War Studies Programme.

This entry was posted in Russia, The Wall. Bookmark the permalink.