

Russia and America are doomed to Remain Political Enemies

Interview with Alexei Fenenko

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Dr. Alexei Fenenko, a leading researcher at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute for International Security, in an interview with Samir Shakhbaz.

The Cold War is long gone but its legacy has an enormous influence on the current system of international relations. Although today's global security is based on such restrictive factors as various international treaties and organizations, many experts believe that a decisive role still belongs to nuclear deterrence. The growing tensions between Russia and the United States in late 2008 that could have led to unpredictable consequences made both countries reconsider their relations by declaring a "reset" policy. [Alexei Fenenko, leading research fellow at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Institute of International Security, assesses its preliminary results and also speaks on the future of U.S.-Russian relations.](#)

Samir Shakhbaz: Enough time has passed since the start of the U.S.-Russian reset policy to assess its preliminary results. Are they positive or not? Do you agree that the only visible result is cooperation on Iran?

Alexei Fenenko: Let's agree on one point: It is more difficult for Russia to develop relations with the United States than with any other country. The material and technical aspects of their bilateral relationship depend on mutual nuclear deterrence. Like it or not, we have always looked at each other through the nuclear missile sights.

However, Russia is the only country that is technically capable of annihilating the United States; China does not yet have this capability. Russia is also the only country that can theoretically wage war against the United States using comparable types of weapons.

From this point of view, Russia and the United States are doomed to remain potential adversaries. It is with this in mind that both countries develop their respective military doctrines, and the U.S. National Security Council confirmed this once again in 2010.

The U.S. national security strategy outlined the following priorities in relations with Russia: reducing strategic nuclear weapons, overcoming disagreements on missile defense, and lastly, developing economic relations with Russia.

However, it will be difficult to achieve the final objective as long as the Jackson-Vanik Amendment stands.

So, the goal of the reset policy as formulated by Joe Biden in 2009 is primarily to lower the risk of military confrontation. There was a very high probability of a confrontation in late 2008, following the war with Georgia over South Ossetia and the conflict over U.S. plans for a missile defense shield in Europe. Russia resumed flights of its strategic aviation, further increasing tensions in the U.S.-Russian relationship.

The second goal is to preserve the system of arms control, and the third goal is to develop a code of conduct for a potential conflict between Russia or the United States and other countries, so that these countries, for example Georgia, do not embroil either of the world's two biggest military powers in their conflicts.

In terms of these goals, the reset policy has so far been successful. We have reduced the risk of military confrontation, preserved the system of arms control by signing the New START treaty in Prague, and started talks on conflicts with other countries. If we do not set impossible goals for ourselves, but rather limit ourselves to these results, we can say that the reset policy is proceeding quite well.

S.S: Is Russia's stance on Iran a result of the reset policy?

A.F: The situation with Iran is much more complicated. Why has Russia traditionally provided Iran "protection", as we say? What is the essence of the Iranian problem?

In the last 15 years, the Americans have been talking about reforming the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). If Iran is prohibited from enriching uranium, this will amount to a revision of Article 4 of the NPT, which states that every non-nuclear state has the right to create a closed nuclear fuel cycle.

From here one can trace the chain of precedents, from the disarmament of Iraq, which turned out not to have weapons of mass destruction, to the prohibition of uranium enrichment in Iran.

Next on the agenda could be North Korea: the United States has proposed deactivating its nuclear facilities and destroying them under the supervision of the five-country commission.

Another target could be Pakistan, where the United States is working on plans to ensure external control of that country's nuclear weapons and to give U.S. specialists access to them.

The vague U.S.-Indian maneuvers regarding a nuclear agreement are also quite alarming.

In short, we have a set of precedents that add up to a system of forced disarmament of countries that are hostile to the United States. This does not suit Russia as a nuclear power with independent military capabilities, and could even be dangerous for it. We are aware of this threat, which is why we reject any radical revisions to the NPT.

That being said, we have no illusions about Iran. During the past seven years of the standoff, we tried to act as an intermediary in talks between Iran and the IAEA twice, in 2005 and 2007, but each time Iran rejected our mediation offer after initially accepting it. This is why we are gradually stepping aside and essentially telling Iran that it can try to settle its problems with the United States on its own, while we gradually distance ourselves from this problem.

S.S: My point is that, based on what you've said, it seems that nuclear disarmament is not an attractive option for Russia.

A.F: No, that's not the case. Nuclear disarmament is an attractive option for Russia for two reasons. First, nuclear weapons become obsolete every 15 or 20 years and need to be modernized. The Americans are in a better position to do this – they have access to uranium fields in Canada and Australia and also uranium reserves in their own country.

Russia's situation is more complicated: its nuclear arsenal is based on plutonium and so we need to regenerate fissile materials more frequently, which is also more expensive. Therefore, any cuts in strategic nuclear weapons benefit Russia.

To put it bluntly, we agree to cut weapons created in the 1980s, and we are trying to ensure that we do this jointly with the United States.

Secondly, the strategic arms reduction treaties are intended to reduce the chance of a disarming nuclear strike. Modern nuclear war doctrines differ dramatically from the doctrines of the 1950s, which implied that a first nuclear strike must annihilate the adversary's cities and infrastructure. The modern doctrines hold that the first nuclear strike must be disarming and aimed at the adversary's launch systems, forcing the country to surrender.

S.S: Another achievement of the reset policy is a compromise on missile defense systems. But is this compromise practical, or is it a temporary move that benefits the United States?

A.F: I would say that it signifies the beginning of a crisis in the reset policy. Last spring, the Obama administration drafted a "minimum deterrence" concept, which calls for a 75% reduction in strategic nuclear weapons and the extensive development of missile defense systems.

There would be a high probability of a conflict under these circumstances, because a country that is stronger militarily will be tempted to exert military pressure. This is why we need to reach a compromise on missile defense.

President Dmitry Medvedev said in Helsinki last spring that all negotiations after the signing of a New START treaty will be based on a missile defense compromise. This was added to the Prague treaty, which in itself was a major achievement because we managed to link talks on defensive and offensive weapons.

That achievement was especially important in light of the fact that since 1989 the START talks had been based on the Wyoming compromise, according to which talks on defensive and strategic offensive weapons must be held separately.

The agreement to hold such talks simultaneously implies a partial revision of the Wyoming compromise, which benefits Russia. From the signing of the New START treaty in Prague and until the Obama-Medvedev summit in Washington in late June, we actively discussed a compromise solution to the missile defense problem.

I do not think the Washington summit was successful; it caused a crisis in the reset policy. Following the talks, the United States proposed signing a declaration on cooperation in the sphere of missile defense.

We responded that we have signed seven such declarations in the last 20 years. One of them was the Moscow Declaration of 2002, according to which the United States was to consult Russia on all questions related to the deployment of missile defense systems. Others include the RAMOS program (Russian-American Observation Satellite) and the 1997 Helsinki agreement.

In other words, we have done this before. What we need now is a fundamental agreement limiting the number of interceptor missiles and their deployment areas. The Americans made it clear at the Washington summit that they would not agree to it in the next few years, which is why the reset policy is running into problems.

We simply don't know what the next step is. Even ratification of the Prague treaty could be put in question.

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