



Vladimir Orlov

ILLUSIONS NO MORE: RUSSIA-U.S. STRATEGIC  
RELATIONSHIP AFTER THE GEORGIAN CRISIS

***PIR Center's President, Editor-in-Chief of the Security Index Journal Vladimir Orlov visited the United States in fall 2008, a few weeks before the presidential elections.***

***We publish below his answers to the questions of U.S. experts and the media about the future of the U.S.-Russian strategic dialogue frozen as a result of the Georgian crisis, and about the prospects of the bilateral relations in the area of nuclear nonproliferation and disarmament under the new U.S. administration.***

**QUESTION:** Georgian crisis has immediately led to the crisis in U.S.-Russian bilateral relations, there is no doubt about that. But how grave is this crisis? Will it pass away within a few months or even weeks?

**ORLOV:** U.S. large-scale support of the Saakashvili regime, and whole U.S. behavior during the conflict in August made the relations plunge into the abyss of a grave crisis. The depth of it is unprecedented for the last two decades and can even be compared to the Cold War bilateral standoffs, e.g. the time of Soviet forces deployment in Afghanistan and the U.S. countermeasures that followed.

The implications of this crisis may be minimized, but anyway we will reap bitter fruit of it for more than weeks and months, for years.

## THE COURSE TOWARDS SEPARATION

**QUESTION:** The bilateral relations felt repeated ups and notably downs after the demise of the Soviet Union. The freezing point was the U.S. bombing of Belgrade during the Kosovo crisis. However, then and later (e.g. after the launch of the U.S. war against Iraq in 2003) strategic cooperation issues, such as WMD nonproliferation, have always succeeded to avoid victimization and have suffered less from tensions and cooling relations. They have not been hostages of the current political developments and lived their own life: the dominating principle has always been closeness and high compatibility of the U.S.-Russian interests in the area of WMD nonproliferation. Thus, the parties have followed an unwritten rule invented and adhered to by their predecessors during the Cold War.

Therefore, here comes the question whether the current bilateral crisis in the U.S.-Russian relations is really dramatic for their entire strategic architecture established in the last two decades, above all in the area of WMD nonproliferation and nuclear arms control.

**ORLOV:** There is no strategic dialogue any longer. The crisis in Georgia has ruined it. There is *strategic dumbness*, if you wish, or if we try define this gloomy situation in more optimistic terms – *strategic pause*. However, it may last long and may be cut only by strong political will on both sides.



It would not be correct to compare the current situation with the previous deterioration of relations, e.g. with the case of Kosovo.

**Firstly**, Russia of 2008 has little in common with the country ten years ago, when the Yugoslav drama was unveiling. Nowadays the state has strong economy, relies on the ideology of rising nationalism and sees no reason to set up sustainable alliances. Russia considers itself to be a country with self-reliance and an influential international actor *a priori*.

Washington is used to considering itself the hub of the universe, the magnet for various collisions and interests. There is no doubt that Russia in the early 1990s, immediately after the demise of the Soviet Union contributed to this image of America – Moscow's behavior was often humble and normally passive. But we correct our mistakes, we learn the lessons.

Not many in Washington will believe it, but for the current foreign policymakers in the Kremlin the relations with Washington are not at the top of the list – they fall behind ties with the neighbors, i.e. CIS and Europe, and even behind China. Under these circumstances, confrontation with the United States, even as worse as the new cold war, is not regarded as something critical, unacceptable, as a psychological red line that should not be crossed.

For those who are not well aware of the Russian foreign policy particularities, but who know well the U.S. policymaking, it may help to make a spoonerism. Many in the Kremlin (I use this term, even though with the high degree of simplification, to identify the people in Moscow who are involved in political decisionmaking) think of the U.S.A in the same terms as Dick Cheney thinks about Russia. Moreover, they do not hide or feel ashamed about this in Moscow and easily agree that they learn from the Americans how to behave in the modern world. Nonetheless, it is not Cheney who is very popular as a teacher, but Ronald Reagan with his operations against the Bishop regime in Grenada and Manuel Noriega in Panama. Not surprisingly these examples were mentioned by Russian ambassador to NATO Dmitry Rogozin, when he was explaining Russia's attitude towards Georgia. At the same time, while Moscow publicly condemns the United States for neglecting the international law, there is an entire generation of Russian politicians who do not trust in the international law. They find Reagan's policy of coercion, on which they were raised and defended their doctoral theses, more convincing and... efficient. Therefore, there are many in Moscow who are disappointed with the developments in the Caucasus, simply because Russia did not act to the end in the Reagan style. The latter was neither stopped by *killing* Maurice Bishop *in action* in Grenada nor by putting Noriega in the U.S. jail.

**Secondly**, the Kremlin admits that there is no trust in the U.S. leadership. This is a new situation. Even recently, while proving exacerbating differences, Moscow has always made a reservation that «we have trustworthy relations with the White House, and the dialogue, which may be difficult but honest.»

«Americans have deceived us in the confidential dialogue,» Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov was outright on August 13. He was obviously meaning Georgia and South Ossetia, but his phrase reflects the present-day mentality in the Kremlin. «Washington cannot be trusted in anything – be it Georgia and Ukraine, or missile defense and arms control.»

And I have to say bluntly – these claims are not only aimed against the current U.S. administration only, but against the U.S. policy in general.

**Thirdly**, Kremlin's perception of the United States is changing. If previously it was regarded as a key strategic partner in solving the principal issues of the international security agenda (above all, the international terrorism and WMD nonproliferation), now Washington is perceived as a major ideological and geopolitical rival of Russia. And, hence, it will allegedly and irreversibly, directly and indirectly hamper Russia's development and strengthening.

It is noteworthy that ten days before the conflict in Georgia started the Russian Foreign Ministry had provided quite specific news coverage for the arrival of the new Russian ambassador to the United States Sergey Kislyak. *Anonymous source*, who was particularly well informed about the course of the Kremlin, suddenly brought up the issue of further decrease of the U.S. role in Russia's foreign policy priorities and the need to reduce any dependence of Russia on the United States. I would like to draw your attention to this particular fact – the strategic

course is aimed at diminishing any dependence of Russia on the United States. In fact, this is dissociation with Washington, the course towards further division.

First, this anonymous source presented his vision of the U.S. domestic situation – the latter allegedly faces a coming «large-scale existential crisis.» The «source» argued, «the United States is at the edge of dramatic and painful changes. First, it will have to learn to live within its means... We [Russia] may in the future reach the moment when we can afford to stop discussing in substance only those issues that the Americans are interested in.» In fact, Moscow has analyzed the lessons learned. As soon as Washington gets preoccupied with Islamic terrorists or Iran, the Americans rush to Moscow. As soon as Russia starts to raise important questions – on Ukraine, on Georgia, on missile defense, or sets forth its own initiatives, such as prevention of arms race in outer space, the United States immediately gets bored and demonstrates little interest in any dialogue.

However, I assume that to a large extent, Moscow is also to blame for such turn of events – for a long time we allowed Washington to impose the agenda for our dialogue and mumbled about our own interests and problems (after all, we always knew what we *did not want*, but we had a little or no idea about what we *want*), so no one took us seriously.

So, according to the current interpretation of this peculiar anonymous source, Russia and the United States, according to the stance of the Foreign Ministry, are «not enemies», but «unfortunately, are not yet friends, and are less and less dependent on each other.»

Thus, the current crisis in the Russian-U.S. relations has turned out to be inevitable. If it hadn't been for Georgian aggression in South Ossetia, there would have been some other pretext – a month sooner or a month later. And unlike all previous tensions, the present-day confrontation will affect (if it has not yet affected) the entire architecture of bilateral relations, including WMD nonproliferation issues and the fate of the nuclear arsenals.

Because it is not about Georgia, and even not about Ukraine (even though it is more about Ukraine than about Georgia)... This crisis relates to the global security architecture. It was able to withstand the post-bipolar world for some time, but now the castle is shabby and will hardly last for long.

It is not in the interests of Russia to put the head in the sand, since Moscow may be buried under the ruins of this bastion.

## LA CRÓNICA DE LA BATALLA DECLARADA

**QUESTION:** You say that the current crisis in Russia-U.S. bilateral relations was inevitable. Does it mean that it was not a surprise for Moscow?

**ORLOV:** Of course, it was not unexpected! It was a surprise only for the deaf and blind or ego-centric American politicians and experts, who failed to see the signs sent by Moscow or preferred to stick to the fantasy about U.S. conducting the world orchestra. But there is no orchestra, there is no concert, nor a single conductor!

Today some of my respected U.S. colleagues ask me – why can't Moscow explain to the United States and the world the reasons for its behavior and its course of action as such? Let us not make pressure on Russia, let us not threaten it with sanctions, and let us give the Kremlin the chance to explain its position... The colleagues have good intentions by saying so. But my God, Russia has been trying to clarify its stance for nearly 18 months now. And if it sinks in further explanations, it may depreciate its own words.

He that hath ears to hear could not miss the message of Putin's speech in February 2007 in Munich. All right, let me quote it again,

«We are seeing a greater and greater disdain for the basic principles of international law. And independent legal norms are, as a matter of fact, coming increasingly closer to one state's legal system. One state and, of course, first and foremost the United States, has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?



In international relations we increasingly see the desire to resolve a given question according to so-called issues of political expediency, based on the current political climate.

And of course this is extremely dangerous. It results in the fact that no one feels safe. I want to emphasize this – no one feels safe! Because no one can feel that international law is like a stone wall that will protect them.»

Was not it clear enough?

Now let us take my journal – the *Security Index*.

*18 months ago* in parallel to Putin's speech we published the article by the then Chief of the General Staff of the Russian Armed Forces Yury Baluevsky. And he wrote that the real military threat to Russian national security is «the U.S. military and political leadership's policy of maintaining their leadership of the world and expanding their economic, political, and military presence in regions traditionally under Russian influence» (then he goes on naming other challenges).

So the Chief of the General Staff called the U.S. course the top priority threat for Russia! I can hear the voices of my colleagues saying – but now you have a different general heading this institution... But let's stop playing into this old-fashioned Kremlinology! The *Byzantine* of decisionmaking typical of Russia in the early 1990s is over and is now more characteristic of the Bush administration rather than of the Putin-Medvedev tandem. There are discussions about the foreign policy priorities, about emphasis in the area of international security, and not always the parties can overcome the variety of opinions. But in this very case we can speak about dominating view, regardless of the political figures.

*A year ago* in my journal we published the article by Lt.-Gen. (ret.) Gennady Evstafiev, one of the most experienced experts on nonproliferation and arms control. He analyzed the treaty after the treaty, the case after the case and demonstrated the discord in U.S.-Russian positions on key strategic matters – from the CFE Treaty to the outer space. His conclusion was evident, «the international legal underpinnings of arms control—which took decades to form—has begun to grow antiquated. In many ways it no longer meets current needs.»

*Six months ago* we published the interview by Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov:

«We are concerned about the process of strategic offensive arms reduction and limitation. It is known that in 2009 the restrictions of the START Treaty will expire and, meanwhile, the United States intensifies its efforts to deploy the global missile defense system. Under such circumstances, strategic stability cannot continue to be the exclusive area of U.S.-Russian relations. The remaining bipolarity should be overcome, this sphere should open to all concerned parties.»

So all words have been said out loud, while the relations have been aggravating slowly and nearly inevitably. The parties were crawling into the crisis, could notice this, but seemingly did not undertake any efforts to prevent the emerging peril of tensions, to think anew. The Kremlin was preparing its secret diplomatic and political weapons for the potential sharp decline in relations with the United States. In the course of this process, Moscow was step by step reducing the number of issues (pivotal to the Russian national interests) that could suffer from such tensions. Curiously enough, the U.S. administration was not willing to give new impetus to relations with Russia either. As a result, sluggish summits took place between Presidents Putin and Bush in Sochi in April and Presidents Medvedev and Bush in Japan in July.

## **CUT DOWN NUCLEAR ARSENALS: INDEPENDENTLY, PERSISTENTLY, WITH DIGNITY**

**QUESTION:** Let us touch upon the issue of nuclear nonproliferation and arms control. What are the priorities of the Medvedev administration in this area now that there is a crisis in strategic relationship with the United States?

**ORLOV:** The priorities are the same as they were before the crisis. And I would like to draw your attention to this fact – for Russia, such issues as nonproliferation and disarmament are not the exclusive part of the bilateral dialogue with the United States. Disarmament agenda may change, but nonproliferation is a significant part of our interaction with the world community. So

Moscow has no reason to revise its WMD nonproliferation principles mentioned in the Russian Foreign Policy Concept that was approved by President Medvedev on July 12, 2008. Russia

- ❑ still considers its commitments under the WMD nonproliferation, arms control and disarmament treaties as key obligations aimed at maintaining and strengthening international security. As President Medvedev noted recently, even though «the nonproliferation regime we inherited is not best suited to today's tasks. But even this regime has not exhausted its positive potential»;
- ❑ «reaffirms its unflinching policy of developing multilateral foundations of nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, other weapons of mass destruction and means of their delivery»;
- ❑ «promotes the early entry into force of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty»;
- ❑ «promotes the prevention of deployment of weapons in outer space and the establishment of a system of collective response to potential missile threats on an equal basis, and opposes unilateral actions in the field of strategic anti-missile defense that are destabilizing international situation»;
- ❑ «consistently speaks for the prevention of the arms race, opposes attempts to develop and deploy destabilizing, including new types, weapons, such as low-yield nuclear warheads, non-nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles, and strategic anti-missile systems»;
- ❑ «is prepared to negotiate with all nuclear powers a reduction of strategic offensive weapons (intercontinental ballistic missiles, submarine-launched ballistic missiles as well as heavy bombers and warheads they carry) up to a minimum level sufficient to maintain strategic stability.»

For Russia it is important to have progress in nuclear nonproliferation, to succeed in preparing and conducting the 2010 NPT Review Conference. Russia is not disillusioned about this treaty and, unlike the current U.S. administration, we do not play with it in favor of our narrow interests or due to the changing political environment.

**QUESTION:** OK, a more specific question now. START I expires in a year or so. Will it be replaced with something else? Should it be extended? If yes, how can we do it? You have just said that the strategic dialogue has transformed into strategic pause.

**ORLOV:** As far as the official position is concerned, Russia is and will continue to be interested in developing legally binding agreements with the United States in the area of disarmament and arms control. Moreover, it attaches «exceptional importance» to the issue of achieving new agreement to replace START I. Russia would like to ensure the continuity of the process, to strengthen the confidence-building measures and transparency in the sphere of outer space activities and missile defense. President Medvedev recently stated very clearly that what he wants is a «legally binding treaty» and not «a declaration.»

If one gets into substance, SORT Treaty is in fact «a declaration», even though it has a legal wrapping. By the way it must have passed the Congress mainly thanks to its declarative character. I assume that in the current situation – regardless of the outcome of the presidential elections – one should not expect the U.S. ratification of real treaties on strategic matters between Russia and the United States. Hopes are vague here. An eloquent example is the decision of the Congress to reject the U.S.-Russian agreement on cooperation in peaceful nuclear energy uses – this happened in August and Georgia was used as a pretext. How can Georgia or the Caucasus in general be related to the aforementioned agreement? It seemed that Russia cooperated in good faith with the United States on the nuclear dossier of Tehran. However, one clause stipulating the treaty is followed by another one, and so on, and so on.

Does the same fate expect new START Treaty (first, it should be negotiated, of course, and there has been apparently no progress since the initial talks in Sochi in spring 2008)?

I would dare to ask an uneasy question – under these circumstances, should Russia aim at elaborating new bilateral treaty with the United States on arms control?



Due to the high unpredictability of global situation and failed attempts of strategic dialogue with Washington, Russia should abandon the years of practice of symmetric steps with the United States in the area of nuclear arms reduction.

We should keep the door open – let START I die by itself in December 2009. Let us not revive the dead. The verification mechanisms of this treaty are dear to the hearts of many negotiators who worked at START I. However, they are awkward, cumbersome and may even become useless for Russia under the new circumstances of its relations with the United States.

In general, Russia should keep its hands free as far as nuclear disarmament is concerned. It should proceed from its own interests and calculations instead of plunging into negotiations that have no prospects. Moscow should avoid the temptation of ceding to the promises which the other party cannot observe, as the life shows.

**QUESTION:** Does it mean that Russia should get back to building up strategic nuclear arsenal?

**ORLOV:** No, this would be a simplistic way of understanding my words. Russia does not need its current level of strategic nuclear arms. For military and financial reasons Moscow should be willing to reduce them step by step. Moreover, Russia should and can demonstrate its leadership in nuclear disarmament. Who said that the Georgian crisis may prevent it from doing so?

Russia can and should reach the 2010 NPT Review Conference with the declaration on gradual reduction of its strategic nuclear arms to 1,000 warheads. Does it need more to repel the threats that the country faces today? Why should Moscow always look at the United States and beg for new arms reduction treaties and endless talks?

Russia can act decisively and independently. Many states expect this step from Russia – they appreciate Moscow's new independent foreign policy course, and along with Russia they plan to be leading actors in the new international security architecture.

**QUESTION:** What about irreversibility of such nuclear arms reductions?

**ORLOV:** In the modern unpredictable world it is quite difficult to speak about irreversibility. However, Russia cannot neglect the growing trend towards nuclear disarmament. One can remember the initiative of the *Hoover Four* (which, despite some reservations, got positive response in Russian diplomatic circles), the U.K. steps and the deliberations in France. In the future Russia would like to fix the current reductions in the treaty developed by all nuclear weapon states. This could demonstrate our compliance in good faith with the NPT commitments. Probably, it would make sense to work out a schedule for our common drift to the nuclear-free world.

But we have to be honest – this process may take decades. In the next 25 years the issue of total elimination of nuclear weapons, which make the backbone of Russia's security, is not on the agenda. So, it must be the «Strategy 2050» rather than «Strategy 2020».

## **IRAN – «THE PROGRAM IS NOT RESPONDING»**

**QUESTION:** How will the Russia-U.S. crisis affect Moscow's position on the Iranian nuclear program?

**ORLOV:** Russia has its own vision of the Iranian nuclear program and it has never been dictated from Washington. For instance, many experts in Moscow believed that the fear of Tehran's nuclear bomb was exaggerated, even though they recognized the significance of the issue.

In general, we maintain a constructive dialogue with the United States on Iran. Sometimes this dialogue transformed into monologues, but in my opinion, we have always tried to listen to each other.

Let me emphasize the evolution in Russia's relations with Tehran. Russia's political leadership is disappointed with the possibilities of large-scale strategic dialogue with Iran. Despite tremendous endeavors of Moscow, the dialogue has failed and each party sticks to its position

and pursues its own interests. The Kremlin assumes that Iran was not ripe for broad geopolitical compromise with Moscow that would enable the parties to launch a serious game in the nuclear and gas spheres. As far as I know, Tehran suffers the same disillusion – it blames Moscow for the lack of desire to strike the deals.

Anyway Russia has expelled Iran out of the list of its priority partners in the region and insultingly put it in the same range as Saudi Arabia and Libya. This makes a sharp contrast with the rapidly expanding strategic partnership with Turkey which has good long-term prospects.

Such turn of events could create new favorable terms for the dialogue with the United States on Iran. Nonetheless, the recent months have indicated little or no progress in such dialogue – it has not been intensified and on the contrary has been dying, just like the UN Security Council resolutions.

If John McCain is elected in the United States, I can see no future for the revival of the Russia-U.S. dialogue on Iran. If Barack Obama is elected, there may be more positive outcome. Russia and the United States could make a review of bilateral talks on Iran and develop a new common approach.

Such attitude would mean the initiation of a direct dialogue between Iran and the United States, including the issues of security assurances to Tehran and normalization of U.S.-Iranian relations, Iran's right to uranium enrichment but its own voluntary moratorium on enrichment or limitation of such enrichment, and the maximum application of the IAEA mechanisms to control the situation in Iran.

### «MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE» OR «HAPPY DIVORCE»

**QUESTION:** Now we have eventually reached the topic of the U.S. elections – otherwise one may presume that the November factor does not exist in the Russia-U.S. relations...

**ORLOV:** Yes, it would be strange to pretend that the outcome of the November elections is not taken into account. Since I represent an NGO, I can afford to call a spade a spade – the Kremlin looks at Obama, but is getting ready for McCain. Such tactics is logical – be prepared for the worst. This approach explains some Russia's steps on the international arena this fall. So winter is coming.

Certainly, even the election of McCain does not shut the window of opportunity for the bilateral dialogue. The time will pass, the dust will settle... But I suspect that the agenda for bilateral debate on nonproliferation and arms control has been brought to minimum. And there will be no time or desire for multilateral forums. Then there is no doubt that Russia will continue to pursue the current course of diminishing interdependence, will play its own game without taking into account the United States.

If Obama comes to power, it depends. The most optimistic scenario implies the cumulative effect of young presidents. Putin may step aside and give Medvedev the chance to play a leading part. Common interests, technological advancement, lack of bias and confidence in the effectiveness of multilateral diplomatic mechanisms – all this may facilitate the rapprochement of the two presidents. And then the bilateral agenda may be enriched with the resumption of strategic dialogue, which may gain new momentum.

Joint work is needed at

- new pan-European security mechanisms;
- revival of the Conference on Disarmament in Geneva
- CTBT's entry into force;
- ensuring the success of the 2010 NPT Review Conference;
- new cooperative approach towards nuclear India;
- new joint approach towards Iran;



- ❑ ratification and implementation of the 123 Agreement
- ❑ possible extension of START I;
- ❑ international agreement on curbing missile proliferation.

All these are the most evident issues for such interaction.

In parallel, the parliamentarians should foster their foreign policy and defense dialogue.

One should realize that even under such optimistic conditions, the resumption of the dialogue may take no less than one year, taking into account the current damage. Therefore, the parties may then fail to solve a number of issues, such as the extension of START I, even if they both follow this course.

Many in Moscow read with satisfaction an article appeared in Washington Post and written by Henry Kissinger and George Shultz. It contains a few policy recommendations to the next administration (obviously, both men would prefer to address it to Barack Obama). Two of them are critically important. One is general and the other is more specific. First of all: «do not isolate Russia». Secondly: use the Sochi April 2008 bilateral document as a road map to deal with the long-term requirements of world order, including such subjects as nonproliferation, Iran, energy, methods to defuse the impact of the anti-ballistic missile deployment in Eastern Europe and a possible linking of some American and Russian anti-ballistic missile defense systems. «The two countries possess over 90 percent of the nuclear weapons in the world. Their cooperation is imperative if proliferation is to be stopped. Climate change and energy equally demand a cooperative global approach. We must not be diverted from these tasks by an avoidable policy of confrontation», write Kissinger and Schultz.

Another positive signal – *business as usual* – was sent from Vienna when Secretary of Energy Bodman and his counterpart Head of *Rosatom* Kiriyenko sat to discuss peaceful nuclear cooperation as if there had been no August war in the Caucasus.

It is important, however, to be free from illusions. Obviously, the positive program of action is needed and is crucial. It should be ready and should wait for the right moment. Moreover, it is important to benefit from the change of command in Washington and the first year of the new U.S. administration. At the same time, the current international context makes the implementation of such program of action nearly impossible.

And it is not the matter of personalities, i.e. appointments made by Obama after the elections – albeit one would agree that Richard Holbrooke and Sam Nunn would make two different Secretaries of State.

The problem is that a large number of influential people in Moscow will not regret if such strategic pause lasts for years. The ship drifts quickly from the harbor of cooperation and cannot be easily returned into the bay.

There are those who (like Senator Mikhail Margelov) continue to speak about the marriage of convenience as the only possible strategic course for Russia with respect to the United States. One can hear strong voices about importance of *marriage of convenience* approach coming from the Russian business community.

The alternative to this position is not a new Cold War or a new confrontation with the U.S. The alternative is separation.

Meanwhile some members of the Obama team who are positive about Russia set forth the concept of «skeptical engagement with Russia as the best course». They expect the applause, but get a cold response from Moscow – «Happy divorce will be the best course», i.e. it is better to get a divorce now than continue the agony and quarrel later. So the parties will be happy apart.

One would agree that the eventual discord of the two great powers possessing the largest amount of nuclear warheads should be avoided, even if such high price as *strategic dumbness* is to be paid.

