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China wary of US-Russia nuclear embrace

By M K Bhadrakumar
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United States President Barack Obama is about to pull off his biggest foreign policy achievement thus far as a perfect twin to the historic healthcare reform bill passed this week.

Obama was expected to pick up his "hotline" to his Russian counterpart Dmitry Medvedev on Friday to okay the first arms control agreement of the post-Cold War era. The "reset" of US-Russia ties is under way, which is no mean achievement considering the army of cold warriors in Washington, including within Obama's administration.

However, at this historic point in contemporary world politics, such an arms control deal needs to be more than a bilateral Russian-American affair. Moscow had a hugely important visitor this week - China's Vice President Xi Jinping, who is widely regarded as the main candidate to succeed President Hu Jintao as the secretary general of the Chinese Communist Party at the 18th Party Congress in 2012.

The new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) agreement heralds an uncertain phase in the complex US-Russia-China equation, and Beijing will watch closely because China's rise could well be a leitmotif of the US maneuvering to "reset" ties with Russia.

In a resonant statement in Moscow on Tuesday, Xi all but suggested a Sino-Russian alliance. "Russia and China must become strategic props for each other in the future on all questions which have a strategic interest for Russia," Xi said.

Obama-Medvedev tandem

Xi's five-day visit to Moscow took place against the backdrop of tortuous START negotiations in Geneva that had lasted months finally yielding a deal, while Sino-American ties have run into rough weather over a spat over the value of the yuan exchange rate. The latter is "locking China and the US in a wrangle ... in which confrontational actions seem to be brewing," the China's People's Daily observed in a commentary on Wednesday.

Both Obama and Medvedev are keen on a START deal. For Obama, the new treaty is a foreign policy milestone that builds momentum for the April 12 "nuclear summit" he will be hosting in Washington. It also opens a pathway to a more ambitious round of arms cuts later, which taken together could be a defining legacy of his presidency.

Two, if Obama gets the "reset" started in the US's troubled relationship with Russia, this would not only ease tensions that accrued during the George W Bush era but also gain leverage to influence the Russian position on vital issues of foreign policy such as the Iran nuclear issue, terrorism, Middle East, energy - and most importantly - China's rise.

Medvedev's is equally in need of an "achievement" politically, and nothing enhances his cultivated image as the reformist in the Kremlin than being seen as capable of making a difference to Russia's ties with the West. Medvedev has squarely placed himself in the limelight for the theatrical nuclear roadshow slated for April 12.

The Kremlin overruled the Russian military's advice that Moscow ought to insist on any new arms pact specifically restricting American plans for a missile defense system based in Europe. Under the new pact, according to media sources privy to the negotiations, each side would have to cut its deployed strategic warheads by one-third to 1,550, while the number of launchers would be halved to 800 and number of nuclear-armed missiles and heavy bombers would be capped at 700 each.

There is no provision limiting missile defense programs as such, except a broad non-binding recognition of the relationship between offensive weapons and missile defense. The Kremlin seems to have accepted that it is not conceivable that parameters of anti-ballistic missile systems could be put into a treaty dealing with strategic offensive arms. Obama has, for the time being at least, put on hold or terminated any major strategic ballistic missile development programs.

Meanwhile, the Kremlin weighs that theater missile defense systems deal with the potentials of countries like China, Iran or North Korea and Russia, and the US could even pool efforts in their development.

The arms pact helps project an image of Russia as the US's key interlocutor in maintaining the global strategic balance, and such an image raises its prestige in the eyes of the world although Russia is no longer a world power.

Given the economic difficulties and paucity of funds for weapon development, a de facto reduction of Russia's strategic forces has become inevitable in the near-term, whereas the US has no such problem maintaining its nuclear potential at the current level.

Moscow keenly seeks progress in Russian-American relations. The "reset" so far has been largely in atmospherics, and Moscow estimates that real progress in bilateral cooperation with the US on any sphere will be hard to expect without the START follow-on treaty.

A helping hand from China

Moscow, therefore, is a net beneficiary of the new arms reduction pact. Arguably, Russia has little choice at the moment. To quote Sergei Rogov, director of the Institute of the USA and Canada at the Russian Academy of Sciences, in a recent interview with Nezavisimaya Gazeta, the new treaty is a "dire necessity" for Russia.

He said: "The Americans have been developing extremely powerful and precise conventional weapons. They are good against practically all objects, probably save for very deep bunkers and such like. It means that these conventional weapons could be launched at targets whose elimination previously required nuclear weapons.

"And since the US is the only country possessing such [conventional] weapons, it can afford to make this noble gesture [to Moscow] and suggest reduction of nuclear weapons. By and large, Obama's administration promotes a policy that combines anti-nuclear rhetoric and modernization of nuclear weapons."

Are we seeing the end of history? Far from it. The Moscow-based Levada Center, an independent, non-governmental poll research organization, just found out that only 14% of Russians advocate the Kremlin striving for closer relations with the US, whereas 73% believe the US to be "the aggressor that is striving to bring all countries in the world under its control".

The Levada Center told Interfax news agency, "This data is evidence of support by the Russian population for the Kremlin's consistently tough position concerning the US foreign policy."

Thus, Xi's visit to Moscow came at a turning point in the US-Russia-China equation. Xi obviously intended to demonstrate that China's ties with Russia are as important for Beijing as its relations with the US. Indeed, neither Beijing nor Moscow has shown willingness to treat their relationship to be in the nature of an alliance.

But, through Xi's visit, as Vladimir Portyakov, deputy director of the Institute of Far Eastern Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences put it, "Beijing wants to deepen the climate of trust that already exists between the two countries ... It is a favorable factor for us [Russia] in geopolitical terms, and Russia may feel more confident during talks with the US and European powers."

At a time when the US is "no longer an enemy, but also not yet a friend" - to use Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov's most recent description - China's support does work as a favorable factor for Moscow. Thus, disregarding the US push to "isolate" Iran, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin recently announced Moscow's intention to commission the Bushehr nuclear power plant in Iran in August.

To be sure, while the initialing of the new START deal is just round the corner, the hard part may only be beginning, since Moscow needs to factor in that the new START deal must win US Senate ratification, which will not be easy.

Meanwhile, the rivalries in the post-Soviet republics keep simmering. In the latest eruption of Great Game rivalries in Central Asia, no sooner than Moscow dropped the idea last December to deploy a military contingent in Batken, in southern Kyrgyzstan, than Washington made a counter-offer to Bishkek to increase its own presence in the region on top of the 1,000 American military personnel already stationed at the Manas airbase.

The growing US presence in Kyrgyzstan is a cause of concern for both Moscow and Beijing. Batken is close to both the Ferghana Valley, the cradle of radical Islam in the region, and Xinjiang. Kyrgyzstan hosts a sizeable Uyghur diaspora.

Washington has been aggressively expanding its influence in Kyrgyzstan. The family-owned businesses of Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev earns more than US\$80 million annually from the Pentagon's procurement contracts for Manas base.

The tandem in the Kremlin

A Kremlin source described Xi's meeting with Putin as "extremely cordial and productive". Putin told Xi that Russia has "always supported China on most sensitive issues, including the Taiwan problem. We intend to further build relations with China on the basis of respect for our common interests".

Curiously, it may seem that Beijing readily relates to Putin, whereas Washington feels encouraged by Medvedev, the "European in the Kremlin". During last week's visit to Moscow by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Medvedev's upbeat assessment of US-Russian relations was that they "are honest and open with agreements honored".

But Putin's foreign policy aide, Yuri Ushakov, said Putin "frankly" discussed with Clinton the entire range of contentious issues - trade, missile defense, Iran and the Jackson-Vanik amendment, a Cold War-era law imposing trade restrictions on Russia.

Ushakov noted, "Putin said plainly that Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization directly depended on the political will of the US administration" (Russia applied for membership to the trade organization in 1993), and he used "interesting and expletive" words while informing Clinton of the Russian position on Georgia and Ukraine. Putin told Clinton that new UN Security Council sanctions against Iran are possible, but they may be counter-productive.

In sum, as a commentator put it, Beijing, Moscow and Washington are like "unwieldy participants in a cultural dance that none can quit without suffering real pain. The trick, however, is how to coordinate the steps so that the participants aren't tromping all over each others' feet."

The yuan exchange controversy is the latest example of this threesome waltz. China has openly

expressed the hope that Russia, which also holds large reserves of US dollars, will "take an objective approach and will support China" against pressure from Washington. There has been no official word from the Kremlin so far.