

by Sally McNamara

Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov met with President Obama at the White House this week, a privilege normally reserved for fellow heads-of-state. Moscow has reciprocated this extraordinary display of friendship by pulling out of the NATO-Russia Council meeting set for May 19, and expelling two NATO officials from their Moscow offices after NATO expelled two Russian diplomats suspected of spying.

After meeting President Obama, Minister Lavrov delivered a public speech outlining multiple Russian concerns, including deployment of U.S. missile defenses in Europe and NATO's eastern expansion. Lavrov also stated that Moscow is open for cooperation with NATO allies and regional powers on Afghanistan.

Timed to coincide with Minister Lavrov's visit, Russia's permanent representative to NATO and notorious ultra-nationalist, Dmitry Rogozin, published an op-ed in The New York Times lambasting U.S. policy on key issues, specifically NATO expansion.

Although President Obama has pledged to push the reset button to renew relations with Russia, U.S. policy towards Moscow must be based on a realistic--not rhetorical--agenda which prioritizes the NATO alliance and emphasizes the indivisibility of the transatlantic security alliance. President Obama must also make clear that the United States will not bargain away U.S. support for NATO enlargement to include Georgia and Ukraine, or missile defenses in Europe in exchange for Russian cooperation on other issues, such as its negotiations to stop Iran's nuclear program.

NATO Enlargement

In his op-ed, Ambassador Rogozin stated that "enlargement to the east is not a matter of principle for the alliance."; This is not his decision to make. Moreover, NATO expansion has been a major success story for the alliance and has played a crucial role in stabilizing and reforming large parts of Europe which, less than a decade ago, were under Soviet domination less than a decade ago. At the Strasbourg-Kehl Summit in April 2009, NATO welcomed Albania and Croatia as the 27th and 28th members of the alliance, marking a major achievement in an area relatively recently devastated by military conflict.

Withdrawing the prospect of NATO accession from aspirant countries will jeopardize the West's post-Cold War gains and betray the founding principles of NATO. Further, NATO enlargement has traditionally enjoyed strong bipartisan support in the United States, and the Obama Administration has repeatedly committed itself to upholding NATO's Open Door Policy, pledging most recently at the Strasbourg-Kehl Summit to "keeping open the door to NATO membership in accordance with Article 10 of the Washington Treaty.";

Despite the U.S. Administration's desire to reset relations with Russia, it cannot afford to bargain away the principle of NATO's eastward enlargement. The accession of Georgia and Ukraine to NATO's Membership Action Plan (MAP) gauges whether Moscow is genuinely interested in recalibrating its relationship with the United States, or if it is merely interested in accumulating policy gains from Washington.

At present, Russia continues to be in violation of the EU-brokered ceasefire agreement it signed with Georgia in August 2008, which stipulates that its military must pull back to its pre-war positions. Last week, Moscow signed 10-year agreements with South Ossetia and Abkhazia for its military to take over both of these territories' border security. President Obama must stand by the Strasbourg-Kehl Declaration he signed in April 2009, which condemns these moves by Moscow and makes it clear that NATO enlargement, specifically to include Georgia and Ukraine, is supported by the United States.

Russian Intimidation of Its Neighbors

Russia's expulsion of two NATO diplomats from Moscow came in partial response to NATO's long-planned military exercises being held in Georgia this month as well as the expulsion of two Russian diplomats from NATO Headquarters. Russia has categorically condemned the exercises, which Russian President Dmitry Medvedev describes as "an overt provocation.";

As part of NATO's Partnership for Peace program, 10 NATO members and several other non-NATO members are conducting modest, peace-keeping planning exercises in Georgia, to which Russia was invited as an observer. Russia has also objected to the EU's Eastern Partnership Summit being held in Prague this week, which aims to strengthen the EU's relations with Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus.

President Obama must confront the reality that the U.S. and Russia do not see eye-to-eye with regard to Russia's "near abroad,"; namely Russia's "zone of privileged interest"; policy, which Moscow believes entitles it to interfere, militarily and politically, in the affairs of its border states. President Obama must make it clear to the Russian Government that the United States will not turn a blind eye to Russia's intimidation of its neighbors and that it supports the expansion of democracy and free market reforms in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, as well as European efforts to diversify energy transit routes.

Missile Defense

President Obama's prevarication on the deployment of U.S. missile defenses in Europe--the "third site"; deployment of 10 interceptors in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic--has hardened Russia's objections and provoked an extreme reaction, such as President Medvedev's threat to place Iskander short range, nuclear capable ballistic missiles in the Baltic region of Kaliningrad. Ambassador Rogozin recently stated that the third site was aimed at Russia, and not Iran, a point allegedly "proven"; by U.S. support for Israel. He stated, "Let's suppose Iran develops the missile technology to hit the US, they won't even be able to build a plant before Israel destroys everything. That's why the US supports Israel, that's why Israel is there--to do the Unites States' dirty work."; Clearly, President Obama's mixed

messages--including his speech in Prague in April focusing on complete nuclear disarmament whereby missile defenses would be unnecessary--have emboldened Russian opposition and left America's European allies out in the cold.

In order to counter this trend, President Obama must commit to the third site deployment immediately and reject Russia's aggressive rhetoric. He must also re-rally previously rock-solid NATO support for the third site. At the April 2008 Bucharest Summit, President Bush rallied NATO leaders in endorsing the third site and agreeing to explore ways to link the U.S. system "with current NATO missile defence efforts...to ensure that it would be an integral part of any future NATO-wide missile defence architecture."; Third site was again supported by the alliance at the Foreign Ministers Summit in December 2008.

President Obama cannot continue to subject two of America's closest allies in Europe to this protracted indecision, while allowing Russia to increase its sphere of influence. He must support both the third site deployment and the NATO alliance's immediate exploration of an alliance-wide missile defense system.

Protecting America's Interests

Since President Obama's election in November Moscow has:

- * Threatened NATO members with offensive missile deployments;
- * Cut off energy supplies to Ukraine;
- * Had its spies allegedly caught operating at NATO headquarters;
- * Pulled out of a NATO-Russia Council meeting;
- * Expelled two NATO diplomats from Moscow; and
- * Taken military control of South Ossetia and Abkhazia's borders.

In preparation for his July visit to Moscow, President Obama must make it clear that the United States supports the extension of NATO MAP to Georgia and Ukraine, and is committed to the deployment of missile defenses in Europe so as to neutralize the Iranian nuclear threat. These are American national security interests, and it is the President's job to defend them.

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