

Reagan's ghost: Starwars stops START

Written by Eric Walberg

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Russian confidence that US President Barack Obama might represent a fundamental change in the direction of US foreign policy is fast eroding. Even pro-Western analyst Dmitri Trenin, director of the Carnegie Moscow Centre reflects, "The people who see Russia as a problem are still at the Pentagon," and he predicts that even if Obama lasts another seven years, the Russians are coming to the conclusion that "he may not be able to withstand the pressures on him."

The hope, as recently as a month ago was that a new version of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (SALT) might be successfully negotiated. But Obama's two other surges — NATO's expansion in Eastern Europe and the rush to implement the US missile defence system around the world — follow so closely the hawkish policies of his predecessors, that whatever "Atlantists" there might be in the Kremlin have been put on the defensive, so to speak.

To blame Russia for tripping up the START talks, given the facts on the ground, is nonsense. The writing for the present impasse was on the wall even before SALT I was signed. Anyone old enough can remember Reagan in the 1980s with schoolboy enthusiasm showing the media his Disneyesque coloured charts with US satellites zapping UFOs and unnamed enemy rockets.

This was the beginning of the Starwars project which effectively ended the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty Soviet Union sign in 1972 to refrain from developing blanket missile defence systems, the logic being to discourage any thought of launching the unthinkable. between the US and the

It was only Gorbachev's willingness to throw in the towel and ignore Reagan's duplicity, desperate to show some quick results of his perestroika, that allowed SALT 1 to be signed in the first place. The finishing touch came shortly after 911, when Bush II gave notice that the US was formally withdrawing from what is perhaps the most important disarmament treaty in history. Now that Russia is on its feet again, the ghost of Reagan has come back to haunt us.

Asked by a journalist just before the new year what the biggest problem was in replacing the old START treaty, Russian Prime Minister Putin said: "What is the problem? The problem is that our American partners are building an anti-missile shield and we are not building one." "The problems of missile defence and offensive arms are very closely linked. By building such an umbrella over themselves our partners," Putin said, with his trademark sarcasm, referring to the US, "could feel themselves fully secure and will do whatever they want, which upsets the

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balance.” Stating the obvious, he added, “Aggressiveness immediately increases in real politics and economics.”

Rumour has it that Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Putin disagreed over the new START treaty, with Medvedev and foreign policy advisor Sergei Prihodko inclined to ignore Starwars and sign the treaty as soon as possible to score a major foreign policy success for Medvedev. Putin and Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov, it is said, opposed rushing the deal, reminding Medvedev of Gorbachev's hasty agreement with Reagan-Bush in the late 1980s and early 1990s which upset the hard-won balance-of-power policies of Stalin through Brezhnev.

But that is unlikely, as almost any Russian will tell you in unprintable language just what he thinks of Gorbachev's follies. Medvedev would hardly want to be seen as following in these ill-starred footsteps. As his recent statements make clear, Putin is the force to reckon with on such weighty matters, and few Russians would take issue with this, as his enduring popularity shows.

So instead of a “surge” in dismantling nuclear weapons, the Russian government is reluctantly calling for more money to be spent on developing new ICBMs that cannot be disabled by US anti-missile defences. The world can only be thankful that there is some force preventing the militaristic hegemon from launching nuclear war at will.

This is not what Obama had in mind last summer when he scrapped the Bush plan to set up bases in Poland and the Czech Republic, a decision Putin called “correct and brave” at the time. But in early December, the US and Poland signed an infamous “status of forces” agreement, allowing the US to station troops in Poland for the first time, as well as, yes, an agreement to build an anti-missile defence system there, now “mobile”.

What are the Russians supposed to make of this? Just what country are these troops and missiles to protect Poland from? This move can only be taken as an insult to Russia, and is a foolish and provocative step by Poland. And just role does Obama play in this duplicity? Is he a closet peacenik who is being forced against his will to follow the policy begun by Reagan almost three decades ago?

The missiles are scheduled to arrive in Poland in a few months' time. And yet US

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Russian-watchers feign dismay at Putin's warning. "It would be a huge obstacle in the talks if Putin now says we need limits on missile defence as part of this treaty," frets Steven Pifer of the Brookings Institution. "It would be a huge setback, and it would make the treaty very hard, if not impossible, to conclude," he moans.

Vladimir Belaeff at the Global Society Institute in San Francisco notes the obliviousness in Washington to its credibility gap with Russia regarding armaments, citing "NATO's expansion eastward, non-compliance with signed treaties to control conventional armaments in Europe, assurances that American weapons delivered to Georgia would not be used offensively, and the persistence in deploying American weapons in Poland."

With Obama's diving popularity (60 per cent of Americans disapproved of his Nobel Prize) and an increasingly ornery Senate, the probability of US ratification of any treaty is not much above zero, so the Russians have nothing to lose by staking out their position to defend the Motherland and waiting for things military to further unravel in the US empire.

What the Russians are up to is well known among Western defence experts. They hailed the failed 13th test of the Bulava submarine-launched ICBM Bulava on 9 December. They were chagrined a week later when an RS-20V ICBM missile was successfully test-fired. The latter is a new version of a Soviet-era missile known in the West as the SS-18 Satan, one of the Soviet Union's most effective nuclear weapons. The Russian military grimly argue that extending the life of its Soviet-era missiles is a "cost-effective" way to preserve nuclear parity with the US.

US official response has been unimpressive, from the bizarre suggestion that Russia join NATO to the demand that Russia cut its defence and nuclear ties with Iran in exchange for more information about US Starwars plans. Putin brushed such prattle aside by challenging Obama: "Let the Americans hand over all their information on missile defence and we are ready to hand over all the information on offensive weapons systems," making no reference to any longing to join NATO or to shaft Iran.

Sadly, the present scenario is the classic arms race one: vast sums will be spent by both sides uselessly as their respective economies crumble.

But, maybe all this is a tempest in a teapot, or as the Arab saying has it, salt, which disappears

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in a drop of water. Andrei Liakhov of Withers Worldwide, London, argues that since the 1960s, “the destructive force of nuclear weapons made them the best deterrent against another global war.” That the proliferation of nuclear states since then merely reinforces this MAD (mutual assured destruction) logic. That rather than a grandiose plan targetting only US-Russian nuclear weapons, strengthening the non-proliferation treaty — which would of necessity include Israel — is the way to go.