

WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2636
October 1, 2009

A Policy Agenda for the U.S.–Russia Congressional Caucus

Ariel Cohen, Ph.D.

Last week, Congress launched the bipartisan Congressional Russia Caucus, which is chaired by Congressmen Tom Price (R–GA) and Dennis J. Kucinich (D–OH). The creation of the caucus could not be timelier, as the Obama Administration seems to have made unrequited concessions to Russia in missile defense, strategic arms talks, and the sale of Russian arms to Iran and Venezuela. Meanwhile, the U.S. said little regarding its violation of Ukrainian and Georgian sovereignty.

This paper provides a policy agenda for the U.S.–Russia Congressional Caucus that will best serve the U.S.’s vital national interests while cultivating this important relationship.

Arms Control and Missile Defense: Unilateral Concessions? Congress should cast a critical eye on the executive branch’s Russian agenda. Since January, the Administration has prioritized Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) follow-on negotiations, which it is rushing to complete before the treaty expires in December. This deadline, as well as the ratification of the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty (CTBT) by Congress, may be a key stepping stone to achieving President Obama’s unrealistic goal of a world without nuclear weapons.

In its quest to push forward the post-START treaty and secure Moscow’s help on Iran, the Administration dropped plans for missile defense in Eastern Europe, despite the U.S. Air Force’s assessment that Iran could have an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) capable of reaching the U.S. by 2015.

Both President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin pocketed the concessions, smiled, and demanded new ones. While making the U.S. look weak, America’s decision also upset the Czechs and the Poles, who worry that this concession will tacitly acknowledge Russia’s authority in what its president called the “sphere of privileged interests.”

Russia is currently in violation of existing arms control and non-proliferation promises. According to the Strategic Posture Commission, a congressional panel, Russia is “no longer in compliance with Presidential Nuclear Initiatives commitments.” Specifically, it violated the current START treaty by testing its SS-27 ICBM with multiple warheads. Additionally, Russia may be violating non-proliferation obligations vis-à-vis Iran.

Recently, the highly suspicious disappearance of the *Arctic Sea* freighter only increased concerns that Russia is failing to meet its non-proliferation promises. Sources in Moscow and leaks from Israeli press intimated that the ship was loaded with S-300 air defense missiles for Iran. In response, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu “secretly” visited Russia, apparently to discuss these illicit arms supplies and Iran.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/wm2636.cfm

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002–4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting
the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to
aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

The Iran–Venezuela Gambit. Whether President Obama’s gambit to secure Moscow’s help on Iran will succeed is highly uncertain. While the Iranian agenda is clearly separate from that of Russia, the Kremlin views Iran as a geopolitical wedge against the U.S. and its allies in the Gulf region and the Middle East.

Russia’s commercial interests in Iran span from billions in arms sales and transfer of nuclear and space technology to lucrative oil and gas contracts for state-controlled Russian companies. Therefore, Russian support for Iran’s nuclear program and arms sales are not only lucrative but reflect a geopolitical agenda that is at least 20 years old. While Medvedev did not completely rule out sanctions, Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov all but rejected the imposition of stronger sanctions on Iran.

Meanwhile, Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez recently announced that his nation will purchase dozens of Russian tanks, helicopters, and other arms for over \$2 billion, signaling growing military and strategic ties between the two countries. This anti-American and anti-democratic alliance bodes ill for both the U.S. and the Western Hemisphere.

Mounting Pressure on Georgia and Ukraine. In addition to these issues, there are broader geopolitical concerns with Obama’s foreign policy toward Russia and Eurasia. In late July, Vice President Joe Biden visited Ukraine and Georgia. The mere fact that he ventured there two weeks *after* President Obama’s visit to Moscow indicates that the White House has downgraded its relationship with these two countries.

Biden correctly rejected Russia’s claims to a 19th-century-style sphere of influence, but he fell short in addressing national security concerns for both states. This is an ominous development. In the run up to Ukrainian presidential elections in January 2010, the Kremlin has been ratcheting up the pressure on Kyiv. Moscow is building up military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and encouraging separatism in Russian-speaking parts of Ukraine. Russian interference may seriously destabilize Eastern Ukraine and attempt to detach the Crimea.

Pipeline Politics. Despite the fall in energy demand across Europe, Russia is racing to secure its

natural gas market share and bypass Ukraine, the principal transit country. It is building Nord Stream and South Stream pipeline systems. Europe may diminish its dependence on Russian gas by boosting an alternative pipeline, Nabucco, but in order to do so, it requires U.S. political support for Turkey, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan to cooperate on this mega-project.

Revision of European Security Architecture? The recent “trial balloons” floated by Obama’s geopolitical guru, Zbigniew Brzezinski, are disconcerting. In the Fall 2009 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, Brzezinski called for a treaty between NATO and the Moscow-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization as well as a joint NATO–Shanghai Cooperation Organization Council.

These steps would be tantamount to of the recognition of Russian hegemony. The Administration has already signaled that it will listen to Russian ideas about reshaping European security architecture. Such proposals should give Congress pause as Russia is obstructing the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and is seeking to drive a wedge between NATO members.

Trade and Economics. Yet U.S.–Russian relations are not hopeless. Economic ties between the two nations will expand if Russia promotes the rule of law and fights corruption. The Administration is likely to ask Congress to consider abrogating the long-promised Jackson–Vanick Amendment, which demanded free emigration of Soviet Jews, something accomplished long ago.

The lifting of Jackson–Vanick is necessary for Russia to receive Permanent Normal Trade Relations status. U.S.–Russian relations will improve if Russian society become becomes more open, transparent, and democratic.

What the Caucus Should Do. The caucus should not allow the Obama Administration to forgo core American foreign policy values and objectives with regard to Russia. Specifically, the U.S.–Russia Caucus should:

- Call to postpone the START follow-on treaty signature until the Department of Defense’s Nuclear Posture Review is finished in December 2009 so that the U.S. nuclear requirements are

clarified. The caucus should also refuse to fund reductions in the U.S. Strategic Nuclear Forces under the START follow-on treaty with Russia in fiscal year (FY) 2010 unless the President certifies to Congress that the treaty provides for sufficient mechanisms to verify compliance and does not place limitations on the U.S. ballistic missile defense systems, space capabilities, or advanced conventional weapons (Prompt Global Strike) and that adequate funds are requested for FY 2011 for nuclear modernization and increased reliability, safety, and security of the U.S. nuclear force. Congress should hold hearings that examine potential U.S. concessions to Russia in any START follow-on treaty, Russian non-compliance with existing arms-control commitments, and other important compliance issues with regard to existing commitments before the Administration signs a new treaty.

- Express support for missile defense in Poland and the Czech Republic both to protect against the Iranian threat and to bolster the relationship with U.S. NATO allies.
- Support targeted sanctions against Russian companies that sell destabilizing weapons to Iran and Venezuela. Congress should demand Moscow's cooperation on robust sanctions against Iran—including curbing gasoline imports and the cessation of all military supplies and technologies—unless Tehran agrees to accept full International Atomic Energy Agency supervision of its nuclear program. Senior Administration officials and experts should be invited to testify on this subject.
- Uphold the rights of post-Soviet states to sovereignty and territorial integrity. This includes Georgia's future reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as autonomous republics and Ukraine's territorial integrity and sovereignty, including the Crimea. Congress should initiate

hearing on these important issues and issue a Sense of Congress resolution on Russian violation of Georgian and Ukrainian sovereignty.

- Encourage the Obama Administration to work with European governments and companies to implement Nabucco, the gas pipeline connecting the Caspian reserves to Europe.
- Call on the Administration to expeditiously appoint a U.S. Ambassador to OSCE. An ambassador will help resist Russia's plans for watering down OSCE's commitment to free and fair elections and undercutting election observation procedures, including undermining the Office of Democracy and Human Rights in Warsaw. The U.S. should bolster the 2010 OSCE chairman, Kazakhstan, in its efforts to resist Russian pressure to undermine OSCE's commitment to democratic reform.
- Promote democracy, good governance, transparency, and the rule of law. In dealing with Russian counterparts, Congress should emphasize strengthening the rule of law and improvement of property rights and conduct hearings on these subjects.

A Democracy Deficit. Members of Congress should remember that their Russian counterparts suffer from a democracy deficit. Yet U.S.–Russian relations are too important to be left exclusively to President Obama and the arms-control enthusiasts. The Congressional U.S.–Russia Caucus should guard American interests while promoting an agenda that encourages security, freedom, democracy, and economic cooperation with Russia.

—Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies and International Energy Security at the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation. The author wants to thank Owen B. Graham, Research Assistant at the Davis Center, for help with this paper.