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RUSSIA: Hoping for Much, Expecting Little

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MOSCOW, Jul 3 (IPS) - U.S. President Barack Obama's visit to Russia next week is expected to bring significant but limited improvement in troubled relations between the two giants.

Obama has spoken of a good rapport with Russian President Dmitry Medvedev - while speaking of strongman and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as a leader with one foot in the past.

Sandra Fernandes, associate researcher at the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) in Brussels believes that the Obama-Medvedev summit will make particular progress on nuclear treaties.

"The controversy about nuclear armaments has been a serious factor in the deterioration in U.S.-Russian relations, but the real difficulty is the linkage between this and other security-related disputes," Fernandes told IPS.

The main issues, she said, are the U.S. project to extend missile defence in Europe, and the Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe – CFE. North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) enlargement towards the former Soviet republics Georgia and Ukraine is also influencing arms reduction talks, she said.

Russia, which has difficulties now in relying on conventional armaments, sees its nuclear deterrence as final security.

"A missile shield would deter its capacity to retaliate in a second strike, or would even destroy a first strike," said Fernandes. "If the nuclear weapon is considered the only reliable weapon, then the capacity to deter is fundamental."

The immediate issue is an extension of the Strategic Arms Reductions Treaty - START I, or on the launching of a START III with lowered new limits on the number of weapons. START II was signed in 1993, but it has not been implemented because Russia withdrew from it immediately after the U.S. withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty (ABM) in 2002.

The term "reset" has been used on a number of occasions by the Obama administration with relation to Russia-U.S. ties. In March, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presented her counterpart Sergey Lavrov with a yellow box with a large red "reset" button on it, which she asked Lavrov to push along with her.

Obama and Medvedev agreed to launch discussions at their first meeting in London in early April at the G20 summit. The first two rounds of arms reduction talks were held May 19-20 in Moscow and Jun. 1-3 in Geneva. The U.S. team of negotiators was led by Assistant Secretary of State Rose Gottemoeller, while the Russian delegation was headed by Anatoly Antonov, director of the Foreign Ministry's department of security and disarmament.

Medvedev has said that any strategic arms cuts would only be possible if the United States addresses Russia's concerns over U.S. plans for a missile shield to be based in the Czech Republic and in Poland.

The U.S. military has recently reiterated its commitment to missile defence, citing a growing threat from North Korea and Iran, but suggested that plans for a European site may change.

U.S. Defence Secretary Robert Gates has suggested that Russian facilities could be part of the missile defence system, but Russia has rejected this idea, saying there could be no partnership "in building facilities that are essentially designed to counter Russia's strategic deterrence forces."

According to a report published by the U.S. State Department in April this year, as of Jan. 1 Russia had 3,909 nuclear warheads and 814 delivery vehicles, including ground-based intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBMs), and strategic bombers. The report said the United States had 5,576 warheads and 1,198 delivery vehicles.

Russia, which proposed a new arms reduction agreement in 2005, expects the U.S. to agree to a deal that would restrict not only the number of nuclear warheads, but also place limits on delivery vehicles.

Some analysts are looking at only a limited outcome from Obama's visit. "The talks are not likely to resolve all of the controversies around the proposed new strategic arms treaty, but they should remove some obstacles and create the basis for a possible resolution of the remaining difficulties," Ted Galen Carpenter from the Washington-based Cato Institute told IPS. "The meeting should further improve the negotiating atmosphere."

Carpenter said: "It is impractical to ban all space weapons at this time, and the treaty should not attempt to do so. Even if Russia and the United States agreed to such a provision, it is not certain that China and other powers will refrain from deploying such weapons in the future." (END/2009)

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