

Putin's red line for US policies

by M.K. Bhadrakumar

Why did Moscow take such a momentous decision on Monday to scatter to the winds the sanctions regime, which was choreographed so tenaciously by the United States over many years and painstakingly assembled under the direct supervision of the White House, to drive Iran into a corner? The answer to this question will have a lot of bearing on the course of world politics in the coming several decades. (See my blog *Putin liberates Iran from sanctions*.)

Indeed, it won't do to demonize President Vladimir Putin anymore. This is a historic decision taken by the Russian leadership after much careful deliberation and planning, knowing fully well that it implies a strategic defiance of the United States and that in the downstream the international system is going to enter uncharted waters.

The fact of the matter is that the Russian decision on Monday is both 'reactive' as well as 'proactive'. First, the 'reactive part'. Some background is needed here, which is not widely known, hence the following brief explanation.

For a start, it is useful to remember that one of the most shameful episodes in Barack Obama's presidential diplomacy with the Russian leadership was the personal assurance given by him to the then Russian President Dmitry Medvedev just before the 2012 presidential election that once he got re-elected he would address Moscow's concerns over the deployment of the US' ABM system in Europe. The American side no longer talks about it but the cavalier fashion in which Obama went back on the solemn assurance once he actually got re-elected, significantly contributed to the collapse of the US-Russia "reset".

At the level of a head of state, statesmen don't behave like school children; nor is the missile defence issue a game of hide-and-seek. But Obama behaved in an abdominal way. Russia all along disputed the American contention that the ABM was directed against the so-called "rogue states" (read Iran and North Korea). Indeed, Obama himself held out an assurance to Moscow, while addressing a public gathering in Prague in 2009, that once the Iran nuclear issue got resolved the *raison d'être* of the ABM deployment in Europe would cease to be.

But now that the US-Iranian negotiations over the Iran issue have entered the home stretch and a deal is well within sight, Obama is once again suffering from loss of memory, forgetting his pledge in Prague five years ago. Washington has begun quietly shifting the goal post. Funnily enough, the US and NATO now argue with a straight face that the deployment of the ABM system in Europe (in close proximity to the Russian borders) has nothing to do with the Iran nuclear issue.

Of course, Moscow has protested in indignation. (Read the Foreign Ministry statement in Moscow last weekend.) But nowadays, Washington doesn't care for the Russian foreign ministry's viewpoint. Obama himself doesn't want to recall *tete-e-tete* with Medvedev, either .

The point is, the US intention behind the deployment of the ABM in Europe all along aimed at neutralizing Russia's missile capabilities. In short, its real purpose is to eliminate Russia's so-called "second-strike capability". The agenda here is to realize the decades-old American dream (dating back to the Cold War era) of attaining "nuclear superiority" globally and to terminate this irksome business of "global strategic balance" with Russia.

Russia perfectly well understands the US' strategic calculus factors in the plain truth that "post-Soviet" Russia still remains the only country on the planet with a thermo-nuclear capability to destroy the United States. Washington knows Russia understands its strategic calculus aiming at the weakening and dismemberment of Russia to reduce it to a second-rate power. Russia knows Washington comprehends the authenticity of the Russian fears and concerns.

To cut a long story short, Putin has decided to let Obama also get a feel of what it feels like when America's core interests and national security concerns come under danger – plainly put, if America ever comes under threat from a nuclear Iran possessing ICBM capability. Indeed, the S-300 missiles make a formidable ABM system, which severely restricts the US' strike capabilities against Iran.

To understand the full meaning of what is unfolding, we need to look ahead and that brings us to the Iran nuclear issue. Now, there is a fair chance that Obama may settle with Iran on a nuclear deal by end-June. But there is an equally good chance that he will chicken out at the last moment and may begin looking for some alibi to wriggle out of the deal due to the mounting pressure in the US from the right-wingers.

Meanwhile, there are storm clouds gathering on the horizon and it is becoming increasingly doubtful if Obama can meet the Iranian demand regarding the full repeal of the sanctions regime by July 1. Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei has point blank refused to comment on the Framework Agreement negotiated at Lausanne recently (which is already lending itself to various interpretations in Washington and Tehran) and has underscored beyond doubt that he doesn't trust the US and that Tehran will not accept any partial or conditional lifting of sanctions in response to its fulfillment of the provisions of a deal.

Now, if a deal fails to materialize by end-June, what happens next? Tehran has said that in the absence of a deal and the lifting of sanctions, it will resume the nuclear program from where it unilaterally capped it when the negotiations with the US began.

Put differently, Iran will bring on stream its latest centrifuges — the whole works, Ferdow, Arak, et al. The result will be that the much talked about "breakout time", which is the bedrock of the present deal being negotiated, could soon become irrelevant as a thing of the past. Put differently, the deal might have to be altogether re-negotiated. A Pandora's box gets opened, which will be beyond Obama's capacity to close.

In fact, the scenario is too frightful to even think about, because the US may have to resort to use force to stop Iran if a deal gets scuttled by end-June.

It is against this uncertain scenario that Russia has now begun beefing up Iran's air defence system. An American land invasion of Iran being out of the question, what Russia is doing is to make it virtually impossible for the US to browbeat, bully, frighten Iran, since any air attack is also going to be prohibitively expensive and will cost American lives in their hundreds or thousands. Simply put, Russia has ensured that the US cannot easily overpower Iran anymore.

Furthermore, from now onward, the "world powers" are no longer standing on one platform facing Iran. The coalition of "world powers" has fractured. Russia has moved out and is openly holding the Iranian hand. That makes Iran's negotiating position very strong, no matter the brave face being put on by the US state department in its initial reaction to the Kremlin's move on Monday.

Indeed, a defiant Iran can make things very rough for the US in the Middle East region, which is a region crucial to the American national security interests and global strategies. The US hegemony over the Middle East comes under challenge; Israel's security gets affected; the continuance of the US military bases in the region becomes uncertain. In short, the US may get into a Middle Eastern quagmire from which it will be difficult for it extricate itself in a conceivable future.

To be sure, the S-300 gives Obama a taste of what he has been giving the Russians in their Eurasian backyard – when he sends American troops and NATO formations to reach Russia's borders and systematically goes back on all the assurances given to the Soviet leadership under Mikhail Gorbachev. The chilling truth is that the NATO and US deployments are today much closer to the Russian borders than Hitler's panzer divisions stood in 1940.

Suffice it to say, Putin's message to Obama is direct: 'We have taken enough nonsense from you. From now onward, make no mistake, every act of yours to undermine our security will evoke a strong reaction. Not only that, we will help other countries too to stand up to your bullying. We didn't want things to come to this pass, but it is a choice you have made for us.'

The bottom line is that the U.S. will have to learn to respect Russia's legitimate concerns and cease trampling on its core interests. The US will not brook if Russia were to mess around in Mexico, a country that is not central to Russian strategies or vital interests. It's actually as simple as that. What Russia is seeking is an equal relationship — not any concessions or dole outs by America. Putin has drawn the "red line", no doubt, to remind the Obama administration that without Russia's help and cooperation, the US simply lacks the capacity to address the challenges it faces globally or to resolve issues such as the situation around Iran.