

In the Trenches of the New Cold War: The US, Russia and the great game in Eurasia

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By M K Bhadrakumar

Curiously, it had to be on the fateful day when Russia had begun brooding over former president Boris Yeltsin's final, ambivalent legacy that US Defense Secretary Robert Gates arrived on his first official visit to Moscow.

Hardly had Yeltsin, archetypal symbol of post-Soviet Russia's "Westernism", departed than Gates, one of spymaster John le Carre's "Smiley's people", arrived on a mission to let the Kremlin know that no matter Russian sensitivities, Washington was going ahead with its deployment of missile-defense systems along Russia's borders. Gates reminded the Russians how little had changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.



Gates and Putin in Moscow

Yet how different Russia is in comparison with

the Soviet Union that Gates spied on. Yeltsin was being buried in Moscow's Novodevichy Cemetery, the final resting place of Russia's heroes, beside the grave of Raisa Gorbacheva, the wife of Yeltsin's bitterest political adversary Mikhail Gorbachev - something inconceivable in the annals of Soviet history.

Gates' mission was clear-cut. The Russians must realize that in the past two decades since Gorbachev wound up the Warsaw Pact and Yeltsin unilaterally disbanded the Soviet Union, Russia never was, never could have been, and just wouldn't be accommodated in the common Western home - certainly not until the home was thoroughly refurbished with American decor, for habitation by post-modern Europeans.

The missile-defense controversy has gone beyond a mere Russian-US spat. It is assuming three distinct templates. First, profound issues of arms control have arisen, and along with that the role of nuclear weapons in security policies gets pronounced. Most certainly, the controversy relates to the United States' trans-Atlantic leadership in the post-Cold War era. And, finally, quintessentially, it is all about the United States' global dominance, of which the unfolding Great Game in the Eurasian theaters forms the salience.

The ABC of missile defense

The missile-defense controversy assumed a habitation and a name on April 18, when the US State Department released in Washington a "Fact Sheet" detailing the technical parameters of the deployments that the US is

contemplating in Poland and the Czech Republic. It said that the US is planning to field 10 long-range ground-based missile interceptors in Poland and a mid-course radar in the Czech Republic to counter the growing threat of missile attacks from the Middle East.



US Missile Interceptor

The Fact Sheet revealed that the approximate size of each interceptor missile site (in Poland) and radar site (in the Czech Republic) will be 275 hectares and 30 hectares respectively, and that US military and civilian personnel numbering 200 and 150 would be deployed in each of the interceptor sites and radar sites. It said the interceptor missiles will be stored in underground silos in Poland and each base will have facilities for electronic equipment for secure communication, missile assembly, storage, maintenance and security. "They [missiles] carry no warheads of any type, relying instead on their kinetic energy alone to collide with and destroy incoming warheads. Silos constructed for deployment of defensive interceptors are substantially smaller than

those used for offensive purposes. Any conversion would require extensive modifications, thus precluding the possibility of converting the interceptor silos for use by offensive missiles," it said.

The Fact Sheet explained that intercepts occur at very high altitudes (above the atmosphere) with the vast majority of the threat warhead and the interceptor reduced to small pieces that burn on re-entry. "A few small pieces may survive, but pose little threat to people and property. The odds of damage or injury from an intercept are very small. European interceptors would not be used for flight tests, and would only launch during an actual attack on the United States or Europe," it said.

The US statement insisted that the missile-defense system has been proved effective through repeated testing and that 15 of the last 16 flight tests were successful.

The Fact Sheet attempted to substantiate the main US arguments in the missile defense controversy, which are: (a) the European missile shield is meant to counter possible attacks from Iran or North Korea; (b) the US is puzzled by Russia's anxiety, since the rockets to be deployed in Central Europe are no match for Russia's arsenal; (c) Russia itself should be worried about the missile threat from "rogue states"; (d) the US is prepared to cooperate with Russia on missile defense; (e) the US is open to the idea of merging the missile shield with the Russian system; (f) Washington would like Moscow to take part in research and development, though it is unlikely the Russians will consider such cooperation; and (g) the US has endeavored to be "transparent" and is prepared to hold consultations with Russia to explain its case for the deployments in Central Europe.

Prima facie, the US stance sounds eminently reasonable and conciliatory. But the Russians point out that ever since December 13, 2001,

when President George W Bush announced that the US was unilaterally pulling out of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty, Washington has followed a consistent pattern of deploying along Russian borders radars capable of spotting missile launches and sending targeting data to interceptors. (The first such radar, code-named Have Stare, was stationed in Norway.)

Russia says these deployments by far predated Bush's "axis of evil" thesis or the threat perceptions of "rogue states" such as Iran. Russian experts explain that neither Iran nor North Korea could possibly have the scientific or technical capability within the next 20-30 years to develop intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) capable of reaching the US. Thus Moscow concludes that the real purpose of the US deployment is to cover the European part of Russia as far as the Urals.

Russia reacts

First Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov told The Financial Times in an interview last week, "Since there aren't, and won't be, any ICBMs [with North Korea and Iran], then against whom, against whom, is this system directed? Only against us."

And on Thursday, Russia announced that it is considering withdrawing from the Soviet-era Conventional Forces in Europe treaty, under which NATO and the Warsaw Pact agreed to reduce their conventional armed forces at the end of the Cold War. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had failed to implement the treaty, President Vladimir Putin said, and unless it did so, Russia would dump it unilaterally. Putin described the US defense plan as a "direct threat".

Moscow doubts the sincerity of US pledges to be cooperative with Russia. Ivanov said, "I see no reasons for that," referring to the logic of Russian-US cooperation in missile defense.

Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov derisively said at a press conference on Tuesday in Luxembourg, "We are against any proposal that turns Europe into a playground for someone. We do not want to play these games."

Clearly, the Russians are also not taken in by the US plea that the proposed deployments in Central Europe are modest. As prominent Russian commentator Viktor Litovkin (editor of the Russian publication Independent Military Review) put it, "It would be naive to think that Washington will limit its appetites to Poland and the Czech Republic, or to the modest potential that it is now talking about."

He continued, "Nobody can guarantee that there will not 20, then 100, or even more of them [interceptor missiles] or that they will not be replaced with their upgraded versions that are being developed in the US." Besides, Russian experts have assessed that the US may expand this system in future to include sea-based elements and space-based monitoring equipment.

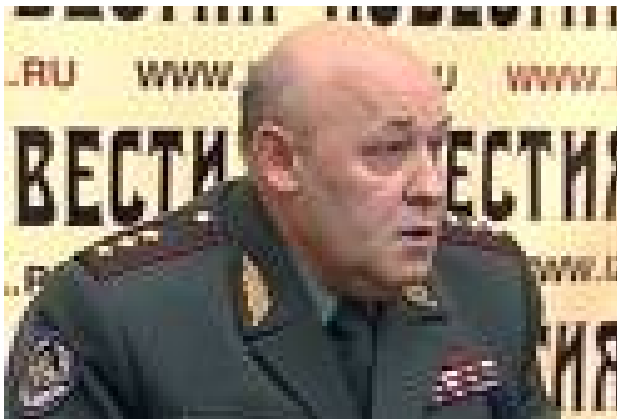
In the words of the chief of the Russian Air Force Staff, General Boris Cheltsov, the proposed US deployments have "the potential to destroy Russian strategic nuclear forces at the most vulnerable stage: the initial, ascending leg of the trajectory".

The "asymmetrical" countermeasures being debated by Russian experts in recent weeks include shortening the boost phase of Russian missiles by converting liquid-fueled missiles to solid-propellant ones; enhancing the maneuvering capacity of the missiles both in the vertical and horizontal planes; using depressed trajectories that practically never rise above the dense layers of the atmosphere; and so on.

Gates, who met with Putin on April 24, invited Moscow to cooperate on a host of issues related to the missile-defense system. In his

public comments, Gates gave a positive spin to his discussions at the Kremlin. He said he was ending his visit on a "very positive tone ... We made some real headway in clearing up some misunderstanding about the technical characteristics of the system that are of concern to the Russians."

But Russia's top brass reacted swiftly to Gates' upbeat tone, maintaining that the proposed US deployments in Central Europe are aimed at Russia and that there is hardly any scope for cooperation. The chief of the Russian General Staff, General Yury Baluyevsky, said: "The real goal [of the US deployment] is to protect [the US] from Russian and Chinese nuclear-missile potential and to create exclusive conditions for the invulnerability of the United States."



Gen. Yury Baluyevsky

He warned that Moscow will monitor the US deployments closely, and "if we see that these installations pose a threat to Russia's national security, they will be targeted by our forces. What measures we are going to use - strategic, nuclear or other - is a technical issue."

All the same, the Russian reaction has been restrained. The Kremlin seems to have a pragmatic diplomatic strategy in mind. As Putin has said, the Russian reaction may be "asymmetrical" but highly effective. Evidently, Putin is averse to getting on to a collision course with Washington. His priorities at the

moment are that he remain focused on the development of Russia's economy and on the acute social problems affecting Russia's progress. In the final year of his presidency, Putin is conscious of his political legacy.

Russian politics are increasingly revolving around the change of leadership at the Kremlin next March. Meanwhile, the US presidential campaign has begun. As Moscow would see it, traditionally, a "hardline" policy toward Russia wins more support for the US Republican Party.

Objectively speaking, Russian-US relations have no reason to deteriorate the way they did during the Cold War. The two countries are not hostile toward each other. On the contrary, they need to cooperate on a variety of issues of common concern, such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation, including the Iran and North Korea nuclear issues. Their economic ties are also increasing.

All the same, significant rifts exist in Russian-US relations and the missile-defense controversy has "plunged relations with Russia to their lowest since the end of the Cold War", to quote The Guardian. Behind the facade of the conciliatory noises during Gates' visit to Moscow, unnamed US officials accompanying the defense secretary are quoted as saying, "We're going to continue to make this effort with Russia, but we're also very clear, whether Russia cooperates with us or not is really up to Russia." The feeling in Moscow is that the US has reneged on an agreement after the collapse of the Soviet Union to abandon Cold War politics.

US rallies European support

Moscow feels disheartened to note that US diplomacy has largely succeeded in getting NATO on board. After a special meeting in Brussels on April 19 at NATO headquarters with high-level representatives from

Washington, which was followed by a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council, it was announced that NATO has a united missile-defense approach; that the territory of all member countries must be protected from missile threats; that the threat of missile attacks is real; and that the US deployments in Central Europe "would not affect the strategic balance with Russia".

Of course, beneath the veneer of unity, it appears there are differences. German Deputy Foreign Minister Gernot Erler told the Berliner Zeitung newspaper on Wednesday that at least six NATO allies, including Germany, had raised doubts about the project at the NATO meeting on April 19.

But the discussion among NATO allies is no longer between the "new" and the "old" Europeans, as Russian commentators would have us believe. The German daily Handelsblatt pointed out that the issue now is whether the planned US system can protect all of Europe or not. It added, "So far it can't ... But if the US can offer a working missile shield for a viable price that would also include southern Europe, the resistance in most European countries will fall away."

Indeed, there is a considerable body of skeptics who feel, like Philip Coyle, a weapons testing and evaluation specialist who served in the administration of US president Bill Clinton, the US missile-defense system is "like trying to hit a hole in one in golf ... [when] the hole is going 15,000 miles an hour [24,000 km/h] ... as if the hole and the green were both going 15,000 mph, the green covered with black circles, and you do not know what to aim for". Yet, Coyle admits, "If Russia were installing missile-defense systems in Canada or Cuba, we [Washington] would react much the same way. We are surrounding them and getting closer to their territorial boundaries."

On the other hand, Washington is counting on

the shift to the right in the locus of European politics. It is much to Moscow's disadvantage that Nicolas Sarkozy is on course to succeed Jacques Chirac as French president. That leaves Romano Prodi in Rome as the lone ranger from Moscow's side. Moscow would have assessed that German Chancellor Angela Merkel is already playing for time. She refuses to be pinned down on the missile-defense controversy. In essence, Merkel believes in the benefits of closer trans-Atlantic cooperation.

Der Spiegel reported last week in an exclusive report that Merkel, Bush and European Commission President Jose Manuel Barroso have agreed to set up a wide-ranging economic partnership between the European Union and the United States that "would have the aim of dismantling the non-tariff barriers to trade". The German daily revealed that a confidential draft has already been drawn up for a treaty establishing a "new trans-Atlantic economic partnership" that will be signed at the EU-US summit in Washington next week.

The rationale behind the initiative, which originated from Washington, is that Western governments must act quickly to combat the rise of China ("dark superpower") and Asia. To quote Der Spiegel, "The role NATO played in an age of military threat could be played by a trans-Atlantic free-trade zone in today's age of economic confrontation. The two economic zones - EU and the US (perhaps with the addition of Canada) - could stem the dwindling of Western market power by joining forces. Together the Europeans and the Americans are still a force to be reckoned with. Representing about 13% of the world's population and 60% of today's global economic power, they stand ready to act as producers and consumers not only of goods, but also of values." Interestingly, Merkel used her keynote speech at the World Economic Forum in January to push for closer trans-Atlantic economic links.

Clearly, Washington has reason to be confident

that the residual opposition in Europe to US missile-defense deployments, too, may prove to be nebulous. Meanwhile, Russia's relations with the EU as such have entered a difficult phase. In a recent speech, EU Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson, a highly respected voice of moderation in Europe, bemoaned that mistrust and a lack of respect in relations between the EU and Russia are at their worst since the Cold War. "Unless we comprehend our different perceptions of the landscape left behind by the last century, we risk getting the EU-Russia relationship badly wrong," he said.

The EU's blueprint of its new Central Asia strategy, to be adopted at the EU summit in June, will likely be viewed in Moscow as an unwelcome encroachment, especially given its thrust on developing energy cooperation with the region by bypassing Russian transportation routes.



Russian oil and gas routes

In immediate terms, a virtual EU-Russia standoff is building up over Kazakhstan's participation in a US\$6 billion gas-pipeline project that is an extension of the South Caucasus pipeline, linking Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, and which is expected to run from

Turkey to Austria via Bulgaria, Romania and Hungary. The 3,400-kilometer pipeline across the Caspian bypassing Russia, which is to be built from early next year so as to go on stream in 2011, will have a capacity of 30 billion cubic meters and promises to be a rival to Russian Gazprom's Blue Stream-2 (scheduled to be commissioned in 2012).

Moscow is well aware that Washington is the driving spirit behind the EU's energy policy toward Central Asia. Washington calculates that Moscow will be inexorably drawn into a standoff with the EU over the latter's increasingly proactive policies in Eurasia.

Without doubt, there are contradictory tendencies in trans-Atlantic relations. Of course, there is a degree of queasiness in Europe about US power and influence on the continent in the post-Cold War era. Much of Europe doesn't think that the US missile-defense system works, let alone that an apocalyptic Iranian threat exists. Even in Poland and the Czech Republic there is widespread public opposition to the US deployments. The major European capitals resent that Washington is negotiating bilaterally with Warsaw and Prague, as if a coherent European security and defense policy independent of NATO is never achievable for Europe.

The European sensibility watches with dismay that not only has the EU dream of a big, peaceful post-modern federation receded but the specter of new Cold War-like divisions has begun haunting Europe. Many in Europe would agree with Gorbachev when he said last week that the missile-defense controversy "is all about influence and domination".

To be sure, trans-Atlantic relations are undergoing a major transformation. Despite all the talk of kindred values and similar social systems, the US is no longer supportive of the European project of integration. True, the

Americans were at one time the promoters of the European project. But now they have developed distaste for the idea of European integration. And the Europeans remain uneasy about US "unilateralism".

On the other hand, Europe also faces an identity crisis. The Berlin Declaration, which was adopted last month on the 50th anniversary of the European Economic Community, completely overlooked the objective of the pan-European project. Translated into EU-Russia relations, all this means is that neither side seems to know what it wants from the other side. As things stand, it is highly unlikely that the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement of 1999 between the EU and Russia, which expires at the end of this year, will be extended or replaced by a new treaty.

Arms race in the making?

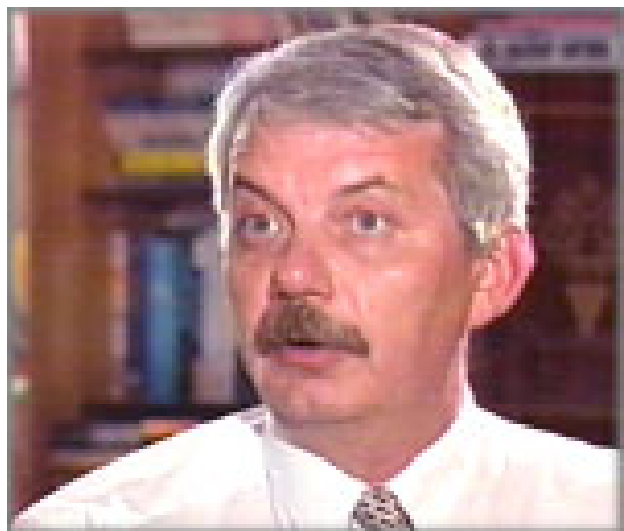
After Gates' mission to Moscow, Russian Deputy Defense Minister Sergei Kislyak warned that the controversy has the potential to create obstacles to the development of bilateral relations for a long time. "It will be a strategic irritant for years to come," he said. Defense Minister Anatoly Serdyukov went a step further: "The Russian position on this issue remains unchanged. The strategic missile defense system is a serious destabilizing factor that could have significant impact on regional and global security" (emphasis added).

Serdyukov's reference to "global security" gives an altogether different dimension to the missile-defense controversy. Russian experts feel that the deployment of the missile-defense system is the first step in a carefully thought-out US strategy toward overcoming the mutual strategic deterrence that formed the basis of Russian-US strategic stability in the Cold War era.

They estimate that Washington's unilateral

withdrawal from the 1972 ABM Treaty formed part of a series of unilateral actions in simultaneously building up the United States' offensive forces (not only nuclear but also non-nuclear precision attack systems) and active defense assets, including missile-defense systems. In short, they apprehend that the US is aiming at replacing the "balance of terror" with total military superiority.

Besides, Russian experts estimate that the Bush administration has created a selective arms-control situation. Writing in the Russian military journal *Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye*, the influential director of the USA and Canada Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences, academician Sergei Rogov, pointed out last month in a lengthy article that the Bush administration has been selectively abrogating arms-control treaties that it considers as interfering with the United States' "military organizational development".



Sergei Rogov

"But if agreements limit Moscow to a greater extent than Washington, then they continue to be in force, i.e., strategic stability based on 'mutual nuclear deterrence' is being impaired gradually, step by step," Rogov wrote. That is to say, the Bush administration has been

"building up US military superiority and weakening Russia's nuclear deterrence potential".

However, Rogov pointed out, "The deployment of space-based weapons cannot begin earlier than the second half of the next decade. On the whole, the echeloned, multi-tiered strategic missile defense system, including relatively effective ground-based, sea-based, air-based and space-based intercept assets, will take on real outlines in the 2020s, but the process of its formation most likely will drag on right up until the middle of this century. We repeat that all this will require a solution to a large number of very difficult technical problems as well as a manifold increase in funding."

Rogov noted that Moscow already has its own missile-defense system with 100 interceptor missiles, and its S-300 and S-400 air-defense assets also have specific capabilities for intercepting missiles. In other words, Moscow can draw comfort that the situation of "mutual assured destruction" will prevail for at least the next 10-15 years in Russian-US relations. Rogov argues that in the interim, instead of knee-jerk reactions or resorting to "a ruinous arms race", Russia must coolly ensure through mutually reinforcing politico-diplomatic and military-technical steps that the overall strategic balance with the US based on "mutual nuclear deterrence" is preserved.

From this perspective, Rogov proposed several measures in the nature of Russia accelerating its program for outfitting its Strategic Nuclear Forces with weapons systems capable of penetrating the US missile-defense system. He suggested that the road-mobile Topol-M ICBM be fitted with MIRVs (maneuverable re-entry vehicles). Again, Russia must concentrate on precision air-launched cruise missiles (ALCMs) capable of destroying missile-defense facilities. Russia's present fleet of Tu-95MS and Tu-160 strategic bombers and Tu-22M3 medium bombers are potentially capable of carrying

about 1,500 ALCMs. Rogov argued that measures such as these will be cost-effective insofar as mass production of ICBMs and ALCMs will cost less than US\$1 billion per year - a tiny fraction of the US expenditure in developing the missile-defense system.



Russia's TU-95MS strategic bomber

Rogov also called for an "auditing" of the arms-control agreements that Russia inherited from the Soviet era so that a cool assessment is made as to how Russia's interests will be served by the preservation of these agreements in their present form. He wrote, "Who needs such selective arms control? We will support 'mutual nuclear deterrence', playing a game without rules like the Americans, as at the height of the Cold War before 1972."

Talking to the Russian media on Thursday after Gates' talks in Moscow, Rogov said Russia and the US "are still hostages of mutual nuclear intimidation ... We are on the brink of a new 'cold war' if one looks closely at our present-day relations." He warned that unless the negative tendencies in Russian-US relations are arrested soon, "I do not rule out that at the 2008 presidential elections in the US, both Republicans and Democrats may bring forward a thesis on the need for a Russia-containment policy."

The new cold war

Moscow has repeatedly warned in the recent

period that enough is enough and that it is not prepared to be pushed around anymore. There is deep resentment over NATO's continued expansion in contravention of promises held out to Moscow that this would not happen. But ignoring Russian sensitivities on this score, Bush signed a new law on April 10 (the NATO Freedom Consolidation Act of 2007) urging admission of Albania, Croatia, Georgia, Macedonia and Ukraine into the alliance and authorizing new funding for military training and equipment for them.

Washington is also aggressively pursuing a policy of rollback of Russian influence in the former Soviet republics. On the same day that the new law on NATO expansion was signed, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told the media that Washington has "tried to make very clear to Russia ... that the days when these [Commonwealth of Independent States] states were part of the Soviet Union are gone, they're not coming back." Already by the end of 2007, Georgia is poised to start its NATO-membership program. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has said, "We expect to receive the status of an official NATO candidate in the next few months."

Again, Washington's line on the status of the breakaway Serbian province of Kosovo has hardened. Senior US officials have threatened that regardless of Russian opposition, and whether the United Nations Security Council agrees or not, Washington proposes to go ahead and recognize Kosovo's independence. There is also a distinctly familiar pattern in the sustained political turmoil in Kyrgyzstan bankrolled from Washington. The instability in Kyrgyzstan has added significance for Russia insofar as Bishkek is expected to host the next summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Moscow maintains an air of passivity but is deeply concerned. In a thinly veiled reference to the US backing for the so-called "color

revolutions", the secretary general of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, General Nikolai Bordyuzha, said in a speech in Almaty on April 19, "Today, it is not only Afghanistan that the entire post-Soviet space is concerned about. There is a problem of the export of revolutions - the problem of attempts to intentionally bring about their elements. And we can see it. Today, there are recognizable people, exporters of revolution, the so-called contemporary revolutionaries - new Che Guevaras - in the post-Soviet space."



Russia and Central Asia

The change of leadership in Turkmenistan has opened a window of opportunity for the US to make overtures to Ashgabat. Significantly, the new Turkmen leader, Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, chose Saudi Arabia for his first visit abroad. The EU has already offered the new Turkmen leadership 1.7 million euros (\$2.3 million) for undertaking a feasibility study on a trans-Caspian gas-pipeline project that would obviate the need for Turkmen gas to be exported via Russia.

The US is using the EU to curry favor with Uzbekistan and somehow let bygones be bygones. The EU is showing signs of getting down from its high horse and unilaterally dismantling the sanctions regime that it imposed on Uzbekistan after the Andizhan incidents in May 2005. Again, the US is

relentlessly working at loosening Russia's grip in the South Caucasus - Georgia, Azerbaijan and Armenia.

But the ferocity with which the US has reacted to the revival of Russian influence in Ukraine has no precedent. The Ukraine developments show that Washington is determined at any cost to surround Russia with a ring of countries that are hostile to it. Washington has assessed that, if only by subverting the constitutional processes and by discrediting the fledgling political institutions (which are actually a legacy of the "Orange Revolution") the US can bring about "regime change" in Kiev, so be it.

The present turmoil began soon after Yulia Timoshenko, the darling of the "Orange Revolution", visited Washington two months ago and was received by senior US officials, including Rice. The stakes are indeed high in Ukraine. Unless Kiev is brought back under a subservient pro-American setup, how can Ukraine possibly become a NATO member and how can US missile-defense systems be deployed on Ukrainian soil, given widespread opposition to the idea among the people of that country?

Professor Stephen Cohen, the venerable doyen of Sovietologists, recently surveyed the topsoil of the newly dug trenches in Russian-US rivalry: "Relations between Russia and the United States are very bad at present. I think we're already seeing a cold war. At least, that is America's policy on Russia. Your country [Russia] is being fairly passive. Understandably, the Kremlin doesn't want to

escalate tension again. But it isn't clear that the Kremlin is capable of preventing that. Much will depend on how NATO's relations with Ukraine and Georgia develop. This is the new front of the new Cold War."

It is appropriate that the working group set up on Thursday as a joint initiative by Putin and Bush, against the backdrop of these growing tensions, focus on relations between the two great powers, will be headed as co-chairmen by two formidable veterans of the Cold War era - Henry Kissinger and Yevgeny Primakov.

Yet the People's Daily might well have had a point when it commented last week with an acerbic tone of detachment and disdain, "The core of the US-Russian oral spat is a conflict of interests. Naturally, both countries want maximum benefits. That explains why the US supports anti-government forces within Russia, promotes 'democracy' - a one-sided wish - in foreign lands, continues to support eastern expansion of NATO, and asks for missile-defense deployment in Eastern Europe, while Russia exercises a measured US policy. It can be predicted that, facing US attacks, Russian-US ties featuring both contention and cooperation will not change in the short term."

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