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„After my election I have more flexibility”

In the short and “truly sincere” exchange between Barack Obama and Dmitry Medvedev, that the public opinion was not supposed to hear, the American President stated in hushed voice, that after successful reelection he will have “more space” when it comes to the missile defense system. This may evoke various reflections concerning the American-Russian relations and the possible scenarios of their evolution. The saddest reflection, however, pertains to the credibility of the American President, who hid his true intentions from his allies, but revealed them to Russia – which is, in general, more of a rival than an ally to the USA. The overheard fragment of the discussion of the two leaders indicates, that after reelection the old/new President Obama will find a solution to the contentious issue of the installation of a missile defense system in Europe: “On all these issues, but particularly missile defense, this, this can be solved but it’s important for him [Vladimir Putin] to give me space”, said Obama. It is hard not to get the impression, that these solutions will be suitable mainly for Moscow, but not necessarily for certain European allies, including Poland, on whose territory some element of the missile defense system were supposed to be installed (from 2018 Poland is supposed to have an *Aegis* missile battery).

Nobody denies the USA the right to communicate with Russia. What is more, it is important for the European security that the Washington gains Moscow's acceptance, if not favor, for the missile defense system in Europe. The role of the USA is most important in that process – this also cannot be questioned. The more Moscow emphasizes its threats related to the completion of the missile defense system, the more important such actions become. In November 2011, Medvedev warned, that in response to the missile defense system Russia will engage in an efficient and inexpensive armaments program. Among others, it will include the installation of *Iskander* missile batteries in the Kaliningrad region and a system assuring the destruction of the control and communication centers of the missile defense system in Europe. Even though one cannot exclude the possibility, that these threats of the Russian President were caused by internal factors – they were uttered a few days before the election to the State Duma, during the President was the leader of the governing party – United Russia, the international resonance of his words was an indisputable fact.

Especially from the perspective of the Washington, where the Obama administration treated the “resetting” of the relationship with Russia not only as an advertising slogan, but also as a real direction of the American policy. Its result – very painful for Poland – was the withdrawal in September 2009 from the original plans for the construction of the missile defense system, in which our country played a much greater role and which irritated Russia much more than the new version. On the other hand, the “resetting” of the relationship with Russia led to the signing of the START treaty in 2009, which significantly decreased the limit for American and Russian nuclear warheads. The USA's interests related to Russia also include the possibility of using the territory of this country to transport supplies for the allied forces in Afghanistan. The matters that would be difficult to solve without the help of Russia also include the Iranian nuclear program and the problem of Syria. With regard to both of these issues the position of Russia is of key importance and its veto in the Security Council may block all the efforts of the USA and other western countries, like in the case of Syria and the condemnation of the Bashar al-Asad regime.

As concerns the missile defense system, it cannot be denied that the Obama administration tried very hard to convince the Russian leaders that it is not directed against Russia. There was even a plan to create two centers, in which specialists from Russia, the USA and other NATO members could jointly analyze the dangers of missile attacks and systematically exchange information. It was also an idea of the Americans to invite Russian experts to a meeting concerning the details of the structure and functioning of the missile defense system. In other words, the full transparency of the developed system is supposed to be a factor conducive to the achievement of the Russian consent.



Even assuming that the determination of the Obama administration to complete the missile defense system plans in Europe is authentic, it is impossible to ignore certain facts. Significant cuts in the American defense budget in the coming years (within the next decade the spending on defense are to be reduced by 500 billion USD) may call the plans into question. Even if this situation is strongly hypothetical, it cannot be excluded and should definitely be taken into consideration. It might have influence on the transatlantic system, as it would mean that, during the financial crisis, the USA does not want to spend as much on the defense of Europe as it used to. Russia undoubtedly takes this factor into consideration in its calculations, assuming that the pressures from its side together with the difficulties with the American budget may shake the whole plan of the construction of the missile defense system.

In such a situation, the confidential conversation between Obama and Medvedev might be really unsettling. However, it is worth to also consider a completely different circumstance. Is it possible that the disclosure of the American President's words will turn out to be, all in all, a positive event? The reaction of the Republican Party to the Obama's statement was very harsh, suggesting that the President is ready for some unspecified concessions to Russia. Not only was Obama asked to clarify, but also it was stated, that the Congress would block all attempts to "trade" the missile defense system with Russia. The administration could react in only one way – assure, that it is determined to complete the missile defense system and that there will be a dialogue held with Russia in order to "better understand one another's position" – stated Ben Rhodes, a deputy national security advisor. Regardless of whether one believes the explanations of President Obama and the members of his administration, it is certain that the President will from now on be carefully scrutinized by the opposition and, *last but not least*, some of his European allies, which may to some degree reduce his space in relations with Russia when it comes to the missile defense system.

The perspectives for American-Russian relations still remain a subject for consideration. Even more so, because they involve certain new circumstances, such as the election of Putin for President. One should not expect any fundamental changes in the strategic approach of Russia to the USA. Something might change when it comes to their tone and style, as much as Medvedev is different from Putin. However, it cannot be excluded, that the old/new leader of the Kremlin will have more space and, at the same time, determination to act. As opposed to Medvedev, for whom Putin was an omnipotent shadow. The Americans take all that into consideration. There will be certain problems dividing the nations in their relations, but there will also be an area to act together.



The most prominent feature of the American diplomacy towards Russia is still its determination to involve it in cooperation on the international arena, as well as other important problems. The most important one being the disarmament negotiations, towards which Russia does not seem to be very enthusiastic. Another closely related issue is the very real danger resulting from the Iranian nuclear program, where there is no alternative to the cooperation of Washington and Moscow. American expects rightly assume that Russia – even though it does not support the Iranian nuclear ambitions, which may have negative consequences for it as well – claims, that it can be accepted. Just like the Americans accepted the Pakistani nuclear arsenal. Therefore, Washington will have to take a lot of effort to convince Putin to cooperate in “disarming” Iran.

It also has to be assumed, that the American administration, regardless of whether Obama will be its leader, is going to effectively perform its plan to build the missile defense system. This means persistence in convincing the Russians, that it is a precaution against potential threats from Iran or Korea, not Russia. The transparency of the system is an argument for the Russian acceptance, but it does not mean that the goal will be reached. It is hard to exclude that possibility, that Russia will continue treating the missile defense system as something to play with to gain more and on completely different field. One must hope, that the American concessions will be discussed with their allies or at least not made at their expense. Even if Barack Obama wins the presidential election again and gains more space.

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