

THE VIEW FROM MOSCOW

Q&A WITH THE DEPUTY MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION

An Interview with Sergey Ryabkov

Sergei Ryabkov is the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation. He has served the Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 1982 in Moscow and abroad. He has been head of the OSCE Unit of the Department of European Cooperation, minister counsellor of the Russian Embassy in the USA, and director of the Department of European Cooperation. Mr. Ryabkov was named Deputy Minister in 2008. As part of his duties, he chairs the Policy Steering Group and Arms Control and International Security Working Group under the U.S.–Russia Bilateral Presidential Commission set up by President’s Obama and Medvedev.

The Q&A was conducted by Johan Kharabi, the Features Editor with the *Journal of International Affairs*.

Journal: It is widely agreed upon that Russia’s relations with the United States have deteriorated in the last decade. To what factors would you attribute such a negative development?

Ryabkov: Every action taken by the government of any state is largely determined by its understanding of the country’s national interests. Quite naturally, those understandings may differ, as sometimes occurs in relations between such great world powers as the United States and Russia. This is what actually happened in the final months of the previous U.S. administration.

I can cite many factors that affected the efficiency of our cooperation at that time, ranging from political and psychological nuances of the perception of world developments to systemic disagreements as regards the choice of means and tools that can and should be used to regulate international affairs and to successfully meet emerging challenges. Our achievements could have been more impressive had we learned to hear each other better and to be more appreciative of each other’s logic.

It would be highly unfair, however, to talk about considerable deterioration or to describe our interaction with the United States in those years as purely negative. Our interaction never ceased, we maintained dialogue with regard to key international issues and managed to increase trade turnover and mutual investments, as well as to expand the general agenda of the relationship. We were indeed confronted with a number of outstanding issues. They need to be addressed, which we are trying to do with the new U.S. administration.

Journal: Has American foreign policy towards Russia changed direction under the Obama administration?

Ryabkov: Following the change of the U.S. administration, we got an opportunity to give new impetus to our relationship. Both sides felt the need to become more attentive to each other's concerns and priorities and to show greater willing-

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ness to find common ground. Presidents Medvedev and Obama have established good personal contacts. The tone of the dialogue at all levels has noticeably improved. The recently established Russia-U.S. Presidential Commission on Cooperation includes the heads of all principal government agencies of both countries who can now effectively work in direct contact with each other on defining and implementing the new bilateral agenda within their spheres of competence.

Of course, we realize that the issues on which we disagree will not magically disappear. We are convinced that there exist good prerequisites for forming common strategic views and tactical approaches in

many areas, both bilaterally and globally; however, finding mutually acceptable solutions always requires hard and painstaking work, as well as strong joint commitment. It is only possible on the condition that we can trust each other and that each side fulfills its obligations.

As for concrete achievements in the past year, I believe that the first pages of the new chapter in our cooperation were rather successful. We have already done a lot in order to reinvigorate the dialogue, to change the political atmosphere and to make progress in various fields—from negotiations on a new START agreement and advanced interaction in Afghanistan, to expanding cultural exchanges and people-to-people contacts. We have passed the initial stage of “resetting” relations. Now the task is to focus on practical implementation of the key elements of the

expanded agenda in order to move relations onto the trajectory of sustainable and gradual development.

Journal: The START agreement expired on 5 December 2009. A reduction of nuclear arsenals appears to be in the interest of both countries, yet progress on the issue has been rather sluggish. Do you think the lack of movement on this issue can be attributed to a lingering suspicion between both nations?

Ryabkov: I cannot agree with your claim that Russian-U.S. START negotiations are progressing “slowly” or in an “atmosphere of mistrust.” To the contrary, the many-year “slump” in the sphere was replaced by dynamic and constructive dialogue after the Obama administration took office. In six months we accomplished what looked impossible—most of the new full-format agreement on further strategic arms reductions and limitations has been agreed to. Only several technical problems remain to be resolved, and the text has to pass a thorough legal and linguistic verification.

Naturally, we will have to check every comma. No wonder, as the talk is about major issues of concern for national security to the parties. The new agreement has both to lay the foundation for further mutual steps in the sphere of verifiable nuclear disarmament and promote strategic stability and international security in general. It is necessary to understand that progress in negotiations is determined not by deadlines, but by the intention of both parties to conclude a viable and efficiently operating agreement. Excessive haste has nothing to do with it; however, both Russia and the United States intend to sign the new START treaty shortly.

Journal: The United States is relying on Russian support in halting Iran’s nuclear progress. It seems difficult, however, to see how the interests of Russia and the United States align on the issue of Iran. Russia has pursued a path of steady engagement with the Islamic Republic, and the country acts as an effective buffer against further NATO encroachment in the region. Do such circumstances make effective coordination of Russian-U.S. policy unattainable?

Ryabkov: You are right to say that tensions around the Iranian nuclear problem remain. Not all concerns of the international community regarding Tehran’s efforts in the nuclear sphere have been lifted. However, I would like to specifically stress that Russian and U.S. interests do coincide on this issue. We do not always agree on tactical matters, but we share a common strategic goal of achieving a mutually acceptable political and diplomatic settlement of the situation that would allow both to lift international concerns regarding the Iranian nuclear program and to

strictly comply with the lawful Iranian right for peaceful use of atomic power.

We believe negotiations are the only reasonable path that can help achieve this. We do not believe sanctions to be a panacea for the issue. The use of that instrument needs a balanced and proportional approach depending on the degree of Iranian cooperation. We are convinced that such measures, if applied, shall exclusively target non-proliferation tasks and nothing else.

Returning to our cooperation with the United States in resolving the Iranian nuclear problem, I would like to stress that cooperation became closer and more productive after the Obama administration took office. A vivid example is our common support to the IAEA-proposed scheme of withdrawing Iranian low-enriched uranium for the production of fuel for the Tehran research reactor. We are actively cooperating on all other issues to implement the understandings reached at a meeting of representatives of Iran and the six powers in Geneva on October 1.

Journal: It is no secret that the interest of Ukraine's former leadership in NATO membership was not well-received in Moscow. Has NATO expansion damaged Russia's relations with the West? Do you feel that the United States has made a mistake in pressing for the organization's expansion?

Ryabkov: We have heard from western politicians of various generations a lot of rhetoric regarding NATO's "open door" policy, which allegedly poses no threat to the security of Russia. But let's look at this in an unprejudiced way—what were the results of this rhetoric and NATO expansion?

Inertia-driven NATO expansion has damaged the climate of our relationship. There were many reasons for that, including the intentions of several new alliance members to resolve purely bilateral issues with Russia through Brussels. Phobias and phantom historical grudges brought in by new alliance members create additional obstacles impeding a build-up of real partner-like interaction between Russia and NATO. The alliance is not a humanitarian organization, but a military-political bloc. It does not operate in a vacuum. NATO expansion implies "military cultivation" of newcomers' territories, e.g. air patrols, modernization of airfields, and other infrastructure objects. The talk is about new military capabilities right across our borders. We simply cannot ignore this.

Our experience has convinced us that in this issue we can abide only by the logic of real potential, not of intentions. As you may know, Russia has recently drafted the National Security Strategy. Specialists in different fields—academics, experts, and political scientists—were engaged in this process. To be quite blunt, not all of them were ready to unconditionally share the optimism voiced in Moscow by

Anders Fogh Rasmussen that we can close our eyes on military-political processes in the West as they do not trigger negative consequences for Russia's security.

It is difficult to ignore the fact that the commitments taken by heads of leading NATO countries in the early 1990s regarding the limits of further enlargement were not fulfilled. Now we hear the logic that the commitments were made by other leaders and in a different historical context. But that does not change the whole thing—the obligations were not fulfilled. In the future, a new generation of NATO leaders will come, and they may also question the necessity of fulfilling “old” commitments.

The very existence of different security levels in Europe highlights major problems of division lines and violations of commitments regarding the indivisibility of security. We remain convinced that attempts to mechanically move the borders of the North Atlantic alliance in violation of security indivisibility commitments or, say, without granting non-members of the alliance legal guarantees of security indivisibility, only sow mistrust. They are inadequate and counter-productive to the modern realities and the relations maintained by the political leaders of our countries.

We call on our NATO partners to be realists. Forced dragging of Kiev and Tbilisi into the alliance contradicts the fundamental security interests of Russia. Besides, few have illusions today that Ukrainian and Georgian NATO membership will enhance security of the countries and the alliance itself. The effect will be the reverse. Most NATO member-states are better aware today of the risks implied by the forced accession of the countries to the alliance.

After NATO established the so-called “intensive dialogue” with Georgia, the previous U.S. administration tried to convince us that NATO will become “a school to educate Tbilisi” and will keep Georgians from irresponsible actions. However, at the alliance summit in Bucharest in April 2008, the Georgian leadership received a political signal that Georgia and Ukraine “will become NATO members” and launched a military rampage in South Ossetia. The regime of Saakashvili conceived the patronage of several NATO member-states as license for permissiveness.

As for Ukraine, the alliance heavily advertised the slogan “NATO is a democracy school” but at the same time simply ignored the voice of a majority of the Ukrainian people who were strongly opposed to NATO membership. The fact that

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the new Ukrainian leadership puts its people's voice first is very promising.

Journal: *Energy has been central to Russia's relationship with its neighbors—most recently Belarus. The slow progress of negotiations with Belarus over conditions for oil delivery led Russia to cut off supplies to Belarus's oil refineries at the beginning of this year. This episode comes in addition to a number of other diplomatic rows. What is behind what appears to be stressed relations with Belarus?*

Ryabkov: You are definitely right in saying that energy is a major factor in Russia's relations with neighboring countries, including Belarus. That is why Russia and our economic partners among Commonwealth of Independent States countries are interested in establishing a mutually beneficial, transparent, and efficient energy cooperation equation based on market principles. Our understanding is that both Russia and Belarus can significantly benefit from this.

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Several years ago we agreed with our Belarus partners to initiate a phased transition to market-based cooperation in the energy sector. Bilateral negotiations held in 2006-2007 produced the necessary agreement and contract framework for this process. And it worked well all these years.

The agreements, however, were fixed for a certain time frame. As they expire, the time has come to fully switch to settlements based on world market prices.

Due to our special economic relations, as well as the formation of the Customs Union between Russia, Belarus, and Kazakhstan, we expressed our readiness to supply oil to meet domestic consumption in

Belarus without any duties at all. Our proposal was that duties should be imposed only on oil that was refined and exported to third countries. We have gone through several rounds of negotiations and finally succeeded in signing the necessary documents. The negotiation process itself was quite challenging but it created new opportunities for expanding our energy cooperation with Belarus.

Journal: *Russia wields significant control over East-West gas supplies. Both the price and demand of oil is expected to increase this year. How do you believe this will change Russia's relations throughout the region? Specifically, what will the increase in price mean for relations with the European Union?*

Ryabkov: I would like to divide your question into two parts: (1) Russia's

relationship with the EU in general and (2) its energy component. It is no secret that our relations with the EU can truly be described as a strategic partnership. As major geopolitical entities on the European continent, we depend on each other in numerous spheres and are linked by a common civilization, history, and future. Besides, the European Union is a major Russian trade and economic partner that accounts for over 50 percent of our foreign trade turnover.

Quite naturally, energy dialogue is an important component of our cooperation with the European Union; we are long-standing partners in the business. For several decades our country has been, and obviously remains, a reliable supplier of energy resources to European countries. Russia today is a major exporter of natural gas accounting for over 40 percent of all EU-imported gas and firmly holds the second biggest share in oil and oil-refined products' supplies. Russia has never failed to fulfill commitments.

As you know, Russia is striving to ensure additional reliability and stability of energy supplies to Europe. This subject dominates our economic agenda. That is the main consideration behind our major Nord Stream and South Stream pipeline projects, which can help diversify energy supplies to European partners and enhance Russian and EU common energy security. Another idea is to introduce a new, efficient legal framework for international energy cooperation. That is exactly the core of our conceptual approach to the energy sphere, which has been submitted for consideration to our European partners. This document is focused on balancing the interests of energy producing countries, transit states, and energy consumers. Another example of Russia's readiness to promote energy security in Europe is the "Memorandum on the Early Warning Mechanism in Energy Supplies" signed last November within the framework of the Russia-EU Energy Dialogue. The document introduced additional guarantees against various abnormal situations.

Many European companies are big investors in the Russian energy sector. This investment flow strengthens the common energy security of the continent and is an obvious example of Russia-EU complementarity. Speculations are sometimes voiced about the alleged readiness of Moscow to resort to the "energy weapon" for the sake of certain political goals. These speculations have nothing to do with the real world. Our interdependence with Europe has a clear mutual character: we are two sides of the same equation. That is why we are pursuing a "win-win" strategy. Russia has built a market-oriented economy which imposes market logic on the behavior of both producers and consumers. It is common knowledge that energy prices are formed by the international market, not by individual states. Price fluctuations are normal and they do not affect the long-term Russia-EU dialogue.

Journal: *In a January op-ed in the New York Times, Boris Gromov and Dmitri Rogozin wrote that NATO must keep its commitment in Afghanistan in order to prevent the “Talibanization of the entire region.” Why is it in Russia’s interest to prevent a Taliban takeover of the country?*

Ryabkov: First of all, I should stress that the Taliban is a major, but not the only, extremist group in Afghanistan. Like-minded associates are the Islamic Party of Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, al Qaeda, and the so-called “Haqqani network.” These forces are multinational and profess radical Islamic ideology. They are already trying to spread their influence to bordering states, including our Central Asian allies. The latest alarming trend—the concentration of militants in northern provinces of Afghanistan close to CIS borders—is more evidence of the expansionist intentions of extremists. It is obvious that such a situation is not in Russia’s interest and threatens our national security. If, hypothetically, Afghan Islamists come to power, the threats of terrorism and illegal drug trafficking from Afghanistan will definitely rise to a new, higher, and more dangerous level.

Therefore, our country is already taking necessary steps to prevent such a turn of events. Our major activities are focused on enhancing the potential of Afghan authorities in ensuring security and solving other key tasks of national development. Specifically, Russia is training Afghan personnel, including military and anti-drug experts, and will train law enforcement agencies’ staff in the future. Our country is providing considerable assistance to Afghanistan in socioeconomic, humanitarian, and cultural spheres. Cooperation in antiterrorist and antidrug areas is strengthening, including that in the regional framework with engagement of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). We hope the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operating in Afghanistan will join such cooperation.

The final goal of the international community’s efforts, as confirmed by the recent international conference on Afghanistan in London, shall be the creation of conditions for the transfer to Afghan authorities of full responsibility for the future of their country. Quite naturally, that means foreign military presence in Afghanistan shall end at a certain stage. International forces, however, should not leave the country without fulfilling their mission of suppressing terrorist activities on its territory. ISAF was deployed in Afghanistan in compliance with the UN Security Council mandate, and it can leave the country only after reporting to the Council. By that time, Afghan armed forces and law enforcement should be strengthened enough to ensure security and efficiently counter extremist opposition on their own.

Journal: This is a rather historic time for Russian foreign policy, as the country appears to be striking a curious balance between two opposing identities: on the one hand, its traditional role as a Great Power coping with various tensions on its borders, and on the other as a global actor increasingly engaging with the West in order to tackle international crises. Do you believe that such a tension exists?

Ryabkov: I think that not only is Russian foreign policy going through an historically important stage, but that the whole world is facing a drastic change in its development. I believe we correctly assessed, on the threshold of the century, future world trends—the formation of a new polycentric international system that is replacing the previous bipolar one and is, to a major extent, the product of globalization. Since then, new developments have confirmed the accuracy of our analysis. It is obvious that after the recent crisis, the global financial and economic architecture will be characterized as multilateral and multipolar.

While preparing for that, we have correctly defined the fundamental principles of foreign policy for the new Russia as: a multi-vector approach, network diplomacy, openness, and rejection of confrontation. We see that many of our international partners, including the United States, are using the same principles to a larger extent in their diplomatic activities. It was Washington's initiative that created the G20 format, which is used to coordinate efforts in overcoming the crisis and offers a mechanism of collective leadership of major world countries represented in geographic and civilizational respects.

Under existing conditions, as a new world is actually being born, previous categories, such as super powers, great powers, etc., are losing their meaning. Russia sees itself among leading countries with global interests. Quite naturally, we are fulfilling tasks traditional to any state, namely, creating a friendly environment. It is an integral element of our line toward the creation of favorable external conditions for the modernization of the country and its technological breakthrough. Our partners outside the surrounding region should treat it with understanding. That space has no room for geopolitical games, which lead only to destabilization, as the experience in Georgia and Ukraine shows.

As for the settlement of international problems, we closely cooperate not only with countries that are historically related to the West, as the notion itself is also transforming, but with all other players, including China, India, Brazil, Turkey, and South Korea—practically with all who are interested in cooperation. For example, China is engaged in resolving proliferation problems related to Iran and the Korean Peninsula. Practically all acute international issues are discussed in the UN Security Council, where China is a permanent member. Therefore, I see no

collisions between the various tasks of our foreign policy.

Journal: *As we have discussed, Russian foreign policy undoubtedly faces many challenges. What opportunities exist? What does the future hold for Russia's foreign policy?*

Ryabkov: The answer to the previous question leads to the conclusion that Russian foreign policy keeps up with the times. We do not attempt to turn back time; we move within the mainstream of international life. We have no goals that would drag us into confrontation with other states. At the same time, we can refuse to cooperate with someone who is not ready to cooperate on the principles

We can refuse to cooperate with someone who is not ready to cooperate on the principles of equality and mutual benefit.

of equality and mutual benefit. But sooner or later we shall all be involved in the new dimension of close interaction in countering the whole range of global challenges and threats common to all states. They comprise the numerous challenges mentioned by you. I believe the most ambitious task of the global community is to design a new paradigm of international relations that would replace the confrontational model of Cold War times and, actually, of the whole preceding historic period. A new coordinate system is emerging in global politics that excludes zero-sum games.

Firstly, the world is faced with the need to design a new economic growth model built on the premise of a limited resource base of the planet, including its climate. That promotes the idea of sustainable development, which many forgot after the end of the Cold War. Secondly, a set of challenges arising from modernization, including economic restructuring and building a principally new technological foundation of development, faces all countries. America is no exception, and President Barack Obama convincingly spoke about it in his recent State of the Union address. I would say the discussion should be about a certain development paradigm that will ensure the focus of global politics on the whole array of development issues. 