

By George Friedman and Peter Zeihan

U.S. Vice President Joe Biden toured several countries in Central Europe last week, including the Czech Republic and Poland. The trip comes just a few weeks after the United States reversed course and decided not to construct a ballistic missile defense (BMD) system in those two countries. While the system would have had little effect on the national security of either Poland or the Czech Republic, it was taken as a symbol of U.S. commitment to these two countries and to former Soviet satellites generally. The BMD cancellation accordingly caused intense concern in both countries and the rest of the region.

While the Obama administration strongly denied that the decision to halt the BMD deployment and opt for a different BMD system had anything to do with the Russians, the timing raised some questions. Formal talks with Iran on nuclear weapons were a few weeks away, and the only leverage the United States had in those talks aside from war was sanctions. The core of any effective sanctions against Iran would be placing limits on Iran's gasoline imports. By dint of proximity to Iran and massive spare refining capability, the Russians were essential to this effort -- and they were indicating that they wouldn't participate. Coincidence or not, the decision to pull BMD from Poland and the Czech Republic did give the Russians something they had been demanding at a time when they clearly needed to be brought on board.

The Biden Challenge

That's what made Biden's trip interesting. First, just a few weeks after the reversal, he revisited these countries. He reasserted American commitment to their security and promised the delivery of other weapons such as Patriot missile batteries, an impressive piece of hardware that really does enhance regional security (unlike BMD, which would grant only an indirect boost). Then, Biden went even further in Romania, not only extending his guarantees to the rest of Central Europe, but also challenging the Russians directly. He said that the United States regarded spheres of influence as 19th century thinking, thereby driving home that Washington is not prepared to accept Russian hegemony in the former Soviet Union (FSU). Most important, he called on the former satellites of the Soviet Union to assist republics in the FSU that are not part of the Russian Federation to overthrow authoritarian systems and preserve their independence.

This was a carefully written and vetted speech: It was not Biden going off on a tangent, but rather an expression of Obama administration policy. And it taps into the prime Russian fear, namely, that the West will eat away at Russia's western periphery -- and at Russia itself -- with color revolutions that result in the installation of pro-Western governments, just as happened in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004-2005. The United States essentially now has pledged itself to do just that, and has asked the rest of Central Europe to join it in creating and strengthening pro-Western governments in the FSU. After doing something Russia wanted the United States to do, Washington now has turned around and announced a policy that directly

challenges Russia, and which in some ways represents Russia's worst-case scenario.

What happened between the decision to pull BMD and Biden's Romania speech remains unclear, but there are three possibilities. The first possibility is that the Obama administration decided to shift policy on Russia in disappointment over Moscow's lack of response to the BMD overture. The second possibility is that the Obama administration didn't consider the effects of the BMD reversal. U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said the one had nothing to do with the other, and it is possible that the Obama administration simply failed to anticipate the firestorm the course reversal would kick off in Central Europe and to anticipate that it would be seen as a conciliatory gesture to the Russians, and then had to scramble to calm the waters and reassert the basic American position on Russia, perhaps more harshly than before. The third possibility, a variation on the second scenario, is that the administration might not yet have a coordinated policy on Russia. Instead, it responds to whatever the most recent pressure happens to be, giving the appearance of lurching policy shifts.

The why of Washington decision-making is always interesting, but the fact of what has now happened is more pertinent. And that is that Washington now has challenged Moscow on the latter's core issues. However things got to that point, they are now there -- and the Russian issue now fully intersects with the Iranian issue. On a deeper level, Russia once again is shaping up to be a major challenge to U.S. national interests. Russia fears (accurately) that a leading goal of American foreign policy is to prevent the return of Russia as a major power. At present, however, the Americans lack the free hand needed to halt Russia's return to prominence as a result of commitments in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Kremlin inner circle understands this divergence between goal and capacity all too well, and has been working to keep the Americans as busy as possible elsewhere.

Distracting Washington While Shoring Up Security

The core of this effort is Russian support for Iran. Moscow has long collaborated with Tehran on Iran's nuclear power generation efforts. Conventional Russian weapon systems are quite popular with the Iranian military. And Iran often makes use of Russian international diplomatic cover, especially at the U.N. Security Council, where Russia wields the all-important veto.

Russian support confounds Washington's ability to counter more direct Iranian action, whether that Iranian action be in Lebanon, Afghanistan, Iraq or the Persian Gulf. The Obama administration would prefer to avoid war with Iran, and instead build an international coalition against Iran to force it to back down on any number of issues of which a potential nuclear weapons program is only the most public and obvious. But building that coalition is impossible with a Russia-sized hole right in the center of the system.

The end result is that the Americans have been occupied with the Islamic world for some time now, something that secretly delights the Russians. The Iranian distraction policy has worked fiendishly well: It has allowed the Russians to reshape their own neighborhood in ways that simply would not be possible if the Americans had more diplomatic and military freedom of action. At the beginning of 2009, the Russians saw three potential challenges to their long-term security that they sought to mitigate. As of this writing, they have not only succeeded, they have

managed partially to co-opt all three threats.

First, there is Ukraine, which is tightly integrated into the Russian industrial and agricultural heartland. A strong Ukrainian-Russian partnership (if not outright control of Ukraine by Russia) is required to maintain even a sliver of Russian security. Five years ago, Western forces managed to short-circuit a Kremlin effort to firm up Russian control of the Ukrainian political system, resulting in the Orange Revolution that saw pro-Western President Viktor Yushchenko take office. After five years of serious Russian diplomatic and intelligence work, Moscow has since managed not just to discredit Yushchenko -- he is now less popular in most opinion polls than the margin of error -- but to command the informal loyalty of every other candidate for president in the upcoming January 2010 election. Very soon, Ukraine's Western moment will formally be over.

Russia is also sewing up the Caucasus. The only country that could challenge Russia's southern flank is Turkey, and until now, the best Russian hedge against Turkish power has been an independent (although certainly still a Russian client) Armenia. (Turkish-Armenian relations have been frozen in the post-Cold War era over the contentious issue of the Armenian genocide.) A few months ago, Russia offered the Turks the opportunity to improve relations with Armenia. The Turks are emerging from 90 years of near-comatose international relations, and they jumped at the chance to strengthen their position in the Caucasus. But in the process, Turkey's relationship with its heretofore regional ally, Azerbaijan (Armenia's archfoe), has soured. Terrified that they are about to lose their regional sponsor, the Azerbaijanis have turned to the Russians to counterbalance Armenia, while the Russians still pull all Armenia's strings. The end result is that Turkey's position in the Caucasus is now far weaker than it was a few months ago, and Russia still retains the ability to easily sabotage any Turkish-Armenian rapprochement.

Even on the North European Plain, Russia has made great strides. The main power on that plain is the recently reunified Germany. Historically, Germany and Russia have been at each other's throats, but only when they have shared a direct border. When an independent Poland separates them, they have a number of opportunities for partnership, and 2009 has seen such opportunities seized. The Russians initially faced a challenge regarding German Chancellor Angela Merkel. Merkel is from the former East Germany, giving her personal reasons to see the Russians as occupiers. Cracking this nut was never going to be easy for Moscow, yet it succeeded. During the 2009 financial crisis, when Russian firms were snapping like twigs, the Russian government still provided bailout money and merger financing to troubled German companies, with a rescue plan for Opel even helping Merkel clinch re-election. With the Kremlin now offering to midwife -- and in many cases directly subsidize -- investment efforts in Russia by German firms such as E.On, Wintershall, Siemens, Volkswagen and ThyssenKrupp, the Kremlin has quite literally purchased German goodwill.

Washington Seeks a Game Changer

With Russia making great strides in Eurasia while simultaneously sabotaging U.S. efforts in the Middle East, the Americans desperately need to change the game. Despite its fiery tone, this desperation was on full display in Biden's speech. Flat-out challenging the Central Europeans to

help other FSU countries recreate the revolutions they launched when they broke with the Soviet empire in 1989, specifically calling for such efforts in Belarus, Moldova, Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Armenia, is as bald-faced a challenge as the Americans are currently capable of delivering. And to ensure there was no confusion on the point, Biden also promised -- publicly -- whatever support the Central Europeans might ask for. The Americans have a serious need for the Russians to be on the defensive. Washington wants to force the Russians to focus on their own neighborhood, ideally forgetting about the Iranians in the process. Better yet, Washington would like to force the Russians into a long slog of defensive actions to protect their clients hard up on their own border. The Russians did not repair the damage of the Orange Revolution overnight, so imagine how much time Washington would have if all of the former Soviet satellites started stirring up trouble across Russia's western and southern periphery.

The Central Europeans do not require a great deal of motivation. If the Americans are concerned about a resurgent Russia, then the Central Europeans are absolutely terrified -- and that was before the Russians started courting Germany, the only regional state that could stand up to Russia by itself. Things are even worse for the Central Europeans than they seem, as much of their history has consisted of vainly attempting to outmaneuver Germany and Russia's alternating periods of war and partnership.

The question of why the United States is pushing this hard at the present time remains. Talks with the Iranians are under way; it is difficult to gauge how they are going. The conventional wisdom holds that the Iranians are simply playing for time before allowing the talks to sink. This would mean the Iranians don't feel terribly pressured by the threat of sanctions and don't take threats of attack very seriously. At least with regard to the sanctions, the Russians have everything to do with Iran's blase attitude. The American decision to threaten Russia might simply have been a last-ditch attempt to force Tehran's hand now that conciliation seems to have failed. It isn't likely to work, because for the time being Russia has the upper hand in the former Soviet Union, and the Americans and their allies -- motivated as they may be -- do not have the best cards to play.

The other explanation might be that the White House wanted to let Iran know that the Americans don't need Russia to deal with Iran. The threats to Russia might infuriate it, but the Kremlin is unlikely to feel much in the form of clear and present dangers. On the other hand, blasting the Russians the way Biden did might force the Iranians to reconsider their hand. After all, if the Americans are no longer thinking of the Russians as part of the solution, this indicates that the Americans are about to give up on diplomacy and sanctions. And that means the United States must choose between accepting an Iranian bomb or employing the military option.

And this leaves the international system with two outcomes. First, by publicly ending attempts to secure Russian help, Biden might be trying to get the Iranians to take American threats seriously. And second, by directly challenging the Russians on their home turf, the United States will be making the borderlands between Western Europe and Russia a very exciting place.

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