

Does the U.S. Have Its Priorities Right?

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The principal issues that have recently divided the United States and Russia include the plans to deploy elements of a U.S. missile defense system along our borders in Eastern Europe, and the future of Kosovo. It is indicative that none of these problems is vital for the United States. This cannot be said of Russia. Furthermore, these problems have become an indicator of tension in American-Russian relations at a time when, it would seem, Washington is objectively interested in close cooperation with Moscow to resolve an array of conflicts, which is far more important for the United States and the international community as a whole.

In this context, I should mention Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Iran, as well as Palestinian-Israeli relations. Four years after the start of the American military operation, which plunged Iraq into chaos and civil war, and placed it on the verge of territorial disintegration, President George W. Bush proclaimed “a new strategy,” and set September as a deadline for drastically improving the situation in Iraq. The “new strategy” added up to an additional contingent of American troops being sent to Iraq in a bid to crack down on the anti-occupation forces in Baghdad and provincial areas under their control. In mid-September, the American Army commander is to report to the president on a breakthrough and propose further measures. Yet with two months to go, it is already clear that betting on a military buildup is not a viable option. American losses have increased sharply, while not even a modicum of stabilization has been achieved.

In these conditions, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani urged the United States to get Iran and Syria involved in an internal Iraqi peace process. A similar call was contained in recommendations issued a few months ago by a congressional commission headed by James Baker, secretary of state in the Bush Sr. administration, and former Senator Lee Hamilton. Getting these two countries involved in a settlement – given the influence that they have on a number of Shiite and Sunni organizations in Iraq – coupled with a schedule for the pullout of American troops (yet another recommendation by the Baker – Hamilton commission), could help break the Iraq deadlock. Especially considering that Iran and Syria are showing interest in contacts with the United States, while Washington’s refusal to set a deadline for the withdrawal of troops has already weakened the Nouri al Maliki government, the U.S.’s key partner in Iraq. Russia, which has close ties with Syria and Iran, could be not-entirely-useless in overcoming the Iraqi crisis.

Now to Afghanistan. The NATO-led antiterrorist operation in that country is evidently going nowhere. The Taliban is still calling the shots in the South. Not long ago, Afghan President Hamid Karzai accused the U.S. military and its allies of “lacking coordination” and “senselessly shelling” terrorist positions from a distance of 37 kilometers, as a result of which “civilians are becoming the main target of attack.” Over 50,000 NATO troops are

operating in Afghanistan, but they are still as far away from routing the Taliban, destroying al-Qaeda or catching terrorist leaders as they were at the start of the operation. Furthermore, the situation is becoming more complicated. Opposition to the central government is expanding not only within the Taliban, but also those forces that have until recently supported Karzai.

I do not think that Russia would agree to bring its troops to Afghanistan: the memory of the Soviet “limited” military presence in that country is still fresh in people’s minds. Yet is it possible to underestimate the role of Russia, which helped President George Bush launch an anti terrorism operation in Afghanistan? Was the Taliban ejected from Kabul by U.S. or NATO troops, not Northern Afghan forces, which were closely linked with Moscow, Dushanbe and Tashkent? Could Moscow’s experience in Afghanistan not be used in the war on terror today?

Meanwhile, it seems to me that Washington, which is currently preoccupied with deploying its military units and missile defense elements in the newly admitted NATO member countries, could ‘miss the boat’ in Pakistan. There are three principal forces there, which are in conflict with each other: the governing military group, led by President Pervez Musharraf; a civil movement, headed by former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto; and radical Islamists. This conflict is unfolding amid an increasingly destabilizing situation. Meanwhile, one must not forget that Pakistan has nuclear weapons, which could fall into the hands of Islamic extremists. This prospect puts in the shade the concern that Iran could, within a few years, acquire nuclear weapons in “embryonic” form. Especially considering that in the past few weeks Iran has started making overtures toward cooperation, and this is, to a certain extent, due to a change in the U.S.’s position: at first, the United States threatened to use force against Iran, but then made a U-turn and went along with Russia, which believes that the problem may only be resolved by political means. Is it not time for the U.S. to start consultations with Russia, India, and China on Pakistan?

On Israeli-Palestinian relations, I have the impression that the U.S. is revisiting the idea of monopolizing the peace process, while the Quartet is increasingly being relegated to the role of an accompanist for the American solo performance. This would be hardly conducive to success.

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