

Moscow intransigent towards Washington on the Syria crisis

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On 7-8 May the US new Secretary of State John Kerry paid his first official visit to Moscow, where he met President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov. The main subject of talks was the situation in Syria. It was agreed that Russia and the US would launch an initiative before the end of this month to organise an international conference in order to put pressure on the main players in Syria's internal conflict to establish an interim executive body. Kerry also met representatives of Russian civil society.

Commentary

- Kerry did not succeed in the main aim of his visit; that being to persuade his Russian partners to change Moscow's position on the conflict in Syria. On the contrary, it may be assumed that the US is slowly adopting certain elements of Russia's assessment of the situation and is increasingly seeing the conflict as a factor in a dangerous destabilisation of the Middle East and a source of threats linked to the expansion of Islamic radicalism. In the key issue which divides Moscow and Washington regarding the role of President Bashar al-Assad, Kerry softened Washington's opposition to his participation in reaching a compromise between the Syrian government and the opposition as he said that "as an individual" he could not imagine this. Three days after the talks with Kerry, Lavrov publicly declared that Russia would not withdraw from supplying Damascus with S-300 anti-aircraft missiles, thus showing Russia's intransigence towards America's demands to halt arms supplies to the Bashar al-Assad government.
- The way the visit developed along with Kerry's rhetoric point to the fact that the Obama administration is consistently seeking to repeat the reset policy as it is trying to create a favourable climate for it. In his public speeches during the visit to Moscow, Kerry avoided all contentious issues. He underlined the importance and achievements of the co-operation with Russia to date (including the cases of Afghanistan, Iran and North Korea). He referred to the experiences of the American-Soviet alliance during World War II, implicitly criticising those of his compatriots who did not appreciate the Soviet Union in its role of US ally in that war. Furthermore, Kerry refrained from criticising the Russian government during his meeting with representatives of Russian civil society who gave him detailed accounts of the harassment and restrictions placed on civil society

organisations in Russia.

- While declaring its willingness to improve its relations with Washington, Russia continues to firmly stand its ground on the anti-missile defence system and the civil war in Syria. Russia's intransigent stance has already brought about certain results as the US have made concessions regarding the issue of the anti-missile defence system (giving up the so called fourth phase of deployment, which means abandoning the installation of more advanced missiles in Central and Eastern Europe, the proposal of written guarantees that this system would not be aimed against Russian strategic nuclear potential) and the fact that Washington has abandoned its criticism of civil liberties and human rights in Russia. Moscow's tactic towards Washington is based on the assumption that the US's international supremacy is fading and therefore sooner or later the US will be forced to accept the Russian conditions of co-operation in solving international conflicts.