

## Analysis: Barack Obama's missile shield decision will be cheered in Russia

The Kremlin will allow itself a wry smile today. Reports that Barack Obama has scrapped plans for a missile defence shield in Eastern Europe are music to its ears.



Barack Obama's new approach marks a significant change in American diplomacy Photo: GETTY

By Andrew Osborn in Moscow

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Tomorrow's Russian newspapers are therefore likely to be triumphalist in tone. "See, we were right to give the Americans a hard time on this" will be the line.

The climb-down undoubtedly does represent a significant strategic victory for the Kremlin. It also gives substance to Washington's so far woolly "reset" of relations with Russia, and will go a long way to soothe wounded Russian egos.

Moscow's biggest complaint about the Bush administration was that it did not take Russia or Russian strategic interests seriously. There is nothing Russians hate more than to think that their old Cold War adversary is not giving them the respect they believe they are due. This therefore will be held up as proof to ordinary Russians that Russia is once again a serious player on the world stage. It will become part of the "Russia rises from its knees" narrative so beloved of Kremlin spin doctors in the blink of an eye.

The Kremlin is not known for missing opportunities to pat itself on the back and this particular propaganda coup has been served up on a plate with all the trimmings. The crowing could be loud. The reflected glory will go to Vladimir Putin. The prime minister has been the missile shield's most vocal and high profile opponent, drawing on some of his famously fiery rhetoric to reject the US plan. This news will serve to bolster his already stellar popularity ratings, cementing his position as Russia's most powerful politician and heavyweight international statesman.

Russia's diplomatic elite will see it as a vindication of Moscow's publicly uncompromising stance on the issue.

Russia effectively staked its entire bilateral relationship with the US on the dispute in a high stakes game of poker that appears to have paid off. At a time when Moscow obviously needs to be more flexible itself, there must be concerns that it will be tempted to resort to the same successful hardball

tactics again.

In Eastern Europe, there is likely to be real anxiety and soul-searching.

Many politicians in the missile shield's putative host countries – Poland and the Czech Republic – will undoubtedly feel jilted and let down by Washington. Former Soviet bloc countries had already begun to voice concerns that Washington's vaunted reset of relations with Moscow would come at their expense. For many, this move is likely to be seen as a disappointing confirmation of that. Washington could be busy mending fences and reassuring some of its staunchest European allies about its future intentions for months to come.

The big question now though is what if anything is Russia ready to do in return? Washington has a meaty wish list. It wants Russia to back tough sanctions against Iran to curb the Islamic Republic's nuclear alleged ambitions. It would also like Russia to make deep cuts in its own nuclear arsenal when it comes to renegotiating a key arms control treaty due to expire in December.

And last, but not least, it wants Russia's continued cooperation in helping Washington keep its troops in Afghanistan well supplied. Iran will be the toughest issue to crack. The Russian government has so far appeared split on the sanctions issue with Mr Putin strongly opposing the idea and President Dmitry Medvedev apparently remaining open to such a demarche.

Will the Russians be magnanimous in victory? Or will they, as the foreign minister Sergei Lavrov has said in the past, choose to frame the decision as an overdue correction of a Bush era mistake rather than as a real concession that requires reciprocity.

That is the 64,000 ruble question.