

U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: John Beyrle

Deputy Chief of Mission in Moscow, 2002-2005
United States Ambassador to Bulgaria, 2005-2008
United States Ambassador to Russia, 2008-2012

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[Begin Transcription]

BEHRINGER: Ok, so we are here with the Collective Memory Project at Southern Methodist University's Center for Presidential History on the U.S. and Russia oral history project. I'm Paul Behringer, postdoctoral fellow here at Southern Methodist University.

MILES: I'm Simon Miles, assistant professor in the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

BEHRINGER: And we are here to interview Ambassador Beyrle. Would you mind introducing yourself?

BEYRLE: Yes, my name's John Beyrle. I currently serve as the Chairman of the U.S.-Russia Foundation. I was a foreign service officer, a U.S. diplomat for 30 years in a career that was focused largely on the Soviet Union and Russia, also Eastern Europe. I served as U.S. Ambassador in Bulgaria, 2005 to 2008, and as Ambassador to Russia, 2008 to 2012.

BEHRINGER: Thank you so much for being with us. At the start of the Bush administration, could you just describe for us briefly what your post was?

BEYRLE: Yes. At that time, I was the acting coordinator for policy toward the new independent states, which is quite a mouthful. Under the Clinton administration, responsibility for Russia—which had become newly independent after the fall of the Soviet Union—responsibility for Russia in the State Department was hived off from the European Bureau, and it essentially was given its own bureau, which was called the [00:02:00] New Independent

State Bureau. And I served as deputy in that bureau for the last two years of the Clinton administration. And when the Bush administration came in, there was some debate about whether that bureau in the State Department was going to continue to exist, being responsible for Russia and the other states of the former Soviet Union, or whether it would be folded back into the European Bureau, as had been the case previously.

The decision was made fairly early on to fold that bureau back into the European Bureau. But that took about six months to accomplish, bureaucratically, administratively, and in policy terms. And so, for those final six months of the new Bush administration, basically January to July of 2001, I served as the acting coordinator for that bureau, which was the equivalent of being an assistant secretary of state.

BEHRINGER: And early on in the administration, in March, 2001 the United States expelled 50 Russian diplomats accused of working with convicted spy Robert Hanssen. What was the thinking behind this move, and how did the Russians react? And was there any lasting impact on U.S.-Russia relations?

BEYRLE: Well, even in the Clinton administration, I would say especially during the last two or three years there was growing concern about the number of Russian intelligence operatives who were working in the United States, both in Washington out of the embassy and out of their consulate in New York and their UN representation office in New York as well. The FBI in particular was very concerned [00:04:00] that these numbers had ballooned to the point that it was getting very, very difficult in resource terms for them to keep track of it.



This is a kind of a cyclical problem in U.S.-Soviet, U.S.-Russia relations. The numbers go up and expulsion takes place.

So we, toward the end of the Clinton administration, began talking within the interagency about ways in which we might go about getting these numbers down, and really the only way to do it, if you can't convince the Russians to send these people home voluntarily, is to expel them. The FBI was very much on board with that obviously, until about six, four months before the election. And, then for some reason, suddenly that subject, which had been quite the issue, suddenly became a kind of second-tier issue. And we were busy doing other things at the time. But I remember thinking at the time that it was kind of curious and feeling almost a bit of regret that we were not going to be able to get this done before the new administration came in because, obviously by November and December, we knew that the new president would be George Bush and not Al Gore. And, almost as a courtesy—it seems kind of quaint now in the times that we live in now—but it was considered almost a courtesy of the outgoing administration to clear the decks of these troublesome things so as not to unduly encumber the incoming administration.

So we had very much wanted to do these expulsions and get them done. We knew that there would be a reciprocal expulsion on the Russian side in response. So we tried to get this done, but it just proved to be impossible. And the administration turned over on January 20th, [00:06:00] the Bush administration came in and, of course, a month later, Robert Hanssen was rolled up by the FBI, charged with spying for Russia—spying for Russia going

back to the Soviet days, he'd worked for the FBI for a long time. In retrospect, it became very clear that the reason that the FBI had stopped talking about wanting this expulsion to take place was they saw that would get in the way of the case they were trying to build on Hanssen. We know from reading the history now that the FBI was onto Hanssen for a number of months before he was actually arrested. We didn't know that at the time, but clearly after Hanssen was arrested, then the pressure renewed and even intensified to throw out these Russian spies—I think the number that we had agreed on earlier was 50 and it stayed at 50.

And I recall going into brief Secretary of State Powell, who I had not talked to at any great length before that. He had been in his office in the State Department for about three weeks at that point. And I went into brief him about what had led up to this point and to tell him that the interagency consensus now was that we needed to expel 50 Russians. And I remember Secretary Powell sitting almost like Buddha in his chair, not saying a word, not nodding, not shaking his head, taking it all in, but betraying absolutely no indication of which way he was leading on this question. That was one of the first instances in which I began to grow a great deal of respect for Secretary Powell, and I learned a lot from him in that moment about [00:08:00] playing your cards close to your chest.

Obviously there were discussions at higher levels between the White House and the State Department, the CIA and the FBI, and it was decided to go forward with this expulsion. And I think it was a day or two after that, that

Secretary Powell called in the then-ambassador Yuri Ushakov for Russia and told him that we were going to take this step, which was not really a surprise to them at this point. They realized that, certainly, they would be paying some price for the Hanssen scandal. It really was a scandal at that point that a senior FBI officer had been working for the Soviets and the Russians for so many years. So we decided to structure the expulsions in the following way: We would expel 50 Russians, all told. Six of them had to leave immediately. Those were the ones who were actually declared *persona non grata*. Their diplomatic status was revoked, and they had to leave by the weekend, as I recall, within two or three days. The other 46—and that list had been arrived at through negotiations between the intelligence agencies, the FBI, and the CIA and others—those other 46 were given until July 1st. And part of the reason for that was humanitarian. These were people who were there with their families, their kids were in school, and it was decided, we'll tell them to leave in July and that'll give them a proper amount of time to close up their affairs and not unduly punish the families for this.

And then Ushakov went back. I remember he also, like Buddha, made no comment at all. He simply scribbled [00:10:00] everything down furiously and left. And then, no surprise, two days later the Russians announced a complete mirror-image reciprocal response. They immediately expelled six American diplomats and another 44—or maybe it was 5, I don't remember—were told that they had to leave in July.



So that was that. It, I would say, did not have a really lasting effect on the U.S.-Russia relationship in that first year of the Bush administration for a number of reasons. The first reason, really, is that these are such routine occurrences in U.S.-Soviet, U.S.-Russia relations that it's never a surprise—there's almost a playbook that's pulled out. And, once it's done, it's done. There's a bit of residual tension and friction for a while, but in general, both sides tend to get over this because there's other work to be done. And it's recognized that this is just the way the game is played. The other reason, specific to the Bush administration and the time, was that simply 2001 was a year in which many other things happened, 9/11 most conspicuously, which very quickly overshadowed any tension or any friction which might have persisted after the expulsions took place. But in general, it was done fairly cleanly, I would say without a lot of *Sturm und Drang*.

BEHRINGER: That's fascinating. [00:12:00] Speaking of moving on with the relationship, also around this time you met with the Chechen rebel leadership, correct? And I was wondering what were the purpose of those talks, and what did you discuss in them?

BEYRLE: Well, it's interesting to think, actually, that my meeting with the Chechen—he was essentially the foreign minister of the breakaway part of the Chechen Republic—that took place right in the middle of all of these expulsions. So we were clearly trying to get rid of a lot of uncomfortable and unpleasant business fairly early in the Bush administration. The reason the meeting took place—well, let me just set the scene very briefly about Chechnya.

Obviously, Russia, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, had had to contend with a number of simmering ethnic disputes, which had had the lid kept on them by the Soviets, and the lid very quickly blew off. And one of those was in Chechnya, a province in the Caucasus on the southern border of the Soviet Union—Russia with Georgia—and the Chechens made very clear that they wanted to fight for their independence. And there was a sort of breakaway militant part of the Chechens, which actually began to wage a war to win their independence from Russia. Russia was not about to give up any part of its territory, especially to an armed uprising.

And so a fairly brutal war ensued through all of the Yeltsin years, essentially 1992 until Putin took over in 2000. It was a war that was characterized by indiscriminate shelling of civilian population, [00:14:00] human rights abuses, terrible human rights abuses on both sides. I recall when I was working in the bureau of the State Department responsible for Russian affairs—this is in the Clinton administration—the Russian side gave us a videotape, which they had captured from the Chechens, of the Chechens torturing and even killing Russian prisoners. And I was delegated to watch that video. Somebody had to watch it, and no one higher up above me wanted to watch it. And I didn't have the heart to delegate it to anybody on my staff.

So some pretty terrible things happened on both sides. And there was quite a lot of push, especially at the end of the Clinton administration, to get the Russians to work out some sort of a peace deal, or at least a negotiation which

would result in a ceasefire and stop the brutality of the violence that was happening.

I was at a meeting actually in Oslo between President Clinton and then-Prime Minister Putin—this is before he succeeded Yeltsin—and most of the meeting was about Chechnya, and most of it was Clinton and the American side trying to convince the Russians that they were playing a very bad hand here internationally and domestically, it would come back—it was already coming back to bite them in terms of investment that they needed that was drying up because of the bad reputation they were getting. Putin was having none of it. He was giving back as good as he got in a way that was conspicuously different than what we'd seen from Yeltsin in the last years.

The Clinton administration had tried hard, had pushed hard on this, but one of the criticisms of the Bush administration, [00:16:00] of the Republicans in the campaign, and then after Bush had won the election, was that Clinton had not done enough, had gotten too chummy with the Russians, too chummy with Yeltsin, and had turned a blind eye to all of the atrocities which occurred on the Russian side. And there were definite atrocities which occurred at the hands of the Russian military. And the Bush administration was going to push harder on this and it was going to be seen to push harder on this. And so as we talked about this in the early months of the Bush administration in the State Department, with the national security, with the White House, it was decided that it would not be a bad idea—in fact, it would probably be a good idea—to

have some senior member at the policy level in the administration meet with the right Chechen.

And it turned out that a man named Ilyas Akhmadov—who, I think I described earlier, was the kind of de facto foreign minister of the breakaway part of Chechnya—was visiting the United States. He gave an interview with the National Press Club. He had meetings up on Capitol hill, met with John McCain, met with members of the former Clinton administration. And it was decided that I should meet with him. And we made very, very clear that this was a meeting that conferred no legitimacy on their claim to pull away from Russia, because the view of the Clinton administration and also the Bush administration was that Chechnya was a part of Russia and Russia had the right to deal with an armed uprising on its territory. The question was always how they were doing it. But we wanted to make clear that we weren't tilting in the direction of the separatists, [00:18:00] but that we wanted to talk to them, to send a message to the Russians that they weren't getting a complete free pass on this, which the narrative had evolved they had been given in the Clinton administration.

So this meeting would take place, not in the State Department, but in a professor's office at George Washington University, fairly close to the State Department. I remember walking over that day and taking a member of my staff as a note taker because we wanted a very, very good record of this meeting. We didn't take an interpreter. He spoke a little English, but we did most of the meeting in Russian, my Russian was good enough. And the

message that I had to convey to him was essentially an anti-terrorist message. I was able to, not to describe to him, but to tell him that I had seen evidence of atrocities on the Chechen side—and I certainly had seen that evidence. And I pushed him very hard, as we had been pushing the Russians, to lay down their arms, find a way to begin to talk and work out some sort of settlement, be it a heightened autonomy for Chechnya, something that would put an end to this war that had been going on for over eight years.

Akhmadov, as I recall, listened. He pushed back a little bit. The meeting itself really didn't take longer than 15 or 20 minutes. 80 percent of life is showing up sometimes, as Woody Allen famously said, and the main purpose of that meeting was for it to take place and for me to deliver a strong anti-terrorist message to the Chechen leadership directly in a way we hadn't been able to—[00:20:00] we hadn't talked to them directly before that.

MILES: Ambassador, if I may, just a quick follow-up on the Oslo meeting between President Clinton and then-Prime Minister Putin. I wonder if you came away with any impressions of the future Russian leader there which might've colored your interactions later on once he was president of the country.

BEYRLE: Well, that was the first time I had actually met Putin, sat in on a meeting with Putin, and President Clinton had met him before. I think that was maybe his second meeting with Putin after he had become prime minister—he came prime minister in August of '99. And we were all taken aback, frankly, by his almost importunate way of speaking. He was dismissive, he would interrupt, but he was given to long paragraph-like disquisitions on his sides, which

sometimes would last five, 10, and even longer, 15, 20 minutes if you didn't interrupt him. He was very self-possessed, very capable, obviously very intelligent, but strikingly different than Boris Yeltsin, who, in the final years of his tenure as president of Russia, was really an old and sick man.

BEHRINGER: And before this time, I should say before 9/11, was there a focus in the Bush administration about cooperating in counter-terrorism operations with the Russians, and did this meeting with and dialogue with the [Chechens] affect any of that?

BEYRLE: There was always talk about counter-terrorism cooperation between Russia and the United States [00:22:00] because Russia had a formidable intelligence apparatus. Obviously, they were very plugged in to what was happening in Afghanistan—at least they thought they were, it turned out they weren't quite as plugged in as we, and they, thought they were and they pretended to be or said they were—but it never really amounted to a lot. If there was intelligence exchange with the Russians and this was true, even after 9/11, it was usually 70/30, 80/20 in favor of the Russians, meaning, of the hundred percent of intelligence that was exchanged, they got 80 percent and we got 20 percent. Before 9/11, there really was not very much to speak of at all. And the fact that we would meet with the Chechens I think probably is the best illustration of the fact that we weren't about to do any kind of joint operations with them.

BEHRINGER: And then in June 2001 Bush and Putin meet in Slovenia. Do you have any memories about that meeting and of President Bush's first impressions of Putin or any accounts of how the meeting went?

BEYRLE: My memories of that meeting are pretty vivid. In the run-up to the meeting, what I remember mostly is how hard the Russians were pushing to have a meeting. There's a kind of disparity, disbalance in the U.S.-Soviet relationship, and it carried over to the U.S.-Russia relationship, where Russia cared about the relationship with the United States more than the U.S. cared about the relationship with Russia. It's not that we didn't care, [00:24:00] but for Russia—I'll put it this way: Russia, especially in the early years with Yeltsin and carrying over to the first 3, 4, 5 years of the Putin administration, Russia wanted a special relationship with the United States. They wanted to go back to that era of parity that existed during the Soviet time, during the Cold War, when there really were two rival super powers, not equal in all terms but certainly in strategic terms are pretty much on the same plane. And that had been lost after the Soviet Union fell apart. The Russians were always trying to recapture that. So they wanted a special relationship with us. We just wanted a normal relationship with Russia. There would be a bit of speciality to it because of Russia's nuclear arsenal that always made the question of Russia much more existential for us than the relationship with France or Germany or Japan.

But the Bush administration came in, again, feeling that Clinton had gotten too chummy, too close personally to Boris Yeltsin and that we had given away more than we had gotten. There was an intense criticism of Clinton, especially in the last year. The Republicans on the Hill put out a report called “Who Lost Russia?”—the answer was the Clinton administration had lost Russia because all of the great plans for Russia to become a market economy, democracy, they

hadn't come as far as we or they had hoped or wanted. So there was a great deal of criticism. And the Bush administration came in [00:26:00] saying, we are going to demote Russia on the list of priorities. It will still be in the top ten, maybe even the top five, but it won't be number two or number three. We have other things that we need to do. The Russians pushed hard for a meeting earlier. Finally, we agreed that we would meet with them in Slovenia in July, it was July of 2001. And we prepared hard for that meeting because it was going to be President Bush's first meeting with Putin. And those of us who were holdovers from the Clinton administration or, not holdovers but career diplomats—we're always holdovers for every administration—we knew what Bush was going to be dealing with, and we knew that he needed to be very, very well prepared, much better prepared than he would have needed to be for Boris Yeltsin.

So we went to Slovenia with a set of objectives in mind. We were going to try to establish, first of all, a relationship, but not an intensely personal relationship. We were going to do away with the commission that had been set up in the Clinton administration, the Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission, which was really about engaging people at the policy level on the Russian side and getting them to talk to Americans and Westerners. The Bush administration thought that was kind of a waste of time, there was too much talking and not enough real agreement. So that was going to be dispensed with, but we were going to try to cooperate on economic terms. We had a lot of American businesses that were working in Russia trying to expand their operations. We

wanted them to be able to operate [00:28:00] on an equal plane. And we wanted them to be protected from the rampant corruption that was going on in Russia. So there was an agenda to be talked about.

And I recall that when President Putin and President Bush came into the room and shook hands for the very first time—and there was a big gaggle around, it was a press spray, and so the press was taking pictures—it struck me that President Putin and President Bush were still both a bit nervous at that point. President Bush, when he was nervous, would tend to speak a little bit more loudly. Just something that other people had noticed and mentioned to me, and I certainly saw that on display. And Putin, in ways that were more subtle, but easy to pick up—I'd met with him at that point in two or three different occasions, so I kind of had a feel of him over the course of several hours across the meeting table—and I could see that he also realized that a lot was at stake here. Then the two of them went off with a small group of advisers, Condi Rice on the American side with President Bush, and they had their famous one-on-one meeting, which was scheduled to last 30 minutes.

Meanwhile, Colin Powell and I and Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and his staff went off into a separate room to have a bilateral meeting of the foreign ministers. And that meeting was really just marking time for the half hour of the one-on-one until we would rejoin the presidents or the presidents would rejoin us around a bigger table and work through the whole agenda. So a half hour of discussion between Ivanov and Powell took place. Ivanov began looking at his watch. [00:30:00] 45 minutes passed. He called an aid into the



room. He was concerned that the meeting between Bush and Putin had ended and no one had told him and that they had gone off. And I remember Secretary Powell telling him, “Don't worry, they'll come and tell us when this is done.”

This stretched onto an hour, then to almost an hour and a half. And by that time, Powell, and Ivanov were completely out of notecards, completely off the agenda, and they were just talking freely about all sorts of interesting things. I remember, at one point, Foreign Minister Ivanov said to Secretary Powell, “you know, you should consider at some point the idea that Russia could join NATO because we're going to have to join forces in the 21st century, that we are now in, against a rising China.” That was something you didn't hear every day from the foreign minister in a meeting with his American counterpart.

But finally they came and got us and took us to a larger room. And the body language of Bush and Putin couldn't have been more different than the body language when they went into that meeting. As we know, it was a long meeting. It was the meeting in which President Putin described to President Bush the golden cross that he'd been given by his mother that had survived a fire at his dacha. This had a deep impression on president Bush. And Putin, as we discovered later, also discovered in President Bush someone who was much easier to talk to, much less doctrinaire, a much better listener than he had expected. More intelligent maybe than he'd been led to believe. The body language was completely different. But the time for the meeting was pretty much over at that point. So we barely sat down [00:32:00] and for 15 minutes, I remember President Bush saying, “Well, we basically covered in our one-on-

one meeting the agenda that we were all going to cover at this meeting, so we have a few loose ends to tie up and then we have to go do the press conference.”

So after 10 or 15 minutes, literally, we all got up and went outside for the press conference. We—Condi Rice was national security advisor, Colin Powell, and our Russian counterparts—we were all seated sort of to the side on a riser, looking out at the press. Bush and Putin were on a separate podium stand, answering questions. President Bush read a statement, which had been prepared ahead of time describing the meeting, ad-libbed a few things, President Putin did the same thing, and then the floor was open for questions from journalists. And that’s the point at which, famously, President Bush was asked what he thought of President Putin. He’d now had a chance to meet him, how did he take the measure of the man? And President Bush said, well, essentially, “I liked the fellow. I looked into his eyes, and I got a sense of his soul.”

And I remember sitting on that riser in full view of the press, and Condi Rice was sitting in front of me, and I saw her, almost imperceptibly, but still, stiffen when he said, “I looked into his eyes and got a sense of his soul.” And at the end of the press conference, when we got up to leave, Condi turned around and said to me and to Dan Fried, “We’re going to have some problem with that statement. And she was right in the short term because President Bush was criticized [00:34:00] for that statement. He later explained it in a slightly different context. But at the time, it really did signal that the U.S.-Russia

relationship and the relationship between the presidents was going to be closer than we had expected. And as we found out after 9/11, it had also had a profound effect on President Putin, because, after the 9/11 attacks President Putin famously was the first world leader to try to put a call into President Bush. And, three or four days later, in a meeting with his national security leadership he overruled most of them and gave the green light for the United States to put bases in Central Asia—Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan—from which to wage the war against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. So, looking into his eyes and getting sense of his soul actually, I think, paid off for the United States in an unexpected way, really just two or three months afterwards.

BEHRINGER: And one of the main things coming out of that meeting was that the United States announced that it was pulling out of the ABM—the Anti-Ballistic Missile—Treaty. What was your sense of how the Russians felt about that?

BEYRLE: Well, you're right. One of one of the items on the agenda for the Ljubljana meeting certainly was a signal to the Russians that we were beginning to think about the modalities of pulling away—doing away with the ABM Treaty, which had been enforced between Russia, the Soviet Union, and the United States since [00:36:00] the 1960s. The Russians were always very, very concerned about this because it was the ABM Treaty which really enshrined the strategic stability that—they called it the balance of power, or balance of terror, or some people would call it the mutual assured destruction, which was their best defense against the American nuclear arsenal because, in terms of accuracy,



technology, and even maybe sheer numbers, we were always going to be able to outdo them, and the ABM Treaty and the concept of deterrence helped them level the playing field. Going back to the Reagan administration, the Russians were always very concerned that America would move away from deterrence in favor of defense. And really what happened in the Bush administration 43 was really just a continuation of a direction which had started under President Reagan.

And the Russians didn't like it. They didn't want to have any part of it. They tried to dissuade us for a long time. They threatened us. They said this would have dire consequences for us, but it was clear that this was something that the United States was determined to follow as a policy because we were concerned about threats, not from Russia, but from Iran and from North Korea, both of which had developed short- and medium-range missile programs which could eventually—would eventually grow into something much larger [00:38:00] and much more threatening to us. And the ABM treaty was preventing us from developing the kind of defenses that we would need to protect American territory, Alaska for example, from missile threats in North Korea. So it was a clear that we were going to follow this and that the Russians really in the end couldn't really do much about it.

And it was in the second year of the Bush administration, 2002, that we actually pulled out of the treaty. At that point, I was not working on Russian affairs, I was teaching at the National War College for a year before I went to

Russia as deputy chief of mission, but I was following the policies pretty closely in those days.

And what we arrived at with the Russians was a kind of a placeholder treaty called the Moscow Treaty, the treaty on strategic—well, we called it the SORT treaty, S-O-R-T.¹ I can't remember what S-O-R-T stands for actually, but it was “sort” of a treaty. It stipulated reductions in the number of deployed warheads, but it had no verification measures. It didn't actually require the reductions to be followed by destruction. It was a very unusual treaty, but it allowed Putin to save some face after the ABM treaty had been unilaterally, basically, abrogated by the United States—the Russians had to pull out as well—that he hadn't walked away empty handed from this.

BEHRINGER: How deeply do you think the Russians felt about missile defense? In reading some of the [00:40:00] memoirs and news reports, I get a conflicting sense that some Americans in the administration believed that the Russians understood missile defense wouldn't undermine their strategic situation but were using it as a rhetorical tool, or that it didn't disturb them that deeply, that there were other motives at play. What was your sense of—because it keeps coming up over and over again—but I'm just wondering, was it something that was—how deeply were they bothered by it?

BEYRLE: Very deeply. Missile defense was really, in strategic terms, the central irritant, the central problem in U.S.-Soviet and U.S.-Russia relations from the early 1980s on, and it became an article of faith in the Russian military, in the

¹ Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty.



Russian intelligence services certainly the hard line faction in the Kremlin, that America's desire to build a national missile defense had to have, if not as a spoken, certainly a large unspoken, component, the desire to be able to defend against Russia in a way that upset the balance of power. And through the Bush and the Obama administration, into the Trump administration, through the Trump administration, missile defense was the insoluble problem. We twisted ourselves into knots in negotiations with Russians, trying to show them, describe to them, [00:42:00] how the defense systems that we were conceiving of to guard against missile attacks from places like Iran and North Korea could in no way threaten their missile capabilities. It just couldn't.

But this was not a rational argument. This was a theological argument almost, and there was really no convincing the Russians otherwise. We really, to this day, haven't resolved that. We have kind of put it to the side and, certainly in the Obama administration, even as we signed the New START treaty, which was the signal accomplishment between Obama and President Medvedev, missile defense continued to hinder our efforts to work out a more comprehensive strategic security dialogue architecture with the Russians. So it was a indeed a very, very big deal on their side.

BEHRINGER: And you mentioned that, right after 9/11 happened, President Putin called the White House, or made a call to President Bush about that. Did 9/11 change the way that the Bush administration officials thought about Russia? You mentioned that they were downgrading Russia before, in the first six months of the administration. Did it change the calculus toward Russia? And,

can you talk a little bit more broadly what the impact was on U.S.-Russian relations?

BEYRLE: It had a tremendously altering effect on it in a positive sense. President Putin not only was the first world leader to try to reach out to President Bush [00:44:00]—he couldn't get Bush, Bush at that point was flying around trying to decide when to come back to Washington, not taking calls from outside the White House. But Putin did talk to Condoleezza Rice, and he made clear at that point that he was telling the Russian military to stand down. It was very clear after this attack that the U.S. military was going to go up to the highest level of DEFCON and normally, in normal times, that would immediately trigger a reciprocal response from the Soviet or the Russian military. They would also go to a higher level. I think the Russians were actually conducting some sort of military exercise at that point, which Putin shut down, and he made clear that Russia would not be ratcheting up its military activity, its military threat level. That was also a very signal decision by him, which made clear that we were dealing with something very different.

And then, as I mentioned, it was only a week after that, that the green light was given for the United States to put bases in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, to use Tajikistan, as staging areas for our attacks into Afghanistan. And by that point, the Russians were sharing with us some of the intel that they had on al Qaeda and the Taliban. This had a tremendous effect on the United States, because as I said, we realized that the Russians had tremendous capabilities—they obviously had a huge history, and not a very happy history, in Afghanistan,

having fought a war there to a stalemate at a huge cost in blood and national treasure. And yet [00:46:00] it seemed to us that the Russians, without any kind of ulterior motive, simply—and Putin even said that, he said, “Our aims are the same as America's aims. We want to liquidate the sources of terrorism in Afghanistan because those sources of terrorism are as threatening to us, if not more, than they are to the United States.”

There was another aspect to it and that's narcotics. The opium trade coming out of the poppy fields in Afghanistan flowed north through Russia and then west into Western Europe, leaving a trail of corruption, destruction, HIV/AIDS in its wake. In some ways, the bigger threat from Russia vis-a-vis Afghanistan was always narcotics. Terrorism was a close second, but for us obviously terrorism was number one. But in any case, if you liquidated the bases of the terrorists in Afghanistan, you were at the same time undermining, if not destroying, their ability to fund their operations through the narcotics trade through opium.

So this was very much in the Russians' interests, and this is how Putin sold it to his national security advisors—we know now from some of the documents and interviews that have been given about what went on at that time. And it was picked up very, very quickly on the American side. And we of course were looking for all of the help, all of the allies, that we could muster in the fight that we were about to wage in Afghanistan. And the focus in that early first year was very much on [00:48:00] Afghanistan. There was another meeting in Washington where President Putin came for an Oval Office meeting with

President Bush in the fall of 2001, and from there they flew to Texas and Bush hosted Putin at his home, the Crawford Ranch. And that made a tremendous impression on the Russians, because for the Russians, for someone to invite you into their home is a much more sacred barrier than it is for Americans. Although it is important for Americans, too. You invite friends into your home, not strangers, not people you're not sure about.

And this was another opportunity for Putin and Bush to talk about the strategic aims of a joint effort, or at least a coordinated effort, to get at the sources of terrorism from Afghanistan. There was a closeness that developed—again, I wasn't in those meetings, that was the year that I was teaching at the National War College before going back to Moscow in 2002—but the personal relationship which developed between Bush and Putin in those early years were very important. And it's somewhat ironic because, of course, the Bush administration had come in criticizing Clinton for over-closeness with Boris Yeltsin, but Putin, we saw as someone who was much more capable of delivering, even in those early years, his first early years as president, simply because he came out of the security services. He was a *silovik* in Russian terms.² And that meant that he had an understanding and access, a sort of base of support, in Russia, from the very people [00:50:00] whose help we needed to deal with the terrorism coming out of Afghanistan. So, strategically it was

² *Silovik* is a Russian word that translates directly as “security official,” but connotes someone who wields power behind the scenes.



important to try to build a close relationship and President Bush did everything he could to foster that in the months succeeding 9/11.

BEHRINGER: I was hoping to move next to the topic of the color revolutions in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan. And I was wondering if you could talk about where you were in government during those. And what types of debates within the administration there were about how to react to those, and how the Russians that you spoke to reacted? What was the general Russian view of them? And—sorry—one more thing would be, would you distinguish between the revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan, or is lumping them all together a proper way to think about them?

BEYRLE: Well, during the time of those color revolutions, basically 2003, 2004, 2005, I was the deputy chief of mission in Moscow. I had returned to Moscow as deputy to Ambassador Sandy Vershbow. So I had a front row seat for all of the effects that these color revolutions had on the U.S.-Russia relationship. But they also took place at a time when the U.S.-Russia relationship was getting a little more rough. There was a bit more friction because of Russia's failure to support the United States going into Iraq, [00:52:00] and we can we talk about that separately.

With regard to the color revolutions—the color revolutions were seen in the United States, certainly on Capitol Hill, certainly by the Bush administration, even by average Americans, to the extent that they were paying attention to it, as examples of parts of the former Soviet Union, newly independent republics, fighting off the pernicious—the malign influence, the



vestiges of corruption that flowed out of being part of the old Soviet Union and the corruption that developed in the newly independent Russia during the 1990s. And the revolutions in, especially in Ukraine and in Georgia, were led by political leaders that we in the United States, in the West, saw as democrats, men—they were all men—who were devoted to the rule of law, or at least made the rule of law, democratic practices, independent institutions, part of their policies, part of their platforms. And they were in all cases replacing leaders—Shevardnadze in Georgia, Yanukovich in Ukraine, Akayev in Kyrgyzstan—who were all from the Soviet era and who had close links to Moscow and who in many ways were pro-Russia, pro-Kremlin leaders in ways that put them at odds with significant parts of their populations, especially as they failed [00:54:00]—these outgoing leaders—as they failed to deal with the economic and corruption problems that were bedeviling all of the countries of the former Soviet Union. So that's how we saw it.

The Russians, of course, saw it in the mirror, completely opposite. They saw this as examples of efforts by the West and the United States to foment regime change, to undercut the influence of Russia in its neighborhood, in its backyard—I can't count the number of times that I would hear Russian officials asked me how we would respond if Russia were pushing a change in regime in Mexico, or even in Canada, if you can imagine such a thing, Mexico at least was maybe more conceivable. “Of course, you'd be outraged,” they would say. “And so you have to understand why we are outraged when we see you pushing to replace the leadership of Ukraine—a country very close to us, we have fraternal

feelings, cultural, economic ties—and you are pushing forward leaders who are anti-Russian, anti-Kremlin, and this will have very negative consequences.”

They were very simply against it, but they were powerless to really stop it from happening. They certainly tried in the case of Ukraine. There was the poisoning of Yushchenko, who was the Ukrainian politician who eventually ended up becoming president after the election that he “lost” to Yanukovich was overturned after street protests because the election was very clearly fraudulently managed.

So the Russians tried as much as [00:56:00] they could to keep their people in power. In the case of Shevardnadze in Georgia there was very little they could do. Shevardnadze, at the end, like Yeltsin, was simply an aging man who didn't have the force of personality or power anymore to run the country. And he, when really confronted by the massive street protests and the personality of Mikheil Saakashvili, who was leading the charge against him, he agreed to step down for the good of the country, avoiding what would have been a very messy and brutal civil war. So we, in the United States, saw these as positive developments because these leaders were committed to, or at least said they were committed to, an anti-corruption, pro-democratic platform. And of course we're going to support that in every way that we can. In the case of Saakashvili in Georgia, some of his very early steps in fact demonstrably reduced corruption where he replaced the entire police force in Georgia, which was probably the main source of day-to-day corruption for the average Georgian. They were replaced by new people who operated under a new set of



principles. Nothing is perfect and none of this continued for long and ended up in any of these countries being paragons of virtue. But, at the time, it certainly was preferable to the direction that the countries had been going under the old leadership.

BEHRINGER: And, in your position as a deputy of mission, are you just reporting the views of Russia [00:58:00] to the State Department, saying, "Here's the Russian view," or are you making recommendations about how the United States should react to the revolutions in their conversations with Russians? Are you saying we need to reassure them, or what are those kind of conversations, if you can talk about that a little bit.

BEYRLE: Well, the job of the deputy chief of mission in most embassies is kind of the chief operating officer. The ambassador is the one who's going in to see the foreign ministers or, in some countries, the presidents and the prime ministers, really dealing at the policy level. The deputy chief of mission is responsible for keeping the embassy running. Moscow is a huge embassy with 25 or 30 different agencies, the Secret Service, Treasury, Defense Department, NASA, Commerce Department, so there's a lot of administrative work to do there. But I had known Ambassador Vershbow, Sandy Vershbow, for a long time. We were from the same cadre. We were both Russia specialists. And so my job as deputy chief of mission was certainly as the chief operating officer, freeing Sandy up not to have to worry about budget and things like that. But Sandy was also very open and we collaborated, worked together a lot, talked a lot about what we were seeing, how we should frame our recommendations to

Washington in terms of policy. So Sandy was very much the lead on that as the ambassador but he was very generous and collaborative.

And I had a lot of contacts in Russia. My Russian was good enough that I was able to track what I was hearing and reading in the press and watching on television. And certainly I was out talking to a lot of different Russians, [01:00:00] and that is what Washington never gets. Washington always has a sense of what's being said in the press, what the official statements of the Kremlin are, but what Washington needs is the understanding of what the arguments were within the Kremlin that led to that outcome, because, a lot of times, policy is not decisions. It's simply the outcome. It's simply what results from a number of factors. And it's no different on the Russian side than it is on the American side. And the embassy is uniquely placed, especially if it has good contacts, good ability to communicate with the government, with people in the foreign ministry, in the Kremlin, in the Duma and the Federation Council, to get a better sense of really what's happening and to inform Washington of how the policies are being developed in the Kremlin—who's for, who's against, what was discarded, what was never thought of. And that obviously helps Washington craft its responses and also its forward-looking policies, understanding what it's up against in Moscow.

BEHRINGER: Sticking with this theme for a little bit—so you're deputy of mission and then you go to become—

BEYRLE: Yeah. Deputy chief of mission.

BEHRINGER: Sorry, deputy chief of mission, and then you go—



BEYRLE: DCM, in State Department speak.

BEHRINGER: And then you go to become Ambassador to Bulgaria and then you come back to Moscow as ambassador in 2008. And I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about if there was a difference between 2002 and 2008, living in Moscow. Did it feel different? Was your experience much different? Were Russians different in your conversations with them? [01:02:00]

BEYRLE: Well, living in Moscow as a diplomat really hadn't changed very much.

Moscow by the mid-2000s was becoming a much more comfortable place to live. The Russian economy really took off between 2003-2008. A lot of restaurants, shops opened up, roads were paved, the infrastructure got better because Russian income from oil tripled—the price of oil almost quadrupled between 2003 and 2008. And, in the same period, the average Russian's take-home pay, disposable income, almost tripled during that time—something completely unprecedented. And so living as a diplomat in Russia was always a privileged perch, even when I had lived there during Soviet times. I was posted to the embassy 1983 to '85, a very rough time in U.S.-Soviet relations, one of the nadirs of the Cold War. And yet, as a diplomat, you had access to food and stores and things that average Russians didn't have. Those differences had disappeared, obviously, after Russia opened up to the fall of communism. So living in Russia, living in Moscow, as a diplomat really hadn't changed.

What had changed when I came back in 2008 was almost the feeling in the air, the attitude on the part of the official Russians that I spoke to. And that was a consequence of a number of things. Probably one of them significantly



was the [01:04:00] war in Iraq and the fact that the Bush administration had decided, essentially, to push in on that alone. And the Russians had essentially joined the Germans and the French in opposing the invasion of Iraq by the Bush administration, by the United States. We had the coalition of the willing as we called it. The Brits were with us, a number of other countries, including, I might add, Bulgaria, which was a member of NATO by that point. But the Russians had not joined us at that point. And the Russians and President Putin had come to a different understanding, different feeling, vis-a-vis President Bush because of that. They felt essentially that they had been slighted, that they had not been listened to, and that the things that they thought were on offer for them after so conspicuously joining with us in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, things like expanded trade, forgiveness of debt, a closer relationship with NATO—although that's a longer story, the Russians never really took advantage of it, there was even conversation at one point that the Russians might join in NATO—none of that came to fruition. The Bush administration by that point was focused very much on the war in Iraq and Afghanistan to a lesser degree. And, again, relations with Russia assumed a much a lower priority, and the Russians felt that and were aggravated by it.

But I think a larger part of the reason that the Russian attitude changed was economic. And it was that reversal of fortune that I described between 2002-2008, [01:06:00] essentially Putin's first two terms, when Russia economically was suddenly in better shape than it ever had been, able to pay off all of its outstanding sovereign debt, which was tens of billions of dollars. There was no

thought in 2001 about where the money was ever going to come from to pay that off, not to mention money available for upgrading the Russian military. I mentioned the disposable income of the average Russian, who suddenly saw he had the ability to fly to Bali for a winter vacation with money he simply—he or she, families—had never had before. And this somehow convinced the Russian leadership that they were on the right track, that they had kind of solved the equation, and that they didn't need the United States and Western Europe to be their helpers anymore, to be their promoters, to be their supporters. And in fact, a narrative even developed that the things that were still wrong with Russia—corruption, pockets of poverty, the need to build up the military to confront the American missiles—was because of the United States, that the United States was again, not an enemy of Russia, but certainly an adversary which was making Russia's life difficult.

And by the time I arrived as ambassador in 2008—this was before the war broke out with Georgia—you could feel it in the air. The air was fairly crackling with a sense of grievance. I remember talking to contacts in the Russian Duma, Federation Council, Foreign Ministry, people that I had [01:08:00] dealt with on a regular daily basis when I was deputy chief of mission, and I saw now in my first month as ambassador—their attitude was completely different. And especially towards Georgia. They were dismissive and even angry because of what had happened between Georgia and the United States and Western Europe with regard to NATO enlargement.

We're kind of branching off here into different areas, so let me just stop at that point. I'll say that the atmosphere in Russia in 2008 was markedly different than the atmosphere that I'd left in 2005. The Russians were clearly spoiling for a fight. And I used those words when I came back to Washington on consultations at the end of July, and talked to Dan Fried, the assistant secretary of state, and told him this, that I was concerned, and obviously relations between Russia and Georgia were quite troubled at that time. We didn't know that a war was going to break out, but it certainly seemed likely.

BEHRINGER: And speaking of—you mentioned NATO enlargement right there toward the end. You go to become Ambassador of Bulgaria and not everyday we get to talk about Bulgaria. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about Bulgaria's role in U.S.-Russian relations and what it was like to be in Bulgaria in that period?

BEYRLE: Bulgaria was always a very special country among the Warsaw pact nations, and even after the collapse of the Warsaw Pact. And even before the Warsaw Pact existed, [01:10:00] Bulgaria had always had a special relationship with Russia. The historical mythology which had developed, which had some basis in historical truth but was also gilded a bit, was that the Russians had liberated the Bulgarians from the Ottoman yoke in the in the 1800s. And Russia and Bulgaria shared a lot, the languages are probably the closest Slavic languages except for maybe Slovak and Czech. They both use the Cyrillic alphabet, religion—Russian, Bulgarian Orthodox, very, very similar, same wing of the Eastern Orthodox Church. So there was a lot of, let's say, sympathy towards

Russia in Bulgaria and this, during the Soviet period, during the Warsaw Pact, the Russians and Bulgarians worked hard to make the most of. Bulgaria wanted to be the special member of the Warsaw Pact. Some people even called it the 16th Republic of the Soviet Union.

So after the Soviet Union fell apart, Bulgaria became an independent country. Russia still maintained significant influence in that country, and there was not an immediate anti-Russia backlash as we saw in the Czech Republic, in Poland, even in Romania and Hungary. Bulgaria was always more in the middle, and a large part of the reason for that was energy. Bulgaria still depended on Russia for close to 90% of the energy it got, both gas and petroleum, and that gave the Russians tremendous leverage.

At the same time, it didn't stop the Bulgarians [01:12:00] from pushing to join NATO in the second round, after the initial round of NATO enlargement, which took in the Czechs, the Poles, and the Hungarians. The [Bulgarians]³ joined in the next wave after that. And by the time I arrived as ambassador in 2005, they were already functioning members of the NATO alliance. They were already sending troops to Afghanistan and to Iraq, a battalion or so, as I recall, and the main thing that I worked on as ambassador in Bulgaria was the defense relationship. We signed a defense cooperation agreement with the Bulgarians when I was ambassador, which allowed for the opening of two bases—we call them Joint Military Facilities, one a land army facility in Novo Selo and another air base at Bezmer, which was very important for the United States—at the

³ Ambassador Beyrle mistakenly says “Russians” here.



time we were waging war in Iraq—as a kind of staging point. Bulgaria was never used for any of the black sites for interrogations, enhanced interrogation techniques that some of the other former Warsaw Pact countries hosted. Bulgaria didn't do that. But it certainly was a very active and a very willing partner with us in terms of this defense cooperation agreement, because the Bulgarians saw this as a way to upgrade their own military capability. And when the Bulgarians talk about military capability, they always are casting a wary eye in the southeastern direction toward Turkey, which is their historical foe. So [01:14:00]—let me just finish—in terms of the role that Bulgaria played in the U.S.-Russia relationship, it really didn't play much of a role at all. Russia played a role in the U.S.-Bulgarian relationship, I would say. I remember at one point giving an interview in which we were talking about this, and I suggested in a kind of brainstorming way that maybe we could think of a way that Bulgaria could become a bridge for Russia and the United States to have closer cooperation. And I was very quickly disabused of that notion and told in no uncertain terms by some senior people in the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry, Bulgarian friends of mine, that I should never use that word bridge again in talking about relations between Russia and the United States. One of my friends said, “Don't ever talk about Bulgaria as being something that Russia and the United States are going to walk over.” [laughter]

BEHRINGER: I see that we've got about 10 more minutes. I wanted to move ahead to the conflict in Georgia. What was your view—or I guess we'll start with how and why did the conflict break out?

BEYRLE: Wow, we only have 10 or 15 minutes for that? [laughter] Why did and how did the conflict broke out—there are just a number of reasons. I would say the proximate cause was probably the Rose Revolution, which brought Saakashvili to power. Saakashvili was probably the most demonstratively anti-Russian leader in all of the [01:16:00] states of the former Soviet Union, certainly on the border of Russia. There was no one who was more openly anti-Russian, talked about this in a way that the Russians were driven crazy by. The arrogance of this guy to have the temerity to criticize us when Russia and Georgia have had such long cultural relationships, a lot of intermarriage, cultural links, religious links. The Russians were angered by this and the Russians wanted to be in a position of dictating to the Georgians to a degree that Saakashvili was not willing to countenance.

So there was a kind of built-in friction there that was exacerbated by Saakashvili's hard push to get Georgia into NATO. And there was a NATO summit meeting that was held in Bucharest in April of 2008, the year that the war broke out in August, at which there was essentially a rather animated debate among the NATO allies about whether the Membership Action Plan, which was the main stepping stone leading to membership in the NATO alliance—it's something that the Czechs, the Poles, the Hungarians, Bulgarians, everyone who had joined NATO had gone through a Membership Action Plan to show that they had essentially met the code. There was a great deal of debate leading up to and at the Bucharest NATO summit about whether or not MAP, as we called it, the Membership Action Plan, should be offered to

Georgia and to Ukraine, which in effect would have been a signal of a green light that they were on their way to join the NATO alliance, and this obviously was something that [01:18:00] the Russians were very opposed to.

And the Europeans, especially the Germans and the French, were concerned that it would cause a tremendous backlash in Moscow that would have effects on their own relationships with Moscow and with the Kremlin. So, in the end, it was decided that the communique at the end of the NATO summit would say that the allies welcomed the prospect of Membership Action Plan, but made very clear that they were not on track, that they weren't ready yet. When that was being drafted, the American side, which had been fighting very hard to have more forward-leading language, managed to get a sentence in there that said a very unusual thing for a NATO alliance communique. It said that we agreed, the NATO allies agreed, that Ukraine and Georgia will join NATO. It didn't say when, didn't say how, didn't say they were in the Membership Action Plan, but it said very clearly they will join NATO. How the French and the Germans allowed that to happen I don't know—these things are drafted very late at night sometimes. And that was the only thing that Russia paid attention to. Didn't pay attention to the fact that they in fact had not been granted a Membership Action Plan, that they were still in kind of the halfway house on their way to NATO membership. They focused on the fact that this had been said as a fact.

And Saakashvili also trumpeted that in a way that led to frictions throughout the spring and especially in the summer of 2008, there were



overflights by Russian military aircraft over [01:20:00] Georgian territory. There was shelling from North Ossetia into South Ossetia. There's always a kind of irreducible minimum of skirmishing going on, on that border, but it really ramped up in the summer of 2008 to the degree to which that we—Secretary Rice—talked to Saakashvili to explain that we were concerned that he was in effect baiting the Russians, that he was maybe falling in—not baiting them—but falling into a trap, that the Russians were trying to provoke him in a way that would give them a *casus belli*, a defensible reason, for attacking. We could see the handwriting on the wall. I certainly felt that myself in this crackling atmosphere that I described which was very Georgia-focused in a very negative way.

So the actual proximate cause of the war will be debated for a long time, but there's no question that the Russians massed a great number of Russian troops north of the Roki Tunnel, which leads from North Ossetia into Georgia proper, South Ossetia, and that the fighting in Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, ramped up to the point where the Georgians actually killed several Russian peacekeepers who had been deployed there, and that triggered a Russian invasion. And the war was on by August 8th, 2008.

BEHRINGER: And as this crisis is unfolding, you've just become ambassador to Moscow. What was the impact on your ability to do your job and even moving [01:22:00] forward for the last six months of the administration?

BEYRLE: Well, it was interesting because the war actually broke out while I was back in the United States on consultations. I had arrived as ambassador on July 3rd,

in time to host the big embassy reception for Independence Day, which gave me a chance to kind of introduce myself. And then I had my round of meetings for about two, three weeks in which I met all of these Russians and encountered this hostility in the air. And then, as priorly planned, per previously agreed, I went back to Washington for home leave, which had been deferred for several years. I hadn't had, really, a proper vacation since the middle of my tour in Moscow as deputy chief of mission, these things get deferred when you're at the senior levels. So we thought it was going to be a quiet August. And I went back to Washington, and, of course, it turned out not to be a quiet August. Much of my time in Washington, even though I was ostensibly on vacation, was spent in the State Department and in the NSC, monitoring what was happening even before the war broke out because it was very clear that this was ramping up in an unfelicitous way. So, when the war actually broke out, I was in Washington and immediately was thrown into interagency meetings in the White House, at the National Security Council, the State Department, in which we tried to come to terms with what the Bush administration's reaction to the invasion, to the war, should be.

I attended a number of meetings in the Situation Room. One I remember in particular was attended both by President Bush and Vice President Cheney. President Bush had just arrived back from the Beijing Olympics, [01:24:00] in which he had spoken with Prime Minister Putin about this war that had just broken out. Of course, by that point, Medvedev had become president, and he was prosecuting the war in Moscow, but obviously with a lot of long-distance

help from Putin, and Putin flew back very quickly thereafter. President Bush had met and spoken to Putin and he came back for the meeting in the Situation Room for which we had developed a list of options about what we might do in response: sanctions, cutting off economic cooperation.

And I remember we could even hear the helicopter, the “womp, womp, womp” of the helicopter, as it landed on the South Lawn. And we knew the president was coming in, and he in fact did come in. We all stood up, and, before we had even sat down, he looked at Secretary Rice, Condi Rice, who was secretary of state by that point, and he said, “So tell me, who started this war?” Exactly the question that you asked me. “How did this happen?” And we sat down and talked through in some circumstantial detail what had happened, what our intel was telling us.

We went through the list of options for reactions, decided on some, struck some of the other ones out. One of the ones that was stricken out I recall in particular was “recall the American ambassador from Moscow.” This had been put on—not at my urging, I was against it—but they said, “Look, for this to be complete, soup to nuts, this has to be on there.” I said, “Okay,” although I was prepared to argue against it. President Bush, as we went through the list, got to the bottom, “recall American ambassador,” and he looked up and I’m sitting right at the table and he says, “Recall the ambassador?” He says, “Beyrle’s right here.” I had [01:26:00] met him a number of times—in Slovenia, he had come to Bulgaria when I was ambassador to meetings in the Oval Office with the Bulgarian president, prime minister. So he said, “Beyrle? Beyrle’s right here.

Did we already recall him?” And I said, “No, Mr. President, we haven't, and here's why we shouldn't. We need—you need to have someone who you can trust and who the Russians know and understand. And I can talk to these people. I can find out what's going on.” And this was never really a serious option, but it had to be talked about, and by the time the list came up for a second look several days later, that point had disappeared.

But remember this all happened at a time that two other things were happening. First, there was an election campaign going on for president. George Bush was in the last months of his presidency. Obama and McCain were fighting it out to see who the new president would be. And at the end of an administration, there's always a bit of pressure that gets let out. People are tired. People are looking forward to the end, to being able to get out from the pressure cooker, from the crucible. And there's just a little less forward-leaning, a little less push to do things than there would be at the beginning of the administration when—or even the middle of the administration—even for something as important as a war between Russia and Georgia on Georgian territory.

The second thing that was happening, obviously at the same time, was the economic crisis. Bear Stearns, Lehmann Brothers had disappeared. The stock market was collapsing, the auto industry. There were many, many other factors to consider when we looked at economic sanctions against Russia, and the Europeans [01:28:00] in particular had no stomach for this at all. And President Bush understood that, if we don't have the Europeans with us on economic

sanctions—a basic fact that holds true to this day—our sanctions will basically amount to nothing because they'll be circumvented by the Europeans, and the Russians will get everything they need, irrespective of the fact that we are sanctioning and preventing things from happening. So there were things that were shut down, contacts that were stopped. But, in the end, we—President Bush particularly—decided not to push for economic sanctions against Russia as a response to that. That I remember very clearly.

BEHRINGER: We're a few minutes over time. I wanted to give Simon, do you have any questions you wanted to ask real quick?

MILES: Well I just wanted to actually pick up on a thread that you mentioned there, Ambassador—the election campaign, and your tenure spanned the Bush and the Obama administrations with Moscow. You're in Moscow for the much-lauded “Reset.” And I wonder if you could, maybe just by way of conclusion, talk to us a little bit about how you saw things change as the Bush administration left. You didn't get to leave and a new team that came into the White House, and maybe how you would compare their initial efforts at dealing with the Russians to the Bush administration's initial efforts at dealing with the Russians.

BEYRLE: Well, I've been dealing with U.S.-Soviet, U.S.-Russian relations for a long time. And I know that any time there's a change of administrations, on one side or the other, it really turns a page and makes things possible that even months earlier [01:30:00] would have been very hard, if not impossible, to conceive of. In the Russian case, we had, at this time, we had a double change of leadership

because Dimitri Medvedev, only months before that, had become the new president of Russia, essentially filling in for Vladimir Putin for the four years that Putin was prohibited constitutionally from succeeding himself.

And what became apparent early on was that the ability of the two leaders, Medvedev and Obama, to speak a kind of common language about some of the joint problems we were facing, including terrorism, dealing with the economic crisis, the consequences of it, were much different than the ability that Bush and Putin had to speak about these things. Obama and Medvedev were very close in age. They were both law professors. They both had two daughters. There was just a similarity, and Medvedev, for his part, had always been a much more—in the Russian sense—progressive Western-leaning political leader, politician, than President Putin had been.

So it was clear fairly early on that there was going to be a chance to take care of some important business, and the most important business to be taken care of was the fact that we didn't have really the prospect of a functioning arms control treaty for very much longer. We needed the predictability, stability that a treaty would give us, not only in terms of continuing the build down on both sides [01:32:00] which [inaudible], but also in ensuring that we had the monitoring, the inspection, the data exchange, which was a tremendous confidence-building measure on both sides, and kept us from worrying unduly about the fact that we were armed to the teeth nuclearly, in a nuclear way that were pointed at each other, something that are never very far from our minds—again, that kind of existential problem that we had a global

obligation, both countries, so we had a global obligation to manage U.S.-Russia relations in the most positive, the most responsible way that we could, simply because we had over 90% of the nuclear weapons on the face of the earth. So, it led in fairly short order to an understanding on both sides that we could and would work together on a new treaty, which became the New START treaty, which Obama and Medvedev signed in Prague in 2010, really within the first two years of Obama being president. This was part of the Reset.

The Reset had other aspects that allowed us to resupply our forces in Afghanistan through Russian territory—something that really had been unthinkable in the last years of the Bush administration, although we needed it very much. The Russians had the prospect of joining the World Trade Organization. They were the world's largest economy at that point outside the WTO, and we very much wanted them to be bound by the rules, even though, as with the Chinese, there were questions about how much they would adhere to those rules. At least we wanted them inside that. There were visa liberalizations to make it easier for businessmen and students to travel—there were a lot of things [01:34:00] that we could do and we actually did get done during the reset. So it was a qualitatively different relationship, and it produced results.

The reset is often criticized as a failure. The reset isn't a failure. It produced the START Treaty. It produced the resupply of forces, a 1-2-3 nuclear cooperation agreement, many other things which serve the interests of both sides. The problem with these periods of U.S.-Russia relations where we get



things done—and we always give them names: detente, peaceful, coexistence, the reset—it's not that they don't produce results in the interest of both countries. It's that they never last. They're never sustainable. And the reset, for reasons we can discuss in a different conversation, had about three years of steam in it. And then the steam gave out when President Putin came back as president in 2013-2014, but we'll save that for a different conversation.

MILES: I'm struck if I may very quickly at the contrast between—at the end of 2008, the inability to have a conversation about the state of the relationship, contrasted with the Slovenia meeting and this really great initial conversation—a huge change which is commonly attributed to a change in the mindset or the priorities of the Russian leader, Vladimir Putin. Would you agree with that characterization?

BEYRLE: I would ascribe the change at the end of the Obama administration, the end of the reset, certainly, largely to the return of President Putin to the Kremlin as president, but, look, look at the [01:36:00] previous four administrations. Every U.S. president—beginning with Ronald Reagan through Bush, certainly Clinton, Bush 43, Obama—all of them came into office looking for a more productive, more constructive relationship with the Soviet Union—first the Soviet Union—and especially with Russia. And each one of those presidents, especially the last three that I mentioned—and we can add President Trump to that list—all of them left feeling that their desire had been unfulfilled and frustrated. So this is part of the cyclical nature in U.S.-Soviet, now U.S.-Russia relations, simply two great continental powers which do share some interests,

but have very different views of the world and their place in it. And that, more often than not, will lead us on divergent paths and make it more important, more incumbent on us, if not to travel down the same path—some areas we can: in space, counterterrorism cooperation; obviously, missile defense we can't—but we never want to diverge to the point where we really do have to start worrying about armed conflict. Because the consequences of that obviously would be cataclysmic, not just for both countries, but for the world.

BEHRINGER: Well, Ambassador, we thank you so much for giving us your time and speaking with us at such length. It's been a real pleasure to talk with you.

BEYRLE: Thank you very much. Thanks very much for having me, I enjoyed it.

MILES: Thanks, so did we.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]