U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: Daniel Fata

Deputy assistant secretary of defense for Europe and NATO, 2005-2008

Interviewers:

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[Transcription Begins]

BEHRINGER: My name is Paul Behringer with the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University.

FATA: My name is Dan Fata. I'm a former deputy assistant secretary of defense for Europe and NATO from 2005 to 2008.

BEHRINGER: And would you begin by describing your background on U.S.-Russian relations and then talk a little bit more about what your role entailed in the Bush administration?

FATA: Sure. My involvement with Russia started in the late nineties when I was a think-tanker, first at the American Enterprise Institute and then at the Council on Foreign Relations. My job then was as an analyst, covering the war on the Balkans, when I was at American Enterprise Institute, and Russia's involvement there. But then, really, when I joined the Council on Foreign Relations in mid-1997, I was the research assistant to the George F. Kennan Senior Fellow. Her name is Ambassador Paula Dobriansky.[1] And so at that point, I really started to get interested in Russia issues, but Russia issues really as it related to NATO, to Central and Eastern Europe.

At that point, in the late nineties, Partnership for Peace had been established by NATO, and I'm sure we'll talk about that later.[2] But we started to

[1] After her work at the Council on Foreign Relations, Amb. Dobriansky served as the undersecretary of state for global affairs in the George W. Bush administration, and as special envoy to Northern Ireland.
[2] Partnership for Peace (PfP), which Russia joined, was officially established in 1994. According to NATO's website, PfP enables "participants to develop an individual relationship with NATO, choosing their own

see the first round of NATO enlargement, and there was a lot of effort that was being undertaken between the [Clinton] administration and the Russian government, which was then the [Boris] Yeltsin government, as well as the think-tank community about really thinking about what a relationship with Russia could be, should be, and how to allay Russian fears about NATO enlargement. So that's where I cut my teeth.

I would then work on Capitol Hill as a senior staffer in both the House and the Senate on the [00:02:00] Republican Policy Committee in both chambers, and I was the policy director for [the] National Security and Trade [committees]. And at that point, NATO enlargement was still going on. 9/11 had happened. There was [a lot of activity and thought on] how we were partnering with Russia on everything from terrorism to nuclear terrorism and other issues. And so I remained [involved with] the Russia issues but [with] less of a focus, just given my portfolio was so broad.

And then in 2005, in the middle of the year, I was appointed and started my job in the Pentagon as the deputy assistant secretary of defense for Europe and NATO, of which initially Russia was not in my portfolio, but given it was NATO,

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priorities for cooperation, and the level and pace of progress" (https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_50349.htm). Fifteen of the signatories have become part of NATO since joining PfP (https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_82584.htm). In 1997, Russia and NATO signed the Founding Act, which established the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council "as a forum for consultation and cooperation." In 2002, this was upgraded to the NATO-Russia Council (NRC). NATO temporarily suspended the NRC after Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008. In 2014, NATO cut off "all civilian and military cooperation with Russia" in response to "Russia's military intervention and aggressive actions in Ukraine, and its illegal and illegitimate annexation of Crimea" (https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_50090.htm).

Russia touched my portfolio quite immensely. And then in January of 2007, I assumed responsibility for Russia and Eurasia and the Caucuses as well. So, at that point, Russia was a day-to-day issue for me to manage in my portfolio.

BEHRINGER: And you had the unique experience of serving as a policy advisor and director in the House and Senate before joining the administration. I was wondering if you could talk about Congress's role in U.S.-Russian relations during this period a little bit?

FATA: Sure. As I reflect on that, there are a couple areas in which Congress was either interested or involved. One was the response to 9/11. And as the administration was looking at how we were going to go about and execute the war in Afghanistan, but also to keep America safe, there were a lot of cooperative agreements that were being undertaken with friends, allies and then others, i.e., Russia, as to how we would come [00:04:00] to common understanding on going after terrorists and then turning terrorists over. So there was a lot of interest from the congressional side as to whether Russia was a partner with us. And at that point the Beslan attack had already happened, and there was a lot of common cause between the U.S. and Russia.[3] And so Congress was interested there and what that looked like and whether there really could be a true partnership.

[3] On 1 September 2004, Chechen terrorists occupied a school in Beslan, North Ossetia. They took over 1,000 people hostage. The standoff lasted three days, and ended after Russian special forces raided the premises following an explosion in the gymnasium. According to some reports, Russian soldiers fired into the school just prior to the explosion. In total, over 330 people, including more than 180 children, died in the attack.

The second aspect that Congress looked at, of course, was arms control, and both of my bosses in the House and the Senate, so Congressman Chris Cox [R-CA] in the House, and then Senator Jon Kyl [R-AZ] in the Senate, were proponents of two things—one, democracy, and two, a strong arms control policy. And at that time, even as we talk today, the U.S. and Russia are really the only two bound by most agreements—China was not discussed, and it makes it complicated now. But it was everything from about missile defense to START [the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty] to New START.[4] What kind of reductions could we honestly accept, and what would we hold Russia's feet accountable for? Could we get out of the ABM [Anti-Ballistic Missile] Treaty? So there was a lot of discussion on the Hill just about that aspect. And for anybody who's worked on those issues, there is a certain expertise that's out there that grew up in the Cold War, that was very active, that was constantly engaging my bosses as well as coming up to brief members and such on what responsible arms control, missile defense policy looks like. So those are the two big areas, in addition to democracy, that Congress was involved in.

BEHRINGER: [What did you think about pulling out of the] ABM Treaty, which the Bush administration did early in the term?[5]

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[4] Following the earlier START I, II, and III agreements and entering into force in 2011, this agreement was formally named Measures for the Further Reduction and Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms.

[5] Due to a technical glitch, the first part of some of the interviewer's questions were cut off in the recording, although Mr. Fata was able to hear them during the interview.

FATA: I supported the move. I thought it was the right move, [00:06:00] given that where we were seeing the proliferation of threats—North Korea, Iran, at the time we believed Iraq, and other things—that we needed to be able to have the ability to defend the United States. I wasn't involved in those. That was [before] my time in the DoD [Department of Defense], so I wasn't involved in the DoD negotiations with the Russians on that. I would be involved in later ones, as part of the questions that I think you put for me to consider, including what would happen after 2007. But overall, I think there was a pretty good level of support, at least amongst the Republican caucus, for pulling out of the ABM Treaty based on the reasons that we thought: that there was a proliferation of ballistic missiles by state actors around North Korea, but also we couldn't quite tell at that time—again, hindsight is 20-20—whether non-state actors were going to be able to get their hands on something.

BEHRINGER: The war in Afghanistan and Russia's cooperation there—when you came into the Defense Department in 2005, what was the Defense Department's relationship with Russia, or how did they see Russia's cooperation on Afghanistan at that point?

FATA: Great question. When it came to Afghanistan, it was clear, on the surface, that Russia wasn't doing anything to obstruct or get in the way of the execution of the mission in Afghanistan. I think, when you pulled back the covers or you just looked under a couple layers, you would see that not everything was altruistic that the Russians were doing. I think they certainly wanted to understand how we were

operating in the region. So I think, if you look at any of the [00:08:00] countries in the region, the Russians had a pretty good intelligence operation. They were doing a lot of minding of what we were doing.

There were some that believed and—I guess we can't prove it through this dialogue here—that the Russians also were helping with the drug trafficking, with the opium and the opioids, which again was financially fueling the Taliban and other movements. And, frankly, the Russians had had experience in Afghanistan before. And again, I can't prove it in this mechanism in which we're talking right now, but there was the belief that the Russians were going around telling Afghans—and of course, Afghanistan was made up and is made up of different tribes—that the Americans aren't going to stay here for long. And so in some ways, undermining our role.

The Russians never played a direct role. There were more than 50 nations that played a direct role in what was called the [International Security Assistance Force (ISAF)] for Afghanistan. The Russians never played a direct role. There was a counterterrorism role that they would help play with the U.S., but not under ISAF. It was being done under the U.S. role. So as I came into the Pentagon, that was how we perceived the Russian role in Afghanistan.

BEHRINGER: I'm interested in your views on NATO-Russian cooperation. What were the mechanisms that the Bush administration viewed as being important for fostering that cooperation and, in particular, [00:10:00] how did—from my reading, historically, the Partnership for Peace (PfP) was a Defense Department initiative

that kind of faded as the nineties went on, but it was still alive in the Bush administration. So I was wondering if you could tell us about how the Bush administration tried to improve NATO-Russian cooperation and what your stance was on the Partnership for Peace during the Bush administration.

FATA: So you've asked a lot there, and there's a little bit of confusing of or blending of timelines. So, for the purpose of historical need, just real quick, the Partnership for Peace was birthed outside of the government. It was actually birthed outside of the government by a few analysts—[F. Stephen] Larrabee, [Ronald] Asmus, [Richard] Kugler, and [Robert] Nurick in a piece. They were all at RAND, and they wrote a piece.[6] One of the authors, Ron Asmus, would actually then join the Clinton administration in the second term as a deputy assistant secretary of state. But when the article came out in 1993, the whole rationale was, you have these newly freed nations of Central and Eastern Europe and beyond—they were under the Soviet Union—that we in the West wanted to see them integrate closer. We wanted to see them develop Western military standards, civilian control, we wanted to see them [develop a] free market economy. What better way to incentivize them than to give them the opportunity to potentially join NATO and potentially join the European Union?

And so, in 1994, the Partnership for Peace was created by NATO, [00:12:00] and, really, it was meant to be—it was an open door to every nation of the former

[6] The RAND Corporation is a government-funded think tank that focuses on public policy research.

Soviet Union, including Russia, that would allow them to develop a relationship with NATO of their own choosing. Nothing imposed by NATO on them. It would be a relationship of their own choosing. Some could embrace to do a lot, some could embrace to do a little, but it would be up to them. And so, in the late nineties, you see the Partnership for Peace really serve as the mechanism by which Poland, [the] Czech Republic, and Hungary would become the first post-Cold War members of the alliance. And then Partnership for Peace would stay active—and to this day, it's still active—to allow that self-tailored relationship between these countries and NATO to develop in which we would see another 10 countries join the NATO alliance as a result.

Again, Russia, Belarus—they were both offered the opportunity to join Partnership for Peace. And I believe, if memory serves, for a short period both were [members], and then both left. Russia would leave Partnership for Peace after the decision was made that the first round of invitations would be extended to Poland, [the] Czech Republic, and Hungary.

In place of Partnership for Peace for Russia, something called the NATO-Russia Founding Act was created in Madrid in 1997. That's the same time the invitations were extended to those first three countries. And what that did was it created its own mechanism for dialogue between Russia and NATO on issues of mutual importance. And you will have heard, and history will have shown, that as part of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, there was a pledge, as NATO agreed to enlarge, that there would be no forces on the new allied territories, no nukes on

them as well. And this was a way to work with Russia to allay fears that this was really meant [00:14:00] to encircle, enclose, or come up upon and pose a threat to Russia.

The NATO-Russia Founding Act would then be replaced years later by the NATO-Russia Council. And so the Founding Act established, literally, the foundation for what a NATO relationship would be in the Yeltsin era. I believe, if my history is right, it was around 2002 or so [that] the NATO-Russia Council was then created, which now was a regular mechanism. So Russians now would have liaisons to NATO and Russia would have a permanent representative to NATO, and the NATO-Russia Council would meet in a variety of formats, again, to serve as a mechanism to deescalate and to manage expectations about what NATO is and is not and that it wasn't directed towards Russia.

It also came at the same time that George W. Bush had become president of the United States. And I say that because the George W. Bush administration and the president at the top had a view that Putin was someone that we could work with, that, you know, the famous quote—and I'll get it wrong—but it's something like, "I've looked into his soul and I've seen someone that we can work with."[7] And that became the mantra for the administration. And so the 2002 NATO-Russia Council—or whatever the exact year was; I know it was in the first term—would be

[7] The exact phrase, which President Bush said after meeting President Putin for the first time in Ljubljana, Slovenia in June 2001, is, "I looked the man in the eye. I found him to be very straightforward and trustworthy. We had a very good dialogue. I was able to get a sense of his soul; a man deeply committed to his country and the best interests of his country." https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/06/20010618.html.

a manifestation of "Let's find a way to work." And if you recall history—Putin would become prime minister in [19]99, and then he would become president. Yeltsin would exit stage. So Putin was the big man on campus for all things Russia, and Bush had just come in. And I'm not trying to say anything negative about the president, because I have nothing but respect for him, but he was relatively new. Putin had been about one year into the job before him. And so I think there was a genuineness about President Bush's [00:16:00] approach towards President Putin, that he's someone we can work with. And that was prior to 9/11, and I think post 9/11, this desire to work together on a variety of fronts just increased.

So by the time I entered the Pentagon in 2005, a lot of this had been in place, and the Putin that we would see in February of 2007 hadn't quite yet reared his head. So we were still on the cooperative phase. The Iraq War had been about a year and a half underway by the time I joined the Pentagon. The second round of NATO enlargement had fully happened, where now the Baltics, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, Bulgaria had now joined, so now 10 members of the former Warsaw Pact, former Soviet Union, if you will, had now joined. The [Iraq] war was underway. Russia's economy wasn't doing so well. So that would set the stage for what would come later. But as I entered the Pentagon, you had that history about Partnership for Peace, about [the] NATO-Russia Founding Act, about the NATO-Russia Council, about President Bush's desire to work with him [Putin]. And that really was how the relationship was viewed as, "How can we find areas of constructiveness?"

BEHRINGER: And how did you view the NATO-Russia Council? Did you think that it did what it was supposed to do, or was it worth all the trouble of going through?

FATA: The NATO-Russia Council was absolutely worth having. I found, and I still find, that we needed that mechanism to be able to talk with Russia. The reality I think was, at that time—and I still believe there are NATO [00:18:00] folks, and U.S. and European thinkers and maybe even officials, that believe Russia's ultimate home resides in the West. That Russia's orientation is not eastward, it's westward. And so I think the NATO-Russia Council served a purpose in being able to engage the Russian leadership again.

It took place at a time when Putin was relatively new. He appeared to have a vision for Russia and a desire to improve Russia. On his border were now 10—or what would become 10—nations that were in NATO, that were leaning towards the EU. And so in many ways, depending on where you sit, that's either a very safe zone that you don't have to worry about, and hopefully there is bleed-over of democracy and free-market capitalism, or it's a danger zone because there may be a bleed-over of democracy and free-market capitalism. And I think ultimately, what we would see is that Putin would view publicly—and I'll come back to this later—that NATO's enlargement or expansion to its westward border was a threat. And so the NATO-Russia dialogue served a purpose to allow Russian views to be able to come out. They're the counter. And the discussion by NATO members in the U.S. to say either, "You're wrong," or "Look at it this way," or "Where can we work?" We wouldn't have had that if it wasn't for the NATO-Russia Council.

There were divisions. So to your question, "was it all that helpful?" Look, there were divisions. I think up until when the NATO-Russia Council was suspended in 2014, there were divisions about how much leniency [00:20:00] can we or should we give Moscow, because NATO enlargement was not popular amongst the Russian people—not only just the Russian leadership, but the Russian people. It was seen by many as threatening. And, of course, Moscow had a role in portraying it that way. But I think there was an acceptance—this is by some, not the Eastern European leaders but the Western European leaders—that maybe we should slow down enlargement. Maybe we should take Russian considerations into our thinking. Are there other adaptive or constructive measures that we can have with Russia? So [the NATO-Russia Council] served many purposes by having it.

BEHRINGER: And you mentioned that the Baltics were brought in 2004. And in 2006, Russia begins to use its leverage in the energy sector against Ukraine and Georgia. And then in 2007, there's that big cyberattack against Estonia. What steps did the Bush administration and the Defense Department in particular take to support NATO allies in Europe more broadly against the energy and the cyber tactics?

FATA: Again, you're going to hear me reference this a few times, that hindsight is 20-20. The attacks on Georgia and Ukraine in that time period—it had become increasingly clear that Putin was not a fan of these revolutions, the Rose and Orange Revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine, respectively. He was not a fan of the two leaders—either [then Georgian President Mikheil] Saakashvili [00:22:00] or [then Ukrainian President Viktor] Yushchenko. And so the fact that Russia or

Putin or whoever was flexing their muscle and demonstrating their leverage that they had over those two countries in terms of energy was not surprising to us. Doesn't mean it was welcomed, and it didn't mean there wasn't a resulting set of conversations that took place between the United States and Russia as well as the United States and our European Union partners about that. But we saw it as a sort of a reflex—look, I'm a fan of both Saakashvili and Yushchenko, so when I say it was a reflexiveness to some of their more bombastic comments and anti-Putin comments, it was accepted that, okay, we're starting to see inklings of who this—meaning Putin—is.

With regard to the attack on Estonia, though, that did catch us flat. I would make two comments. One, I don't think we responded as well as Estonia expected. And I think that's because, two, at the time, it was the first time something like that had happened, and therefore it was hard to figure out the forensics of it. Was it the Russian state? Was it a Russian-backed group? And for years leading up to that, there had been a discussion in NATO about whether a cyberattack against critical infrastructure would be considered an Article 5 violation—so Article 5, meaning if there's an attack on one, it's an attack on all. And would a cyberattack against critical infrastructure, a financial network, anything like that constitute an Article 5 [00:24:00] invocation? Therefore, NATO [would have] to come to the defense.

And I recall at the time, in the lead-up to the attack—again, just as we're having writ large this conversation—it came up at the 2006 Riga Summit. The

French and a couple others said, "No, we don't believe that would constitute an Article 5, and it's not really NATO's domain. That's an EU domain, not a NATO domain." And that was a big factor to what was happening back then—what was true NATO and what wasn't. And so I look at the Estonia attack, and it really didn't take us more than just a few months to realize we probably could have responded differently. Estonia would set up a cyber Center of Excellence.[8] There was NATO support for that. But really, for the most part, the cyberattack was allowed to have had happened with minimal consequence coming out of the alliance.

BEHRINGER: I read that you attended the two-plus-two meetings with Secretaries [Condoleezza] Rice and [Robert] Gates and the Russians on trying to find a way to cooperate on missile defense. I was wondering if you could talk about those meetings, your memories of those meetings, and who was there on the Russian side as well, and then how realistic were the options for cooperation?

FATA: So the genesis of those—at least the missile defense talks—as part of the two-plus-two—and two-plus-two means SecDef [Secretary of Defense] and SecState [Secretary of State] on the U.S. side and the Russian counterparts—the genesis for that was the decision that was made in January of 2007.[9] If it wasn't Secretary Gates's first decision, it was his second major decision, and it was a decision that

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[8] Centers of Excellence are NATO centers specializing in doctrinal development, education, experimentation, and analysis on key defense concepts, including cyber, missile defense, extreme weather operations, security policing, among many others.

[9] Mr. Fata says "2006" here but clarifies below that Gates made the decision in January 2007.

was held off by [00:26:00] [outgoing Defense] Secretary [Donald] Rumsfeld. And that decision was where to place what we would call "third site" in Europe for the United States missile defense program. At this time, missile defense was a big Bush priority—again, going back to why we got out of the ABM [Treaty]. And so the government decided it needed to have a missile defense system in order to protect the homeland. And so we had missile defense sites in Alaska. We had missile defense sites in other parts of the United States, but we needed a non-U.S. site. Presuming that the ballistic missiles would be launching out of the Middle East, you needed to have a site in relatively northern Europe in order to detect it, so you had time to shoot it.

We were looking at a variety of different locations. The decision was ultimately made by Secretary Gates to put what was called "third site" in Poland and the Czech Republic, so a set of launchers in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic. And the Russians would object to this quite strongly, claiming that the radar system in the Czech Republic could detect a Russian launch, and therefore the shooter in Poland could take it out. I had gone around Europe for almost a year explaining that the system was not designed for Russia, and from our perspective, in terms of just pure physics, we actually couldn't see a Russian launch in time where we could catch it [with] anything coming out of Poland. So we debunked the Russian argument. But the idea was this was always designed against a Middle East launch. This system would not help us with a North Korean launch, the way that things would work, the trajectories would work. So it was really meant for a

Middle East launch. But Russia wasn't buying it, or if they did buy it, they still used it as a negotiating tactic. [00:28:00]

By mid-to-late spring of 2007, following Putin's February 2007 Munich speech, in the either late-March or early-April [2007] trip that Secretary Gates, Ambassador Edelman, and myself made to Moscow, where Gates sat down with Putin, the two-plus-two talks would be launched. And so I was a party to that as was the under secretary, Eric Edelman. I had some of my team there, the Russia experts. We had my colleague who did missile defense, Brian Green. We had the secretary on the State Department side—it was Secretary Rice. It was the [recently nominated] under secretary for arms control, John Rood,[10] and then a couple of my DAS [deputy assistant secretary of state] counterparts. And the two-plus-two talks would have multiple aspects to them—Ukraine-Georgia, or NATO membership but with Ukraine-Georgia. It would have missile defense. It would have some other classified topics.

But on the missile defense discussion, it was clear that the Russians were not going to move off their position that our system being placed there could detect and then destroy any Russian launches and therefore was an unfair advantage. It was something that violated just the principle of cooperation coming out of the ABM [Treaty]. And so the Russians offered us a radar site in Azerbaijan.

[10] John Rood was nominated for the position of under secretary of state for arms control and international security affairs in March 2007; in September of that year he was designated "acting under secretary" but was never confirmed by the Senate.

It's called Gabala. And they said, "Look, if you're not going to get rid of the Poland and Czech Republic sites, then allow us to have a plugin to this common picture, and let us use this radar down in Azerbaijan." [00:30:00] And the reality is we sent a team to Azerbaijan to go check it out, and it was very antiquated, very antiquated technology. And ultimately we would say no during the process of these two-plus-two talks, that it doesn't work. They were going to operate the Gabala radar. They said we can have U.S. folks there, but they wanted folks inside the Poland and the Czech Republic facilities, to which both those countries said, "No way, we've already had Russians on our territory. We're good. No more."

And so in hindsight, we made a mistake. We made a mistake by saying no to the Gabala radar. We probably could have negotiated whose personnel was going be on what. But as I looked back at this just a few years after I left, I really thought—and I've had this conversation with fellow Bush folks—that, [in] my view, Russia was trying to find a way to work with us on this missile defense system so that they could either sell it to the Russian people or make it not look like a strategic loss. And even as crappy as the Gabala radar was, we just should have said yes. We never had to turn it on. The Russians probably knew how bad off it was. But it was their way of saying, "Look, you're about cooperation, let's cooperate." And we said no. Would that have changed anything that happened afterwards? I have no idea. But we may have made a tactical mistake by not accepting the Gabala radar into this "greater" system to therefore show cooperation.

Let me provide one more bit of context for that. So in 2006—it would be one of Rumsfeld's last trips to Europe [00:32:00]—I joined him in a bilateral [negotiation] with his counterpart, Sergei Ivanov—so the Russian defense minister, former KGB lieutenant general. There were many parts that were classified, but in that discussion, what we heard was that Russia was very concerned about the proliferation of ballistic missiles to its south and to its east—so Iran, Pakistan China, North Korea—and it was not concerned about its western border, meaning NATO. [Ivanov] said, "We see nothing but stability at our western border. So we know we don't have to spend as much time defending that. We know you're not going to attack us. What we're worried about is our southern and eastern border. That's where we see a lot of threats growing with missiles and others." And Rumsfeld and Ivanov would have a discussion about what that meant, what Russia was thinking of doing. So I happened to be there for that meeting. It was just Rumsfeld and myself. And then I would happen to be in those two-plus-two talks. And of course, Rumsfeld and I out-briefed everybody after this meeting.

But that was part of the reason why I thought, in retrospect, just accepting the Gabala radar could have been something that may have shown that we understood Russian concerns about the growing threats. And again, even if the radar was crappy, the Russians were still using it. It could have [given] them some sense that, okay, we share the same when it comes to proliferation of ballistic missiles.

BEHRINGER: [President Putin delivered a now-famous speech at the Munich Security conference in February 2007]. So, given what you just said about missile defense [00:34:00]—first of all, were you there for the speech?

FATA: I was.

BEHRINGER: And can you give us your recollection of how it unfolded. And then, were you surprised by it? Do you view it as a turning point in the relationship? It sounds like there were still room for this ambiguous, "cooperate in some areas, stand up to the Russians in other areas" framework, for lack of a better term, that the Bush administration had been working with here. How did you view the Munich speech that way?

FATA: I was there. It was Secretary Gates's first European trip having become SecDef. When he took over, he immediately went to Iraq and Afghanistan, but this would be his first Europe trip. So his first European defense ministerial. I had been in the job for 18 months at this point, had done multiple trips. I think at that point I had done, I don't know, eight trips with Secretary Rumsfeld, eight or nine trips. I would ultimately do a little more than 20 between both secretaries. But it was his first. The way DoD reorganized itself, I had just fallen under [Assistant Secretary of Defense] Peter Rodman. It would be Peter's final trip. Peter would retire.

And so, having done [the Munich Security Conference] multiple times, I explained to the secretary what to expect: "Sir, you're going to be in this big room in the Bayerischer Hof in Munich. If you're at the podium, when you look, as you look to your right, you're going to see the U.S. delegation. You're going to see our

senior uniform folks. You're going to see the members of Congress, and then there's going to be all these brainiacs and think-tankers. And then, as you're at the podium, you're looking to the left—that's the entire European delegation. So you have defense ministers, you have parliamentarians, you have policy [00:36:00] officials and such." And I said, "It's big, it's 500 or so folks, but usually after the German chancellor, it's the U.S. defense minister who, up to that point, was the senior rep that commands all the attention." I said, "This year is going to be a little different. President Putin is going to speak after Chancellor [Angela] Merkel. And then you'll speak after him." And so [Gates said], "Okay. I've got it." And so we had prepared a speech for him, sort of what would become the traditional speech of, "Europe needs to spend more, Europe needs to help more in Iraq and Afghanistan," blah, blah, blah.

And so we get there. Chancellor Merkel makes her speech. President Putin is now ready to make it his first time and his last time that he would be there. So again, you got 500-600 people packed in this room. And exactly as I laid out, the congressional delegation were the first two rows. Secretary Gates in row three was the corner aisle seat, so Putin could look directly at him. And then we were—myself, Ambassador [Victoria] Toria Nuland, who was our ambassador to NATO, and then Kurt Volker, who was my counterpart at State Department—we all sat next to each other, and then the U.S. European Command four-stars were all behind us. And we had no idea when Putin started what the speech would turn into.

You asked me a question if I thought this was a seminal moment. We knew at the time, I knew at the time, that this was changing everything, and I've gone on the record of calling it the "coming-out party for the resurgent Russia," because the Russia that Putin presented on February [00:38:00] [10th],[11] 2007 would be the Russia that we've seen today. So that's when things fully, really changed. So as President Putin was making his remarks, obviously Gates is one row ahead of me, and I'm not going to go tap on his shoulder. But instead, if you recall, at the time we had BlackBerries, and so you had [the ability] to really punch away. And Toria, Kurt, and I—we were punching notes to each other saying, "We think that this has just changed everything." And one of the questions bouncing between us was, "Who's going to let National Security Advisor Steve Hadley know, and, following this, do we need to have the secretary participate in a virtual National Security Council meeting?" That's how serious we were taking what Putin was saying [in real time].

So what was he saying? Putin came up. He was lit up. He was on fire. He was ready to go. This had been building in him for a while. Sorry, I need to correct something I just said [see footnote 9]. So, Gates would make the decision in January of 2007 on third site, because Rumsfeld would leave in November-December of [20]06. So Gates's first decision on third site was January of [20]07. So now, to pick this back up, that was the straw that broke the camel's back for Putin.

[11] Mr. Fata says "February 8th" here, but later clarified that Putin spoke on the 10th.

So Putin now comes in February of 2007 to the Munich Security Conference, calling America the hyperbolic superpower, how all the problems in the world are result of America's, basically, ego and machismo, that it violates the rule of law. And he would go on and on and on.

So, as I mentioned, we were all [seated] on one side. The Europeans were on another. And every European head was doing the north-south [nodding]. [They were] in complete agreement. So you have a war going not so [00:40:00] greatly in Iraq by 2007, you have a whole bunch of stuff that's happened. Putin has expressed his displeasure. And so you got a whole bunch of north-south movement of the heads by the Europeans. And then, as Putin's continuing with his rant, he decides now it's time to go talk about what needs to change in Europe and potentially even changing this pan-European organization called the OSCE, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. And at that point, the Europeans broke out of their trance, and now you could tell that they realized the conversation had shifted from bashing America to, now, "I got my eyes set on you. The way you've treated me across Europe hasn't been all that great. And I'm going to put some proposals forward for how Russia can play a greater role in pan-European security."

So the Q&A [part] would happen, and Putin would just dig in his heels, whether it be about Russia-Georgia, whether it be about missile defense, the third site, and other things, and the problem that the U.S. poses. So the speech would end. There'd be a brief pause. [Peter] Rodman and I were like, "We've got to go find the secretary. We've got to figure out if he wants his speech rewritten." And

[we find] the secretary—cool as a cucumber. He's waiting for me and Peter. And he said, "So what did you guys think?" And so, in pure deference, I let Peter go first, and then I offered my comments, that basically was, "Look, we didn't see this one coming. Me, Toria, and Kurt—we let Washington, let our counterparts, know. I let Ambassador Edelman know what was going on." So Peter says, "So, sir, do you need us to redo your speech?" And Secretary Gates looked at us and notes [00:42:00] that he had been taking on his little note card there. And he said, "What do you think of a response like this?" And it was, "One cold war is enough. We don't need a second one." And Peter and I looked at each other. "Sir, that's perfect." He goes, "Yeah, we don't need anything rewritten." And he would stick with his speech, and that's the line he would deliver. And yeah, it's hard not to get emotional about it because—talk about being a proud American. I was a proud American when the secretary delivered that because he lowered the temperature in the room. Instead of adrenaline pumping, the endorphins now started to set in, and it left a calm, because the secretary was an adult here. He had lived a life of dealing with the Soviets. He had walked away from that life after his time at CIA. And now here he is, put back into it, and you can just tell the maturity of that time seeped in. And it was a wonderful response. And many folks were saying, what would Rumsfeld have done? And of course, it's an interesting mind game to play. Who knows? But Gates was absolutely the right person at the right time to deliver those remarks.

We would go back to Washington afterwards, and the secretary would debrief the president on this. And the president asked Secretary Gates to go to Moscow to meet with Putin directly. And so, a couple weeks after we got back, off we went—Edelman, myself, a couple members of my team—and Gates would meet with Putin. Secretary Gates writes about this in his book—[00:44:00] President Putin would keep Secretary Gates waiting for about 90 minutes. And at this point, we had heard this was a traditional, Putin-y kind of thing. It would turn out that actually Yeltsin had died that day while we were there. And so, what we believe is that Putin was getting the news of the death, trying to figure out what this means. Anyways, Putin and Gates would ultimately meet, and Putin would lay out for the secretary his narrative about why Putin acted the way he did at Munich. And it was basically, "You and the West fail to appreciate what the end of the Cold War meant. It was the end of the Soviet Union, but it was also the end of the Russian Empire. And you all in the West came in and took advantage of," basically, "a weak Russia. And so, my job is to restore Russian pride in the world and to show that Russia is still a global power." He never said whether that influence and that role would be positive or negative.

And so, we would go out that night. Secretary Gates would come back and brief us. We'd go out to dinner. We did a cigar walk in Red Square, and there was nobody out. Again, Yeltsin had died that day. There wasn't a single candlelight vigil or anything. And it dawned on the secretary that maybe Putin is right. Maybe we don't have an appreciation for what really happened during the nineties, and

the fact that there's nobody out here recognizing—or even protesting or whatever—Yeltsin, I think really struck a chord with the secretary. So again, [the] secretary would go back, would talk with the president, would talk with Secretary Rice, and that would lead ultimately to the two-plus-two to try to figure out, based on what Putin said in Munich, and then what happened when we went out to Moscow, "Is there still a way in which we can find [00:46:00] cooperation and constructive engagement?"

BEHRINGER: Maybe, in the time we've got left, you could talk about the Russian invasion of Georgia—where you were when you heard the news, how the Bush administration responded, and your analysis of the Bush administration's handling of that crisis in the summer of 2008.

FATA: Sure. So with regard to the August, 2008 invasion of Georgia by Russia, one of the decisions that came out of the April 2008 Bucharest Summit was not that Georgia and Ukraine would be extended what was called Membership Action Plan, so that one next step below NATO membership, but instead, the decision was that both countries would be the recipients of a rather forward-leaning statement brokered by Germany, by Chancellor Merkel, and the words said, "Ukraine and Georgia will one day become members." So very forward-leaning. No timetable on it, but very forward-leaning.

And so, in the lead-up to the Bucharest Summit, I was the senior-most policy person in the Defense Department that actually believed that this Membership Action Plan made sense for Georgia and Ukraine, because there were

movements that were taking place—democracy, capitalistic, civilian-controlled movements taking place in both countries that we wanted to continue to foster. The idea of extending security to Georgia and Ukraine at that time was a bridge too far for many allies. But there were myself, those in the State Department, and others that believed we needed to continue to incentivize these countries that had a pro-Western bent. Well, Secretary Gates was one of those that didn't agree with that, because he thought that it would be hard to extend the actual Article 5 to these countries, and we knew it was a red line for Putin. [00:48:00]

Anyways, long story short, that kind of language was agreed, and I was in a private room with the secretary at Bucharest, and he said, "Well, you must be happy. You got what you wanted." I said, "Absolutely not." And he said, "Why not?" I said, "Because Putin controls the timetable now. Because the language here didn't put a timetable." And he said, "Fata, you'll never be happy."

And so—it would be a few weeks after the Bucharest Summit—the secretary would call me to his office, and my boss, Ambassador Edelman, was there, and [Secretary Gates] said, "Dan, I need you to go to Tbilisi," to the capital of Georgia. He said, "Take a look at this." And he showed me some papers, some intelligence that, at the time, looked like the Russians may be having a buildup of forces in the North Caucuses, so just above Georgia. He said, "I need you to go there and talk to Saakashvili and tell them not to take the Russian bait," because we knew, after Bucharest, Putin was not happy.

So off I went. I brought a EUCOM [United States European Command] colleague and went out there and explained what it is that we were seeing and to be careful and not to fall for the Russian bait. About four or five, six weeks later, I was then sent back a second time, because now the intelligence reporting showed that the Russians were doing a large-scale exercise in the North Caucuses and that the forces may not be leaving. And so [I] again went back, and again, Saakashvili was a bit passionate, a bit bombastic, and so it made sense for us to go. My big question was, "Why is it my level? Why isn't it somebody higher?" And the view was, "You have the relations with these folks." And I said, "Okay, got it." So [I] went back, and at this point, the Georgians themselves could see what we were talking about, and we were assured that the Georgians wouldn't fall for any of the bait of acting prematurely in Abkhazia or in [00:50:00] South Ossetia, two areas that were contested by the Russians.

And so, on August 7, I was having dinner with a friend, and I get a call from my desk officer—a smart guy, great guy, Mark Simakovsky, who could speak Hebrew, could speak Russian, and he did his Fulbright in Georgia, and he learned to speak Georgian. And Mark was my Georgia desk officer. And Mark called me. He said, "Hey, Dan." He said, "I'm starting to see something and hear something that's happening. Do I have permission to stay at my desk tonight?" And he's just a civilian, a young civilian. And I said "Sure, keep me posted." About an hour or so later, the Georgian ambassador to Washington [Vasil Sikharulidze], who'd become a friend, said, "Dan, we're starting to see things." At about the same time, Mark

would call me back. He said, "Dan, I'm talking to folks in Tbilisi. It's happening." And so what I said to Mark was, "Hey, Mark, why don't you do this? Why don't you call me or give me an update every hour, hour and a half as something happens." And then, by a little after midnight, when Mark and I—he'd given me more, and it is all on an open line; I'm at my house at this point—I said, "Here's what I need you to do, Mark. Prepare a sitrep—situational report—that we can put in the secretary's bag when he drives in in the morning. I will get to the Pentagon by 5:30, talk to the new three-star"—that's the secretary's senior military aide—"and say, 'This needs to be in the bag.'" He said, "Okay."

I didn't bother to wake my boss up—that's Ambassador Edelman. I just decided to do this because no one else was tracking this better than we were. So at 5:30 in the morning, I get to the Pentagon. Brand-spanking-new three star SMA—senior military assistant—Lieutenant General Dave Rodriguez, who doesn't know me, I don't know him, and I don't have approval from my boss to go do this—but I run into General Rodriguez. I said, "Look, you don't know me. I need a favor. I'm not going to let you down." He goes, "You're right. [00:52:00] I don't know you, but I know your name. You better not screw me." And so we had the classified document that we put in the secretary's bag. And at that point, I decided to stay at the office. Mark had slept there for the night.

I get a call at 7:00 a.m. from Rodriguez: "Fata, the secretary wants to see you at eight o'clock in his office. Bring Mark with you." And I don't know what the heck this means. Mark's shaking. I'm thinking, "I think we're okay, I think we're

okay." Mark and I walk in at eight o'clock. In the SecDef suite, [the secretary] has a very small table that can seat about three people. The secretary's sitting there. And there's the chairman of the joint chiefs, General Rodriguez, my boss; the DoD chief of staff; and I'm missing one other person. And the secretary says, "Why don't you guys have a seat?" And I'm thinking, we're either fired, or this is going to be a really interesting conversation. And the secretary had our memo, and the secretary said, "I read your memo. I need you guys to walk me through it." And so, at that point, being the kind of boss that I was, I gave the secretary enough of what I knew, but I said, "Sir, Mark is the guy here." And Mark walked the secretary through the whole thing, and the secretary sat back, and he said, "Okay, and what's our policy?" And we explained to him what the policy was at the time, and he said, "Okay, then that's what we're going to do."

And again, that's classified, so I can't really say what that is here. But what would ultimately result is [that] there was an obligation that we had for the Georgians that, if something like this had ever happened, that we would move them out of Iraq, where they had about 2000 soldiers, that we would move them out within 96 hours. We did that. My point to the secretary was, "Look, sir, what we need to do right now are three things. We need to stop Russian aggression. We need to express support with the allies and partners. [00:54:00] And then we need to roll back Russian gains." And that would ultimately become the U.S. policy, the national security strategy, that would take place over those next few days.

I will tell you that, as we watched the Russian advances in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the secretary got on the phone, as did the chairman [of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen], with their [Russian] counterparts, and they were assured that there would be no advances on Tbilisi. Once we saw [the Russians were in fact doing] this, they both called their counterparts back and said, "You lied," to which there was [the response], "We need to protect Russian citizens. They're in danger." So you would hear that line again in 2014 [in Ukraine]. You would hear it now in 2022 [in Ukraine]. And so, long way of saying, all this ties back to the February 2007 speech where Putin laid out how he viewed America, how he viewed Russia, where Russia was being wronged, where his red lines were. And I think, as we look at lessons learned, Putin will tell exactly what his intentions are.

Our problem has been that we haven't wanted to believe it, because, for all the right reasons, we were still operating under President Bush's philosophy that he [Putin] is someone that we can work with. And I don't fault the president at all, and I was party to it, but the reality is it took us too long to realize Putin means what he says, and he likes to telegraph things. He will tell you, "Look, if you do this, it's a red line. If you do this, I will act in Syria. If you do this, I will act in Ukraine." And again, our Western view is we don't want to believe that he will actually do it, because we believe that he values the relationship with us as much as we want to believe we need that relationship with Russia.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]