U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: Thomas Graham

Senior Director for Russia, National Security Council, 2004–2007
Director for Russia, National Security Council, 2002–2004

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[**Begin Transcription**]

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

MILES: My name is Simon Miles. I'm at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

GRAHAM: And my name is Tom Graham. I'm at the Council on Foreign Relations.

BEHRINGER: Thank you so much for being with us today, Dr. Graham. So first, we wanted to ask you to talk a little bit about your background in U.S.-Russian relations, and then how you moved from the State Department to the National Security Council in 2002.

GRAHAM: How far back do you want me to go, as far as U.S.-Russian relations are concerned?

BEHRINGER: You can give us a brief overview of your career, your interests.

GRAHAM: I've had a longstanding interest in Russia and U.S.-Russian relations that date back to when I was a very young boy, but I don't think that's material here. I joined the Foreign Service in 1984 and had a number of postings overseas, first in Oslo as a consular officer. But there I dealt extensively with a number of Soviet diplomats. I then went to a tour of duty at the embassy in Moscow. Spent three and a half years there at the very end of the Soviet period from 1987 to 1990. I returned from Moscow to work at the Pentagon on Soviet and then Russian affairs; moved from there to the State Department for a couple of years on the policy planning staff before I went back to Moscow as head of the political internal unit, and then as the acting political councilor in

years from 1994–1997. [00:02:00] I left the Foreign Service at that point to spend three to four years at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in Washington working on, again, Russia-Eurasian affairs, but then I was asked to join first the State Department and then the National Security Council staff in the Bush administration, 2001–2002. I spent about five years on the National Security Council staff.

BEHRINGER: I'm just wondering, can you talk a little bit about the difference between working on the Policy Planning Staff at the State Department versus the National Security Council?

GRAHAM: Yeah, no, certainly. They're very—two different institutions. The State Department has, as you know, a long history. The Policy Planning Staff is supposed to take a long-term view—work directly for the aid of secretary of state. It was founded many, many years ago. George Kennan was the first director of the Policy Planning Staff when George C. Marshall was the secretary of state. And it has a unique function in the State Department in that it's not supposed to deal with day-to-day issues. It's not like a desk at the State Department that handles the bilateral relationship or multilateral relationship. It's really supposed to provide long-term guidance, to help the secretary of state, others understand the nature of the problems that they're going to be facing over the longer term and then factor that into the day-to-day policy that they are engaged with.

The National Security Council staff is something quite different. The National Security Council staff works directly for the president of the United

States. It has a government-wide view [00:04:00] of any policy issue. Its role is really used to coordinate the inter-agency process on any specific issue. If it's Russia, you'll be working with people from the State Department, the Department of Defense, the Energy Department, the Commerce Department, and so on, or you have input from the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Intelligence Community. But the role of the official in the National Security Council staff is always keep in mind what the presidential view is and use that as a way of trying to develop, formulate policy and then ensure its implementation along the lines that would be acceptable to the president of the United States.

So they're two very different types of positions and require two very different types of interactions with other people throughout the government.

BEHRINGER: And am I correct that the Bush administration had eliminated the senior director level for Russia on the NSC before you came onboard?

GRAHAM: Before I came on board, they had eliminated that from the very beginning. A part of this was that they, I think in their own minds, they wanted to downgrade the Russia relationship, that it wasn't going to stand out as a separate issue for them, but it was going to be included among a number of other issues, those largely related to Europe. That stayed that way for pretty much the first term, but towards the end of the first term, a decision was made to resurrect a directorate for Russia.

MILES: And do you have a sense of why the decision was made to revive it? And, of course, then install you as the inaugural holder? [00:06:00]

GRAHAM: Well, in part because I asked that they do it that way. I think the administration, at that point—the national security advisor or deputy national security advisor—decided that they needed a special focus on Russia, or they needed someone to look at how Russia was impacted by policies that were made elsewhere on a range of issues, and that you needed to give someone the status of senior director to give him the bureaucratic weight he needed both within the National Security Council staff itself, but more importantly across the inner agency to be able to function in that role effectively.

BEHRINGER: And can you talk a little bit about the policy positions within the Bush administration and their various views toward Russia? What were the different schools of thought?

GRAHAM: Certainly. I don't think anybody sat down and clearly articulated the different schools of thought, but I think in broad terms you can name three.

The first would be the school that I would call sort of the muscular nationalist, represented by people like Vice President Dick Cheney; the Secretary of Defense, initially, Donald Rumsfeld. I think John Bolton, who handled a lot of the security non-proliferation issues falls into that camp, as well. And they really didn't see much of a reason to deal with Russia. Russia was a weak power. It really didn't count for that much in global affairs. They would deal with it to the extent that they had to get certain things done [00:08:00], but they didn't feel that it was really worth the time and effort of the United States to devote a great deal of time to try and to manage what can be a very difficult relationship with the Russians.

The second school probably best known as neocons. I think that's a good label. Basically, saw Russia also as weak, but as an authoritarian power. They were always leery of engagement with Russia and certainly engagement that would try to work towards cooperation because they thought that the Russians would try to take advantage of that and use it in ways that were damaging to America's interest, damaging to America's relations with its allies, particularly in Europe.

And then there was another school, the final school, to which I belong, which thought that the United States should risk engagement with the Russians, risk cooperation, that, while the Russians were difficult to deal with in the short term, there were long-term benefits to trying to build a solid partnership with the Russians that would endure over many, many years and provide for a more sustained, stable security relationship in Europe at the strategic level, but it would also help the United States advance its interest on energy security at that time in the Middle East, and perhaps even in East Asia.

MILES: Can I ask if you had a sense of in what of those camps perhaps the president, at least instinctively, felt?

GRAHAM: I believe that the president himself belonged to the camp that wanted to risk engagement or cooperation [00:10:00] with the Russians. He came in wanting to build a qualitatively—well, certainly maybe not in the initial week or so—but very early on in the administration, he had come to the conclusion that his goal should be to build what he called a qualitatively different relationship with Russia, that put the Cold War behind us and laid a basis for

future cooperation on a range of issues that would be mutually beneficial. And I think he fell into that camp. I also think that the National Security Advisor, Condoleezza Rice, fell in that camp at the beginning of the administration.

BEHRINGER: And that actually segues nicely into the first meeting between Bush and Putin in Slovenia in 2001, in June. And I wanted to ask, what was the Bush administration's policy on NATO expansion at this point in the administration?

GRAHAM: Well, the Bush administration didn't have a formal policy on NATO expansion at that point. Certainly, there was an agreement that NATO needed to expand, that the first wave of expansion in the 1990s was not the end, and that was never the way it was formulated in the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration very much agreed that the process needed to continue.

The issue that absorbed some attention in the Bush administration, as it was trying to make its initial decision, or to set the policy, was how broad the second wave of expansion should be. And basically, there were two competing views on that. The first was that you should go for a small expansion of bringing Slovenia and Slovakia, two countries that appeared to be most advanced, the most ready for, NATO membership at that point [00:12:00].

And then there was the other school that believed in what we might call the "Big Bang." That is, we should bring in seven new members. So not only Slovenia and Slovakia, but the three Baltic states, plus Romania and

Bulgaria. That's really where the internal debate was within the administration at that point. The final decision, as we know, was to go for the "Big Bang."

BEHRINGER: And that decision was taken by the president, or how did that result play out?

GRAHAM: Well, again, there's an interagency process, so there are a lot of discussions in and around the table. Ultimately a decision like that is made by the president. It would have been presented to the president. But my recollection is that the various committees, the deputy's committees, which was made up of the deputy cabinet secretaries from the relevant national security agencies—and then the principals, which is made up with the secretaries themselves—had decided and recommended to the president that the decision should be for the "Big Bang." And the president agreed with that.

BEHRINGER: And at that first meeting, one of the main things that President Bush was communicating to President Putin was that the United States was going to move ahead with pulling out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. It seems like the Russians were clearly communicating their displeasure at the idea. And I was wondering if you could help us understand why the Bush administration went ahead with pulling out of the treaty, and also with, more broadly, establishing missile defense in Central Europe.

GRAHAM: The idea behind missile defense didn't originate with the Bush administration by any stretch of the imagination [00:14:00]. The Clinton administration had also concluded that the United States needed to move in

that direction. They were trying—that is, the Clinton administration—tried to work within the framework of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, seeing whether it was possible to agree with the Russians on a somewhat different interpretation of various provisions that would allow the United States to do some of the testing that it wanted to do at that point.

Now, the Bush administration continued but also decided that the issue was of sufficient urgency that they needed to move beyond the treaty itself. Now, the reasons for deciding for missile defense were: one, we knew that there were a number of hostile regimes—Iran, North Korea in particular—that had nuclear weapon programs and ballistic missile programs. And while that didn't pose an immediate threat to the United States, it would over time, and anybody who's worked in the government or worked on the development of weapons platforms knows that it takes a number of years in order to develop a protective system that does what you hoped it would do. So, even if you thought that the Iranians or the North Koreans wouldn't develop nuclear weapons, the capability to deliver them to the United States until later in the decade or even in the following decade, you needed to begin the process of developing that system right away. So, there were very good reasons I think in the minds of the senior officials or the Bush administration as to why we needed to move forward on missile defense.

Now, we knew that the Russians had a problem with this, but I think the view of the president and others was that [00:16:00] we were going to move into a different type of relationship where we wanted to move beyond the

mutually assured destruction that had a foundation of strategic stability during the Cold War into one where we would work together in dealing with the threats from rogue regimes, nuclear proliferation, and so forth. And if we were going to establish that type of a qualitatively different relationship, then the missile defense system in and of itself should not have been a problem for the Russians. And beyond that, the type of system we were talking about, which was quite limited, geared towards very small nuclear arsenals, would have no impact or no capacity to harm the strategic deterrent that was so important to the Russians at this point.

So, again, we moved out of the ABM treaty because we thought we had a threat that we needed to deal with, and we thought that we could manage any problems that the Russians might raise in the process. And in fact, if you look back at the events of 2001–2002, while the Russians did express their displeasure at the at the American decision, they didn't really raise a great deal of noise about that and decided that they were going to live with that. Now, we'd also promised the Russians that we would try to work cooperatively in this area, raised the possibility of, in fact, developing a system jointly at some point. And I think that also eased at least some of the initial concerns that the Russians may have had about our decision to withdraw.

BEHRINGER: Do you think the counteroffers that the Russians made later in the administration about basing the sites in different parts of the former Soviet Union and using some of their radar [00:18:00]—were those serious counterproposals or just a way of extending the negotiations?

GRAHAM: No, I think from the Russian standpoint they were serious counter-proposals. The United States looked at some of those possibilities and ultimately decided against it, against using. And now part of the problem was that, when the Russians made those counterproposals for a radar site, for example, on a base that they had in Azerbaijan, they saw that as a substitute for the sites that the United States decided it wanted to build in Poland and the Czech Republic at that point. The United States was happy to see whether they can include a Russian radar site in the overall architecture for missile defense, but they weren't going to give up the sites elsewhere in Eastern Europe in order to make that done. So that was really the sticking point. Now, again, part of the problem was that the Russians wanted not only insight; they wanted some control over how the system developed. The United States wanted to build a system that it would control unilaterally. That was a fundamental, I think, opposition between the two countries and led to the souring of relations over missile defense.

BEHRINGER: So, coming out of the first meeting it seems like President Bush and President Putin established a pretty good rapport. And then, less than three months later, 9/11 happens. What was the effect of 9/11 and the response to 9/11 on the relationship between the United States and Russia?

GRAHAM: This gives a further impulse to the relationship. After the meeting in Slovenia, as you said, the two presidents had established very good personal rapport at that point [00:20:00]. We also launched a number of initiatives—

in energy, in the media—that were supposed to help bring the two countries together.

But 9/11—first of all, it gave the Bush administration a focus that it hadn't had before, but it also gave a focus to the to the relationship with Russia very much on terrorism, counter-terrorism cooperation. President Putin, as you're aware, was the first foreign leader to call the White House on 9/11. He actually didn't speak to the president on that day, but it occurred sometime later. The Russians had made an offer to be of help to the United States, particularly asked the administration at that point, what type of information or assistance Russia might be able to provide as the United States was considering its response against Al Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Putin eventually made the decision to allow the United States—or not to object to the United States' trying to establish bases in Central Asia to assist in the logistics of the Afghan campaign and also provided the United States overflight rights so that we could move through Russian airspace as part of the logistical arrangement, a tremendous help for the United States in the initial phase of the Afghan operation. In addition, the Russians had some useful intelligence. They had been in Afghanistan in the 1980s. They knew many of the non-Taliban Afghan leaders at that point and helped massage some of the relationships with those individuals, as well. So, I think the viewpoint at the highest levels of the administration was that [00:22:00] we had received very good cooperation from the Russians in Afghanistan.

And this, again, laid a basis for cooperation between the two countries, but also engendered hopes that we would be able to move more closely together, find ways to cooperate more broadly as we dealt with the wider counter-terrorism campaign, strategic stability issues, and that this would spill over and help improve relations across a broad range of issues.

BEHRINGER: What was the expectation on the Russian side? Was there an expectation that the United States would help them in some way in return for their cooperation in the War on Terror in Afghanistan?

GRAHAM: Almost certainly, yes. But, you know, if you look back, what President Putin said at that time was that helping the United States deal with the problem in Afghanistan was in Russia's interest, and if you're doing something that's in your interest, you don't usually ask for a payment for that from your partner in that effort. And the Russians had been concerned, not so much about al Qaeda in Afghanistan, they had been concerned about the Taliban in Afghanistan. Afghanistan, under Taliban rule, had in fact supported terrorist movements that were operating in Central Asia—Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, in particular—some concern on the Russian part that this would lead to terrorist types of activities inside Russia itself. So, they were quite interested in working with the United States in Afghanistan to deal with the Taliban. In fact, even before 9/11, they [00:24:00] had made proposals to the United States for some type of joint operation against the Taliban in Afghanistan. So again, so what Putin has said publicly was that, "We don't ask for favors when we're doing something that's in our own interest."

That said, I think in his mind and the minds of other senior Russian officials, there was an implicit ask, and that is, if the United States and Russia were going to be partners in counterterrorism, if they're going to be partners more broadly, then the United States would recognize Russia's interest in the former Soviet space, sort of the *droit de regard*—that Russia would have over what happened in its immediate neighborhood. That, in fact, Washington would have to come to Moscow if it wanted to use Central Asia states for logistics purposes and have Moscow's permission before it actually approached the states of that region. The same thing elsewhere in the former Soviet space. I think there was also an expectation that the United States would work closely with Russia and accelerate its effort to join the World Trade Organization. So, there were at least a couple of trade-offs, or a couple of asks, in Putin's mind that would help form the foundation of a stronger partnership between the United States and Russia—things that he was expecting the United States to do to help Russia in the very near term.

BEHRINGER: And you mentioned one of those things being that Russia would have—the United States would take Russia's opinion into account in dealing with states in its own backyard.

GRAHAM: [00:26:00] Not that it would take Russia's opinion into account—that it would follow Russia's lead in that part of the world. So, this would be implicitly recognized as Russia's sphere of influence.

BEHRINGER: And, in subsequent years, then you had the color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan. How did the Russians see those revolutions,

and what was the Bush administration's reaction or approach to dealing with them in relation to Russia but also broader policy?

GRAHAM: The United States, after the breakup of the Soviet Union, had a policy of supporting democracy in all the former states of the Soviet Union, and the Bush administration was very active in doing that, as well. So, when we saw events in Georgia in 2003, we thought it was a positive development. There was a rigged election, public reaction to that in an effort to—for the population to demand that its democratic rights be respected on the part of the leadership.

My sense is that the Russians were ambivalent about what happened in Georgia at that point, in part because the Georgian president was Eduard Shevardnadze, who for many Russians had played a major role in the collapse of the Soviet Union a decade or so earlier and certainly wasn't a loved figure within the Russian political elite. So, having him removed wasn't seen as necessarily a downside, although they would have appreciated it having been done in a different fashion [00:28:00]. The Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan was also, I think, not of great interest to the Russians, in part because it was clear that Kyrgyzstan was going to remain close to Russia under any circumstances, no matter who replaced Akayev at that point.

Ukraine was a different matter. Ukraine had always occupied a special place in Russian thinking about the former Soviet space. It was, in the minds of Russian leaders, the former Soviet Republic—with the possible exception of Belarus—that was closest to the Russians. It was certainly the most

important former Soviet republic in terms of the geographic location, its economy, the role that it had played in the development and sustaining of the military industrial complex in the Soviet Union, but also after the breakup, because there was still a great deal of trade and exchange between the Russian military industrial sector and parts of that sector that were still located in Ukraine. So, the events in Ukraine, where a pro-Russian—or the figure that the Russians preferred, and whom Putin himself had has supported and, in fact, traveled to Kiev to demonstrate his support for Yanukovych before the election—to have him removed by a popular movement and replaced by an individual who was seen in Moscow as pro-Western—Yushchenko, if I remember correctly, had an American wife, which already made him suspicious. The Russians looked at what happened [00:30:00] in Ukraine and saw that this is not simply America's promoting democracy but America trying to change the political balance inside a country that was important to Russia and therefore to undermine Russia's geopolitical position in favor of America's political advance or geopolitical advance into Russia's strategic backyard.

So that I think hit really a neuralgic point in Russia. It came two to three months after the terrorist attack in Beslan at the beginning of the school year on September 1st. And those two events together, I think, led to a very serious Russian reappraisal of the relationship with the United States and led to a decision that the Russians needed to be more assertive in the defense of their own interests and to push back in a more effective way against American

encroachments in the former Soviet space—but also needed to protect Russia itself from alleged democracy promotion efforts by the United States, which many in the Russian leadership suspected were also aimed ultimately at regime change in Russia itself.

So, the fall of 2004 becomes, I think, a critical point, a turning point, in the nature of the relationship between the United States and Russia in the 2000s.

BEHRINGER: And, in 2004, you also led a policy review on Russia. Can you talk a little bit about that? What was the impetus for the review, and what were your recommendations moving forward?

GRAHAM: I wish I could recollect this better. We didn't have an agreed policy [00:32:00] on Russia—a formal, agreed policy on Russia—in the Bush administration. Part of this was an effort to sort of formalize our position on Russia. The hope was it would that provide a basis for managing the inter-agency process to make sure we were all on the same page. It became clear very early on in the process that there were very different views about how you should deal with Russia—you know, some of the views that I already laid out from the various camps.

But clearly, there was one group that thought that we should focus much more on the security relationship others who thought that the human rights aspect should also have an important if not the primary pride of place in our relationship with Russia. And that's where the real debate took place. I honestly don't remember what the final document looked like. I think it was

a compromise document. So, it certainly wasn't a document that said that we should lead with security, that we should forget about democracy promotion as part of our Russia policy. It was a more balanced document than that, that would have said we need to do a bit of both, that we need to pay attention to each as we as we formulate our more specific policies to deal with concrete problems that were emerging at that time.

BEHRINGER: And then moving into 2005, Bush and Putin meet in Bratislava, and there's a lot of tension at that meeting. And then the next year Condoleezza Rice goes to Moscow, and, in her memoir, she mentions that she had a very tense meeting [00:34:00] with Putin. Can you talk a little bit about what changed from 2001 to 2006 in the U.S.-Russian relationship?

GRAHAM: Well, I've already talked about it to a little extent, to some extent. I mean, the fall of 2004, the Beslan events, which led Putin to the conclusion that the United States really wasn't interested in counter-terrorism cooperation, that the United States was using counter-terrorism as a smoke screen to cover American geopolitical advance in Russia's strategic backyard, and doing this all at Russia's expense. Putin never believed that the United States gave Russia the type of unqualified support in dealing with what it saw as its primary terrorist problem, which was the Chechen rebellion, and certainly not to the same level as that at that Russia was prepared to support the United States in dealing with the United States' primary terrorist problem, which was al Qaeda. And to some extent, I think, in Putin's mind, it was the unwillingness of the United States to be true partners in dealing with the Chechen problem

that provided the background for the events in Beslan. So, that cut one leg from under the U.S.-Russian partnership at that point.

The second was the Orange Revolution in Kiev. Again, the United States makes an effort to remove a pro-Russian figure in favor of pro-Western figure, then takes a number of steps to solidify its relationship with Ukraine, and if not directly, at least indirectly supports a Ukrainian government that wants to distance itself from Moscow. So, as I said, democracy promotion as a smoke screen that covers America's [00:36:00] geopolitical advance in Russia's strategic backyard. And in 2005, I think, the decision is made at the highest levels of the Russian government to approach the relationship in a different way, to push back against American efforts or encroachments in the former Soviet space. You also see the beginnings of a much more concerted effort to reign in NGOs in Russia, particularly those that are Western-funded. Those are seen as potential fifth columns to support a regime policy—regime change policy—by the United States. And all these types of things create some tension in the U.S.-Russian relationship.

The United States begins—and the White House begins to criticize Putin for some of his domestic policies, which we see as authoritarian inspiration, something that the Bush administration hadn't done until probably the fall of 2004. And Bratislava is the event where this sort of comes to a head. It's the first time that the presidents actually met one-on-one with only interpreters in the room without their entourages just so that they could speak frankly about development. I think President Putin thought that he

would be able to get George Bush to see the way some of his senior officials were undermining the relationship with Russia, and President Bush thought that it was to be an opportunity for him to explain clearly to Putin, particularly on issues related to democracy how he thought about this issue and what types of changes [00:38:00] he would like to see in Russia. Now, it wasn't the best of meetings by any stretch of the imagination. And I think that reflected, again, the reassessment that the Russians had made about the relationship. And I think you will also see, if you look at the history at that time, that the contact between the two presidents became much less frequent after Bratislava than it had been in the first, during President Bush's first term.

MILES: Can I ask a question which takes us maybe chronologically one step further and that's to Putin's 2007 Munich Security Conference speech. So, hearing you say all of that, would it be fair to say, then, that what the president of Russia said to that audience wasn't really surprising to you, that you saw this as being just part of a trajectory which had already been launched and Putin's, let's say, invective in that speech was understandable and, to a certain degree, predictable.

GRAHAM: Well, I had left the administration by that time. I think I actually left 72 hours before the Munich speech. But certainly what he said wasn't surprising given what had occurred over the past couple of years, particularly what had occurred over the past six months. And the list of the litanies of complaints really wasn't something that was new. They were similar to the litany of

complaints that we had heard from other senior Russian officials for at least a couple of years. The short answer is: what he said wasn't surprising.

[00:40:00] Now, I think one of the questions you have to ask is, "Why then? Why not earlier?" And I think the answer to that lies into the treatment that Russia received at the hands of the American administration at that time. As I said, in Bratislava—was sort-of a turning point. There were four additional possibilities for the presidents to meet face-to-face during that year. The expectation on the Russian part was that those meetings would indeed take place. In fact, the Bush administration refused to meet with Putin on the margins of the G7—or G8 summitat that time, sometime in the summer. They had difficulties arranging a meeting when Putin came to the UN for anniversary celebrations in the fall. In 2006, the situation got even worse in terms of frequency of meetings. But particularly starting in the summer of 2006 there was very little contact.

Now, the reason for that was that the administration, the president's senior officials, were focused on the problems that they were having in Iraq. Iraq was going south very, very fast. Questions of what the United States should do to save its position, to save its prestige. The internal deliberations eventually led to the decision to launch the surge in Iraq. But that took the oxygen out of the room for all other issues, including Russia. So, by the time Putin is speaking at Munich at the beginning of February in 2007, there had been very little contact [00:42:00] between the two governments. I think Putin certainly saw it that he personally was being disrespected by the United States.

More broadly, Russia. And he was laying down a marker that that was unacceptable, that Russia would not continue to allow itself to be treated by the United States in that fashion, and then the warning that that Russia had a long history of pursuing an independent foreign policy to advance its national interest, and that was going to be the guiding principle for Russian foreign policy going forward.

BEHRINGER: And then I know that you were out of the administration, but when—in the following summer, in 2008—when NATO announces or promises Ukraine and Georgia that they will eventually become members but doesn't offer the action plan—Membership Action —did that statement surprise you at all when that came out?

GRAHAM: Well, remember, the Bush administration was pushing very actively for a Membership Action Plan for both Georgia and Ukraine at that point. The statement that you're referring to is the statement made by the NATO summit, and it was compromise language because the French and the Germans were dead set against offering the MAP to the Georgians and Ukrainians. Now, my understanding was the American delegation was quite surprised at the compromise language that Chancellor Merkel offered, which said that Ukraine and Georgia would become members of NATO, not specifying a time [00:44:00] nor putting them in a program that would lead directly to that.

From the standpoint of the Bush administration, that was an acceptable compromise. Didn't get exactly what they wanted, but laid down

the marker that these two countries would become part of NATO at some point in the future. Now, that had the advantage of pleasing the Germans, the French, and the Americans. But it wasn't greeted with great pleasure in Georgia or Ukraine, which wanted the Membership Action Plans. And it certainly wasn't greeted with great pleasure in Moscow, which didn't want to see those two former Soviet republics on a path towards NATO membership.

BEHRINGER: And then soon after that, the conflict in Georgia breaks out in August. What are your assessments of why it happened at that moment and the U.S. response to the crisis?

GRAHAM: Look, the problem with Georgia had been brewing for some time. From the very beginning of the Bush administration, there was tension between Russia and Georgia. We tried to do some things in a trilateral format to ease some of that tension. We put pressure on the Georgians to govern their own territory more effectively so that it wouldn't be a safe haven for Chechen rebels or conducting operations in Chechnya at that time. There was a basing issue that was problematic for us. We had done some things to ease that tensions between the Georgians and the Russians on that issue as well, leading to the Russian decision to withdraw some of the bases, one just around Tbilisi itself, another in Batumi.

But the tensions [00:46:00] were still there. Saakashvili was very adamant about his desires to move away from Russia towards the West, NATO membership being among them. I think another factor was the decision by the United States and a number of her European partners to recognize that

Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in the early part of 2008, which raised in Russia's minds the question of, "Well, if Kosovo can do this, why can't Abkhazia and South Ossetia do it with regard to Georgia? What's the principal difference between the situation in Kosovo and the situation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia?"

I think this NATO summit declaration about these two countries becoming part of NATO at some point also was an added reason for the Russians to put some pressure on the Georgians, or to demonstrate that they had tools to prevent that from happening. Now, you might remember that the mantra in the United States and the administration was that Russia didn't have a veto over NATO actions, that NATO was an alliance, it would make decisions based on its understanding of its own—of its interest. It might listen to Russia, but it wasn't going to allow Russia to veto things that it wanted to do.

I think the Russians, beginning in 2008, and until the conflict with Georgia in August of that year, wanted to demonstrate that Russia did have a veto on NATO actions, and the veto came in the guise of the use of force. Now, the Russians structured the—managed developments in a way that they didn't invade [00:48:00] Georgia unprovoked. This came after the—after Saakashvili—Georgian forces had launched an attack on Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia and killed a number of them, and that provided the pretext for the Russian movement of military forces into Georgia. All that said, the Russians had been doing a number of things along the border in

terms of military exercises, drone flights, and other things to create a trap for the Georgians and the Georgians walked right into it.

BEHRINGER: I wanted to ask a question that's—two questions that are related. One is related to the transition from Putin to Medvedev as president. Did you expect any shift in Russian policy toward the United States? And did that have any effect on US-Russian relations moving forward, or was it just for show?

GRAHAM: It certainly wasn't for show, and it certainly had some impact on U.S.-Russian relations. The emergence of Medvedev as at least a temporary successor to Putin created the possibility for the reset that the Obama administration launched when it came to office. It'd be very difficult to see a scenario under which you could have done that with Putin, given Putin's reputation in the United States at that time.

So Medvedev was a new face, came from a different generation. He was taken by—saw all of these tech—these new gadgets, communication gadgets, you know, iPhones, iPads, and so forth [00:50:00]. As I said, came from a different generation, same generation as President Obama. And so that laid the foundation for another effort to build a closer relationship with Russia in the initial years of the Obama administration.

Did I foresee that coming? I wouldn't be telling the truth if I said absolutely yes. But certainly, it did create a different a different dynamic that the Obama administration used to its advantage at least for a couple of years. So, you did get the START agreement. You did get Russian help with us in Afghanistan, Russian help in dealing with the Iranian problem. We helped

Russia join the World Trade Organization at that time. Things soured in 2011 when it became clear that Putin was going to return to the Kremlin as president and that Medvedev had only been an interim and something of a substitute but that Putin needed to deal with a constitutional problem that he faced in Russia at that point.

BEHRINGER: Do you think that the Bush administration misjudged Putin as a leader? Or do you think Putin changed over his first two terms in a way that was less compatible to a good relationship?

GRAHAM: No, I mean I don't think that Putin changed all that dramatically. Maybe he did change in the sense that it became more confident of his role. He certainly had more control of Russian domestic politics. He had a more solid position to operate from. But Putin did not—did not hide or try to conceal his views about the world, about politics and so forth [00:52:00].

I still think if you want to understand Putin, if you want to understand at least as his first two terms as president, you go back and look at a document that was released shortly before he assumed the presidency, released at the very end of 1999, a document called "Russia at the Turn of the Millennium" where he laid out views on Russian values, what Russian goals should be, how Russia should think about its role in the world, and so forth. It's clear from that document that he had a very different view of what democracy is from that that is entertained in Western Europe and in the United States. He made it clear that Russia intended to be a great power. In fact, that lay at the essence of Russian national identity.

But Russia was weak in 1999 and 2000 and Putin understands the correlation of forces. I think part of the reason that he was prepared to work with the Bush administration initially was because he respected American power at that point and thought a cooperative relationship between Russia and the United States would boost Russia's status on the global stage. But, if it were a genuine partnership, it would also give some Russia some insight into and some influence over American foreign policy. It's a stretch because it's not the same type of relationship, but look at the way the British handled the relationship with the United States, right? They had some influence over decisions because of the close cooperative relationship that they've had with the United States. Well, Putin was thinking that he could get something along those lines, obviously not to the same extent, but that would be helpful to Russia.

What changed by [00:54:00] 2005–2006, and certainly by the end of Putin's two terms in office was his view of the United States. One, he saw the United States as cynical and hypocritical, wasn't really interested in a partnership with the United States or was in fact using rhetoric to try to conceal what it was doing to undermine Russia, at this time a strategic weakness. And in addition, the United States got bogged down in Iraq and by 2005, 2006, the United States looks much less powerful than it did in 1999 and 2000. And so, the need to be a partner with the United States, the attraction of that thought, becomes less for Putin. And what you see then is a much more forceful, assertive defense of Russian national interest.

BEHRINGER: And yet even despite the souring of relations in the middle three years there, at the end, you have Putin coming to Kennebunkport and the lobster summit, and then President Bush goes to Sochi and they sign the strategic framework. I'm just wondering how do you think about the role of personal diplomacy in U.S.-Russian relations and its importance or lack thereof?

GRAHAM: Again, there's a long history of this. Certainly, good chemistry between the top leaders is not disadvantageous to the relationship. It can help a right relationship move through the rougher patches between the two countries. It keeps open a line of communication that can be useful, particularly [00:56:00] when lower ranking officials come at odds to one another.

But it's not enough to carry a relationship. At the end of the day, Russia and the United States have their national interests. The presidents try to advance those. When those come into conflict, all the goodwill in the world isn't going to prevent the conflict. It can make it a less dramatic conflict than it may have been otherwise, but it doesn't remove the competitive nature of the relationship. So, on balance, it's good to have a good personal, good working relationships between the top leaders, but it's hardly sufficient to taking the relationship in any different direction.

BEHRINGER: We're coming up on just about an hour here. I wanted to see—Simon, did you have any questions that you wanted to follow up with?

MILES: I had just one. You've mentioned that you'd left the administration very shortly before the Munich Security Conference speech by Putin, which we talked about. And if I recall correctly, you then went to work at Kissinger

Associates shortly after you left government. And my understanding is that, in those years after you were no longer on the NSC staff, that you were involved in a range of track two high-level discussions with Russian officials, including reportedly the president and the foreign minister, Putin and Lavrov respectively. I wonder if you've got any sense— what sense you came away from those conversations of how the Bush administration was doing, I guess you could say, after you had left it and if they indicated anything to you about their own sense of [00:58:00] relations with the Bush administration.

GRAHAM: Yeah. The senior Russian leadership—Putin certainly, Lavrov and others—didn't want to destroy the relationship with the United States, they were looking for indications that the United States was prepared to respect Russian national interest and work with Russia as an equal. The track twos that I was engaged in—I think the most important of it was the Kissinger-Primakov group, which brought together about a half dozen former senior officials on both sides to discuss the nature of the relationship, to think creatively about how you can move the relationship forward, to build a foundation for greater cooperation and then report those results back to the governments on both sides—was an effort to, supported by via the Kremlin and the White House to see whether you could ease some of the tensions and relations.

How much of an impact it had is very difficult to say. By 2008, the relationship is really in a different direction after the conflict in Georgia. In fact, the Bush administration told us it would not support our group having

another meeting with our Russian counterparts because of Georgia. It helped in some ways, but not nearly enough to provide a foundation for a different type of relationship between the two countries.

BEHRINGER: [01:00:00] And then I guess one last question would be, is there something—or, in this period, in the Bush administration, were some of these issues just intractable, that couldn't be solved with some type of a grand bargain? I guess I'm looking for what would have had to happen for things to turn out differently?

GRAHAM: Everybody asks that question. And I don't think there's an easy answer to it. First, if you look at the history of U.S.-Russian relations, they certainly have been competitive from the time the United States emerged as a great power at the very end of the 19th century.

The areas, the times over the past 125 or 130 years where the United States and Russia were anything that we can call partners were very rare and very specific cases. Everybody points to the to the Second World War. I guess we were partners, fought against the common enemy, Nazi Germany, but if you look even very closely at that, the cooperation at that point was laced with deep suspicion. We didn't fight really together. We fought in parallel on the Western Front and the Eastern Front, and the conflict, the war itself, laid the foundation for the division between a Soviet sphere and an American sphere after the defeat of Nazi Germany.

There was some effort at cooperation after the breakup of the Soviet Union [01:02:00], a period when Russia itself was extremely weak, internal

disorganization and so forth. As soon as Russia began to regain some of its strength under Putin what you saw was the reassertion of very traditional Russian views of the world, a very traditional Russian foreign policy, which brought it into conflict with the United States. Although there's a fundamental difference between the two countries and the way we think about world order, the way we think about the values that should inform a domestic political system, and very different geopolitical interests that often come into conflict with one another whenever the United States and Russia meet on the global stage.

So, there's a background to competition that is always going to be there and will impact any effort to build a broadly cooperative relationship. I think the question you need to ask: Was there a policy that we could have pursued in the Bush administration that would have taken some of the edge off of the competition and built a foundation for a broader cooperation that we see at this point? And, reflecting on what happened during those years, I think there are a couple of things where different decisions by the Bush administration could have led to somewhat different results in a better relationship between our two countries.

The first and obvious one is on NATO expansion. I think that we moved too quickly at the beginning. I would have preferred simply admitting two members in 2003, not the seven, providing some time to acclimate Russia to those changes [01:04:00], but also using that time to see whether it was possible to develop a different type of security architecture for Europe that

would have been more acceptable to the Russians. I think we certainly overreached when we tried to bring—or put Ukraine and Georgia on the fast track to NATO membership. They weren't ready, but these were countries that were extremely important to Russia, particularly Ukraine. So, I think we didn't handle a very sensitive issue in a very effective fashion.

More broadly, I think the problem for the administration was that we were never really prepared to risk cooperation with Russia. And by that I mean we were never really prepared to test Russia's bona fides on any range of issues. We were always hedging against a turn for the worse in Russia. And we hedged in ways that I think pushed Russia away from the United States in an unhelpful fashion. Again, to give you an example that's related to NATO, one of the things that we did in 2002 was set up the NATO-Russia Council, and the idea behind the NATO-Russia Council, that this would be an advance over what had been Permanent Joint Committee, which was a 19+1 arrangement—that is, NATO sat at the table with Russia.

The idea behind the NATO-Russia Council is that the group would not sit down at 19+1. It would sit down as 20 with Russia as an equal participant, an equal partner—granted, on a very limited range of issues that we had decided [01:06:00] beforehand. But you would expect a free discussion to determine what interests were, what the nature of problems were, what the various participants could do jointly in order to deal with that issue. The way

we arranged this was that we would have a meeting of the NAC,[1] the NATO Council, beforehand, before meeting with the Russians. We would decide on what the NATO posture was going to be, what the NATO position was, and then each country was obliged to adhere to that to that position in dealing with the Russians. So, it was 19+1 all over again, I guess is the way I would put it.

So, we were never really willing to try a situation where we have the free discussion to see how the Russians reacted and to see whether they would try to take advantage of that and undermine unity within the Alliance, or they would have dealt with it as good partners, trying to work in a constructive way to deal with the problems that faced European countries, the United States and Russia, as well.

There are a number of other areas where the Russians offered help to us where we turned them down flatly, again, in part because we were concerned about the way the Russians might be able to manipulate that against us. The Russians offered a strategic airlifted Afghanistan. We turned them down because that would have given them a military presence on the ground in Afghanistan. The Russians offered us the possibility of using their medical facilities in Tajikistan for American soldiers who were wounded in Afghanistan. We turned that down in part because of questions [01:08:00] about the quality of Russian medical assistance, but also because it would have

[1] Here Dr. Graham refers to the NATO Advisory Council, pronouncing the acronym like "knack."

a legitimated a Russian presence in Tajikistan. So again, I think there are a number of areas we should have been prepared to run greater risks to see how the Russians reacted on the view that we were the much superior power; that, if the Russians didn't act in good faith, we had many ways of rectifying whatever damage the Russians did to our interests at a very—at a minimal cost.

So again, would this have turned out differently? Hard to say. You can't go back and replay that. But I do think that there were points along the way with a somewhat different approach by the United States, a different mindset, would have created a better foundation for a closer relationship between the two countries.

MILES: Can I just ask you a quick follow-up? I'm struck, hearing the—maybe characterizing what you said as missed opportunities is going a little further than you intend in the options that you just laid out—but sort of struck by that and this real reticence *vis-à-vis* Russia contrasts acutely to me with an administration that has a national security advisor and then a secretary of state who is deeply learned about Russia. And I just had cause to read some of her work from the late eighties about deep battle doctrine and the general staff—really deep knowledge about Russia. Do you have any thoughts on that, why National Security Advisor and then Secretary Rice, though being primed to really make the most of the U.S. [01:08:00] relationship with Russia, perhaps didn't?

GRAHAM: Well, that's something you ought to ask Condoleezza Rice herself, right?

MILES: I will!

GRAHAM: But there's a difference between being a deep expert on Russian military affairs and an understanding sort of how Russia reacts in various situations. So, she had deep knowledge. The policy was—as I said, I think Condoleezza Rice wanted to try to build a cooperative relationship with Russia initially. But she was part of an administration that started out there but didn't end up there.

I think the problem for all of us was a lack of strategic imagination, and also the recognition that Russian wasn't going to become like the United States, that Russia really wasn't in a transition after the breakup of the Soviet Union towards a Western-style, democratic, free market system that had a different set of traditions that would dominate the way it developed politically, the way it developed economically. I think we also, whether consciously or willfully or not, misread what had happened in the 1990s and many people seeing that as a blossoming of democratic practices or commitment to democracy in Russia, where I think we really was a period of collapse, degradation, economic and political, and you didn't have the institutional framework for building a democratic system.

One of the things that Putin had to do [01:12:00] at the very beginning of his term as president was to rebuild the Russian state, to turn it into an authority across the country. And given Russian traditions, the authoritative state also had very marked elements of authoritarian regime—that's something that we were unprepared to accept in the United States at that

point. And then finally, I think we never came to—again, part of the problem is you have a short-term focus. You want to get things done rapidly. Certainly in 2000, 2001, when the United States was the height of its power, I think we lacked the patience to play a longer game, to see whether it would have come out differently for the relationship between the United States and Russia.

BEHRINGER: Thank you so much for meeting with us and for your time today, Dr. Graham. We really appreciate it. And it was such a pleasure to speak with you today.

MILES: Yeah. Thank you very much. This was fascinating.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]