

U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: Steven Pifer

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Ambassador to Ukraine, 1998-2000

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[Begin Transcription]

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

MILES: My name's Simon Miles. I'm an assistant professor at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University.

PIFER: And I'm Steve Pifer. I'm a William Perry Fellow at the Center for International Security and Cooperation at Stanford University.

BEHRINGER: And thank you for being with us today, Ambassador Pifer. I was wondering if you could begin by describing your background on U.S.-Russian relations and your roles in the George W. Bush administration.

PIFER: Sure. I was a career foreign service officer for 27 years, and a good chunk of that was either dealing with the Soviet Union or the post-Soviet space.

So it began in 1981, I joined the NATO desk. But my primary focus there was the U.S.-Soviet negotiation on intermediate-range nuclear forces. After two and a half years doing that, I worked for Paul Nitze for a year and a half.

Ambassador Nitze was the special advisor to the president and the secretary of state for arms reductions negotiations. And then after taking 10 months of Russian, I was at the embassy in Moscow from 1986 to 1988, where I had the arms control portfolio. After completing that assignment, I came back to the Soviet desk—there was still a Soviet desk at that time—and I was the deputy director for multilateral and security issues for two years.

In 1990, I took what I call my out-of-area assignment, since most of my assignments were in either the Warsaw Pact or Soviet Union territory, and was three years as the deputy head of the political section at the embassy in London—though then I had responsibilities for the Soviet and the post-Soviet account.

I came back to Washington in 1993, went to work for Strobe Talbott, who was then the ambassador-at-large to the new independent states, and then he later moved on to become deputy secretary. And then at the end [00:02:00] of 1994, I moved over to the National Security Council, where I was first director for Ukraine. Then in 1995, I became director for Russia, and in 1996, I became the senior director for Russia, Ukraine, and Eurasia.

In 1997, I left the NSC. I was in Kyiv as the ambassador from 1998 until October of 2000, then came out here to Stanford as a diplomat-in-residence. And in the summer of 2001, in July, returned to the State Department as the deputy assistant secretary of state responsible for Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, and a regional affairs office. And I did that up through summer of 2004 when—that was the conclusion of my last regular assignment. And then I did a short-term assignment for a couple of months helping to set up an office on stabilization and reconstruction and then retired at the end of the year.

BEHRINGER: Thank you very much. That's quite a resume. Can you start by describing a little bit what were the schools of thought in the Bush administration at the beginning on how the United States should approach its relationship with Russia?

PIFER: Yeah, I think there were a couple. One was, they did not see Russia as an adversary at the time. There was a desire to move towards a normalization of the relationship. So some of the things, some of the structure that you had with the Soviet Union, with Russia during the nineties—for example, a series of arms control agreements—the Bush administration came in and said, "Why do we need this? It's not like the Cold War." And then I think that there was also some opportunities—could you shape a more positive relationship? In the same way that the Clinton administration, when I was at the White House, thought there was an opportunity to shape a relationship between Washington and Moscow that would move you beyond [00:04:00] any concern about falling back into the Cold War. Now, the first meeting that took place between President Bush and President Putin was actually before I came back to Washington—I got there about a week before [their second meeting]. In fact, I got there, I had four days in the department, then I was off to Genoa for the bilateral meeting on the margins of the G8 and then went with National Security Advisor Rice to Moscow after that.

But, based on that first meeting, then the observations in general—there was a personal connection. I would not have predicted this between a conservative southern American governor and a former lieutenant colonel in the KGB. But I think there was a chemistry there—hard to explain, but they seem to get along quite well.

BEHRINGER: And what did you think of Putin at that moment?

PIFER: Putin was still a bit trying to figure out where he was coming from. At least initially, it was clear that he wanted to stabilize Russia after a period of—it was pretty chaotic in the 1990s. I think though, in 2001, we collectively—we the U.S. government—did not see the sort of authoritarianism that you saw him move to, beginning, in 2003-2004, and it's certainly not what you have in Russia today. And somebody who seemed to be, I think, open to engagement with the West. Now, what turned out was, at the end of the day, he wanted to engage with the West on his terms, and when it became clear to him that his terms were not going to be met, we saw, first, drift, which began in the U.S.-Russia relationship probably in about 2003, and then problems begin to pile up, particularly during the second Bush term. [00:06:00]

And this may be jumping ahead of the story, but I guess a conclusion that I've come to, and this is from observing both the U.S.-Soviet relationship and the U.S.-Russia relationship is, probably more than any other bilateral relationship the United States has, the tone of the relationship is set by the two guys at the top, and that sends a message down through the bureaucracy. And it means they have to be pretty hands-on. And I think in 2003, both Bush and Putin got distracted. Bush got preoccupied with the Iraq conflict. Putin became more distracted at the time with basically establishing the political system that he wanted within Russia. And you had a period of drift, and that drift then let—issues piled up. Some of the promise that you saw, particularly—we'll talk about it a little bit later—from the 2002 summit, was not fulfilled. And then frustration set in on both sides.

MILES: Can I ask just a quick follow-up? Do you think there's something unique or specific about the relationship between the United States and Russia that makes that personal element, and the kind of trickle-down through the bureaucracy, especially vital in that particular one?

PIFER: Yeah. First of all, the relationship is driven by interests, but again, I think at the top, and it seems to me that if you look at, for example, Reagan-Gorbachev in the late eighties; if you look at Clinton-Yeltsin, particularly in the first three or four years of the Clinton administration; if you look at Obama-Medvedev in the first couple of years—I would argue that the Reset was a success for a couple of years, until Putin came back. But at those times, when they seem to be in sync, things seem to work well. At other times, when you didn't have them in sync—and I'd say the second Bush term with Putin, after Putin came back [00:08:00] to the presidency during the second half of the last part of the Obama administration—when they weren't in sync, then you had more difficult relations.

I'm not sure it requires political chemistry, as much as the two guys at the top—they need to have some shared vision, and they need to be communicating that down to the people below. And when that doesn't happen, things can go awry. And I think that's what happened, say, particularly in 2003.

MILES: Got it. Thank you.

BEHRINGER: I wanted to follow up on something you said in answer to the second question, which was the Bush administration's rejection of the arms control summitry and the pageantry surrounding arms control and then the desire to

implement missile defense. One of the purposes of that first meeting in Slovenia was to officially announce that the United States—or at least feel the Russians out about the United States withdrawing from the ABM. What did the Russians think about the ABM withdrawal, and then on a broader level, why did the Bush administration insist on going ahead with missile defense?

PIFER: Yeah. I think there's two pieces, and they played out maybe a little bit more so over the course of the fall of 2001. One was arms control, what was going to happen, and then what led to eventually the SORT treaty, and the other was missile defense.

And my conclusion is that the Bush administration just came in, and one of their priorities was, “We're going to do something on missile defense.” Part of it probably reflected Secretary of Defense [Donald] Rumsfeld. He had chaired the commission back in 1997 or 1998 that had come up with the conclusion that North Korea [00:10:00] and Iran, within five years, might have an ICBM capable of reaching the United States—I think they were about 20 years premature on North Korea and still premature on Iran. But there was a, “We're going to do something on missile defense.” And you saw it play out when they began deploying, in 2003 or 2004, ground-based interceptors that had not gone through a full research and development and test program, which is why they're still having problems with them now, 15 years later—they were never fully developed.

The Russian attitude was they wanted to keep the ABM treaty. It was interesting. The Russians, I think, bought into the arguments that the United

States made about the ABM treaty going back to the late sixties and early seventies, [which] is that, by constraining missile defense, you created a situation in which both sides were vulnerable to a counterstrike by the other, and that was a stable strategic situation. And the Russians would talk about it. They'd say, "This is a cornerstone of strategic stability." And they wanted to preserve the treaty.

In fact, I recall one meeting that took place—this would have been October or November in 2001. It was up in New York, and it was just before Putin came to New York, then came down to Washington, then went to Texas with the president. But there was a meeting between some senior U.S. officials and senior Russian officials. And I was sitting there as a note taker, and the Russians basically said, "What do you Americans want to do? Tell us what your plans are and let us tell you whether we think that that's consistent with the ABM Treaty."

My surmise at the time was that there was perhaps a readiness on the part of the Russian side to stretch the treaty, maybe even come up with a broader interpretation to accommodate certain plans. But they really didn't [00:12:00] get the chance. The response basically from the Defense Department and the National Security Council was, "We plan to test and develop a program in ways that are inconsistent with the ABM treaty." They wouldn't say what it was, so the Russians had no chance to define it [their reaction to the planned U.S. program]. And so what was interesting to me, is that the Russians were trying to find a way to preserve the treaty and accommodate what the Bush

administration wanted to do. And then, of course, it was in December when Secretary [of State Colin] Powell was in Moscow that he delivered the formal notice of six months' intent to withdraw from the treaty.

I guess the surprising thing to me was that the Russian reaction was much more sorrow than anger and actually was quite modest. I would have expected more. And it was interesting, in a way, we saw much less protest or expression of concern from either certain allies who I think thought the ABM Treaty was worth preserving—I have in mind here particularly the British and the French, who saw those limits on Russian strategic defense as important, given the smaller size of their strategic offensive forces—but also that there was going to be some howls from some quarters of Congress. But the Russian reaction was so modest, you then had a mild reaction from allies and Congress, because how could you complain if the Russians weren't complaining? So that was interesting.

On the arms control side, and this was getting back to the point about the Bush administration saying, “We want to have a normal relationship with Russia, and with other countries, we don't have these cumbersome 500 page START I treaties.” And I'm pretty sure, I guess October, November, whenever President Putin came to Washington [00:14:00]—and it's interesting because originally the U.S. side proposed, “Let's just go from New York directly to Texas.” And for reasons that I just don't understand, the Russians thought that [showed] some kind of a disrespect. They didn't recognize that actually going to the president's personal house was an honor. And so we ended up working out

at the last minute where they would come to Washington, they would have a formal meeting in Washington at the White House, for an hour or two, just to check that box. It was just one of the odd things about dealing with the Russians.

But it was at that meeting where the U.S. proposal was, "Look, we've done our nuclear posture review in the Bush administration. We believe we need somewhere between 1700 and 2200 operationally deployed strategic warheads." And the proposal was, "Bush'll go out, and he'll say that, and you, Putin, you go out and say whatever your number is. There doesn't have to be a link." Now, it would have been interesting had Putin said, "Well, fine, I'm going to go out and say that my number is 6000 still." But it was important to Putin to have an arms control agreement, and he really pushed it. And Bush, who I think at this time, felt pretty good about Putin—the Russians had responded in very good ways after 9/11. And so finally, in that fall, Bush says, "Fine, let's give him a sop, Let's give him the treaty that he wants." And then, of course, you got the Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty, which was two pages long.

It satisfied a political need on the part of Putin, who really didn't have much choice. He was given that in take-it-or-leave-it terms. I don't think it was much of an arms control treaty. It had no agreed definitions, no counting rules, no verification measures. People said, "Well, they could rely on START I verification measures, but only partially, and START I actually expired three years before SORT was due to expire. And then SORT—its limits took full effect

on the last [00:16:00] day of the treaty, the same day it expired. It was an odd agreement.

And it seems to me that, I think there's evidence—I never proved this, but I don't think we and the Russians counted the same thing under the treaty. We used the term “operationally deployed,” and the State Department actually reported for a number of years to the Senate at the end of each year a report that said, “And these are the number of operationally deployed warheads we had.” And that count was the actual number of warheads on deployed intercontinental ballistic missiles [ICBMs] and submarine-launched ballistic missiles [SLBMs], plus the number of bombs and cruise missiles at the airbases where the nuclear-capable bombers were, even though those weapons were not actually deployed on the aircraft. So that was our number. There had been a number of hints I picked up in the years that the Russians said, “Operationally deployed—well, if it's not on a delivery system, it's not deployed.” So they counted warheads on deployed ICBMs and SLBMs, but I don't think they counted the bombs [and other weapons for their strategic bombers].

But at that point, the Bush administration really didn't care. They didn't want the treaty. They did it because President Bush said, “Well, President Putin has been helpful to me on things after 9/11 and other issues. I want to be helpful to him, so let's do it, but let's do the minimum,” and they did the minimum. But again, I don't think it was a serious agreement. And had a Democratic administration proposed that treaty to the Senate, it would never have gotten folks from the Republican side to consent to ratification.

BEHRINGER: And I want to get to 9/11 in a second, but just to follow up quick—given your background on these issues, were you making the arguments against going ahead with missile defense and scrapping arms control agreements behind the scenes, or were you off of that issue at this point?

PIFER: By the time I got back, I was [00:18:00] not so focused on the arms control side because I had broader Russia responsibilities. John Bolton was the undersecretary of state for arms control and international security, and he had very definitive views on this, and there wasn't much point to fighting it.

So, by the time I got there in July, I think the outlines were pretty clear. I do recall in, again, in the fall of 2001, when we were debriefing Secretary Powell on the meeting that had taken place with the Russians on the ABM Treaty, where the Russians had said, “What do you want to do?” And I did make the observation that I said I thought the Russians were looking for a way to save the treaty and looking for ways that might accommodate what we want to do. But I said, I don't think the folks from DoD gave them the chance. Bolton was really unhappy with me. He jumped down my throat at that one. And at that point, there really wasn't, at the National Security Council, at the State Department, at the Defense Department—perhaps the uniformed military who may have had some different views—but there was no point in really fighting the train on that one.

BEHRINGER: And, as you mentioned a couple times, after 9/11, Russia offers to cooperate in the War on Terror, or at least in the invasion in Afghanistan. Can you talk broadly about how 9/11 changed the relationship, and what sort of

steps did Washington take to reciprocate Moscow's support for the liberation of Afghanistan?

PIFER: Yeah. By 9/11, you'd had two meetings [between the presidents], and then National Security Advisor [Condoleezza] Rice had been to Moscow and talked about a framework for the relationship. So I think the U.S.-Russia relationship was moving in a [00:20:00] positive direction then.

9/11—there are a number of things that happened. First, the early phone call from Putin was appreciated. There was—and I'd heard about this, although I have to say in my official position, I was not able to track this down—but there was a report that the Russians had scheduled some kind of a military exercise, over the North Atlantic or whatever, that they informed us, “We've canceled that because, basically, we don't want to be in the way of whatever you're going to do.” And that was within a day or two after 9/11. But the more important thing was probably about 10 days later; it was—it was pretty clear—and this is what one of my offices was involved in—that there was not going to be any U.S. military action against Afghanistan until you could have a staging area for, at a minimum, search and rescue forces [for possible downed aircraft]. And that meant somewhere in Central Asia—Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan. And that was the thing. In fact, I remember there was actually a discussion openly in the Russian press at one point, maybe five or six days after 9/11, where you saw Russian commentators saying, “There's no way we would let the Americans establish a military presence in Central Asia. That's our backyard.” And there was a phone call—it would have been, I think, on the

second Sunday after 9/11, I forget what date that was—between Putin and Bush in which Putin basically said, “We won't stand in the way. If you want to approach those governments, we're not going to cause problems.” And then publicly, he said that within a couple of days. That surprised a lot of people. And that was very important because that allowed units to deploy that could then do [00:22:00] the search and rescue and then do other support operations to Afghanistan.

And that was seen pretty much throughout the U.S. government as a big gesture and an important gesture by the Russians to be helpful. And that's one of those things that probably led President Bush a month or six weeks later to say, “Look, Putin really, for his political reasons at home, he needs a treaty. Let's give him a treaty.” That was part of it.

The part that didn't work out so well was the Russians then were hoping for more cooperation with regards to the conflict they had ongoing in Chechnya. And the problem there was simply, well, one, whenever we talked—we, the U.S. government—talked about Chechnya, I cleared or approved talking points like this all the time, the first point we made was, “The United States supports Russia's territorial integrity.” The second point we made was, “We do not agree that the Chechens have a right to unilaterally secede from Russia.” But the third point was, “We think Russian security forces, in conducting their operations, need to pay more attention to basic human rights.”

And that always generated frustration on the part of the Russians. We'd always point out, "Well, look at the first two points." But the Russians, in part because they didn't have the discreet capabilities that the U.S. military had and had demonstrated in the First Gulf War, for example—the Russians didn't have the alternative. So they were going in, lots of collateral damage, lots of civilian casualties, things like that. And there were then some issues.

There was an unofficial Chechen representative in Washington, but the State Department, we had unofficial contact, and this was cleared within the U.S. government. It was below my level. It was conducted by either the director or the deputy [00:24:00] director of the Russia desk—never at the State Department, always somewhere off the premises—and it would be a conversation. And we made a point to tell the Russian embassy before and after this happened so that they knew about these contacts.

The Russians didn't like that, but that gave us a sense that there might be a political solution as opposed to a purely military solution. But the Russians were never quite comfortable with those sorts of contacts, and that was a problem up until the time when the Russians finally succeeded in putting down the Chechen forces.

I remember also it was a great frustration to the National Security Council. Steve Hadley, who was the deputy national security advisor, he called a couple times [and] he asked for a deputies committee meeting on what can we, the U.S. government, do to get the Russians to behave in a more constrained manner in Chechnya, because it was awkward on the one hand

trying to be supportive of Russia when you'd hear mass attacks by aircraft wiping out small villages and things like that. And we tried a couple times [to come up with ideas before we] finally said, "Look, we're not going to be able to change the Russian approach to Chechnya. The only way that you could do it is if you were prepared to build up some leverage by withholding things they want. Are you prepared to hold up the SORT treaty or things like that? We're not advocating that, but this is not something where we have leverage." And so we finally persuaded the government that we weren't going to try to fix this problem, and stop trying to [hold] meetings to fix the unfixable.

BEHRINGER: And staying, for a moment, with a theme of cooperation on these transnational problems, in October 2003 you testified before Congress on the issue of [00:26:00] transnational crime in Europe with a particular focus on Ukraine and Russia. I was wondering what sorts of assistance did the Bush administration offer Russia to combat organized crime? And did the situation on the issue improve over the course of the Bush administration or beyond?

PIFER: There was some effort—we had a legal attaché at the embassy in Moscow, so there were some sorts of contacts. My recollection is that we didn't make a lot of progress on this. And this was one of the problems, I think, that we did have in the relationship. Even when relations were pretty positive at the top, getting the special services to work together and operate was never very easy. So, for example, we established a working group on Afghanistan and counterterrorism that was chaired by Deputy Secretary [of State Richard] Armitage on our side and then First Deputy Foreign Minister [Viacheslav] Trubnikov on the Russian

side. And we tried to make it real. They would come to Washington, and we would have the head of the National Counterterrorism Center. I remember one time, we met out at Annapolis and they [U.S. counterterrorism officials] displayed some kind of a chart that was about Afghanistan and the Taliban, things like that. And I still remember, the heading of the chart was classified TOP SECRET, CODE WORD: RELEASABLE RUSSIA. And most people were staring at that.

But there was that effort to try to really work [with the Russians, but] the Russians, I felt, did not reciprocate. We didn't have the same level of attendance [on their side at the meeting]. It was mainly people from their embassy. And I know there were complaints from our guys that they weren't getting operational cooperation. And I think [00:28:00] there were complaints on the Russian side too. And it may just be that both sides, when it came to the CIA and the SVR,¹ just had a hard time cooperating. And my suspicion is that there were some lingering suspicions also between the FBI and the FSB.² So there was a history still there that made the kinds of cooperation that perhaps Bush and Putin would have liked to have seen happen just not possible.

BEHRINGER: And the other thing that affected cooperation around this period, starting in fall 2002, was the issue of Iraq. How did the Iraq War affect relations between the White House and the Kremlin? And also, how did the Bush administration try to bring the Russians along as the invasion of Iraq developed?

¹ Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (*Sluzhba vneshnei razvedki*)

² Russia's Federal Security Service (*Federal'naiia sluzhba bezopasnosti*)

PIFER: Yeah, it was interesting. I remember the observations of our embassy at the time were that the Russians didn't want to be separate from the West on this in a way, but the problem the Russians had was the West split. So you had the United States and, to a lesser extent, Britain basically prepared to adopt a military response, whereas Germany and France were saying no. And the embassy in Moscow thought this was causing the Russians a degree of discomfort.

But shortly before the conflict, the Russians had a team that came to Washington, and it seemed to me that the Russians had two primary concerns about Iraq. Their assumption was that [when] the American military went in, Saddam was dead meat. It was only a matter of time, and probably not much time. But their concerns seemed to be, one, what would happen to [Iraq's] Russian debt? Would that be written off? And the other concern was, well, would the Russians then be excluded from developing [00:30:00] the Iraqi oil resources? On debt, we said, "We understand your position on debt, and to the extent we have influence on the successor government, we'll be mindful of that." And then there was even, I think, a briefing that [Department of] Energy or someone gave them saying, "Look, our understanding of Iraqi oil resources is such that we're not going to throw you out. The pie is so large that everybody can come in and you're going to still be protected."

But it was really interesting to me that the two main focuses of the Russians were not about the big issues of war and peace or the Middle East. It was about, "Are we going to lose our debt that the Iraqis owe us?" And, "Are we

going to be excluded after the takedown of the Saddam government from participating in the oil market?” And in both cases, we gave them fairly reassuring answers. And at the end of the day, they were not nearly as vocal as the French, for example, in opposing [the invasion]. That was the famous—it was Condi Rice’s reported line—

BEHRINGER: “Punish the French, ignore the Germans, and forgive Russia.”

PIFER: —“and forgive Russia,” yeah. And that was part of the mood. And also, at that time, you still had a fairly positive [feeling toward Russia]. The Bush-Putin summit in May of 2002 had been fairly successful and opened up [agreed on] a framework [for the further development of the relationship]. So, it really wasn't until the second half of 2003 that we began to see some problems emerge in U.S.-Russia relations.

BEHRINGER: I wanted to move to Europe and talk about NATO for a moment. What was your position on the “Big Bang” approach, and why did the Bush administration go ahead with that expansion of NATO?

PIFER: [00:32:00] I think they saw an opportunity [on enlargement], but like with the Clinton administration—in both the Clinton administration and in the Bush administration, we underestimated how much antipathy there was in Moscow towards the very idea that NATO still existed, let alone the question of enlargement.

Now enlargement was the right thing to do, because I think a lot of Russian attitudes towards NATO are driven not by geopolitical factors but are

driven by domestic factors, which explains—and I'll come to that point in a minute about Putin's approach.

And I also think that both in the Clinton and the Bush administrations, we overestimated our ability to assuage Russian concerns by building a NATO-Russia partnership or NATO-Russia relationship. Now you'd had [a start] in the Clinton administration—it got derailed by the NATO conflict against Serbia—but it was interesting in 2001 and 2002, there seemed to be readiness on the Russian part: “Let's start again.” So you had in 2002—it was the [May] summit in Rome where you reestablished [and sought to deepen] the NATO-Russia relationship. The name changed. It became the NATO-Russia Council instead of whatever name we had after 1997, but there were also some changes in substance.

For example, there was agreement between NATO and Russia that some issues would not be addressed at 19-plus-1. The Russians [had come] to us with a valid complaint. They said, “Look, when we have a NATO-Russia meeting, and NATO has worked out an agreed NATO position, you've already shed so much blood working out that position. There's no way in hell that our views are going to change your position.” And that was a fair complaint. [00:34:00] So one of the innovations of the revitalized attempt in 2002 was to say, “[On selected issues] where NATO and Russia will meet at 20, there will not be a preconfigured NATO view, [and] each country will represent an independent [national] view.”

So there were some areas to try to get that NATO-Russia relationship back on track. But again, at that time, enlargement, we knew the Russians were not going to be happy about it, but the Russians did not come up hard on the net against enlargement, including against the Baltic states. It was not seen as a really difficult issue.³

Now, when I look back in retrospect and we can come back to this, I think one of the problems we probably had in the U.S.-Russia relationship in the Bush administration was, I would call [it] siloing or stovepiping [issues], that is, issues were addressed in different [U.S. interagency] groups. So arms control in one group, missile defense in a related group, NATO enlargement in another group, Iraq in a different group, WTO [in a different group]. All these issues, which touched upon Russian equities, were addressed in different [interagency] groups. And there really was not, in the Bush administration, the kind of mechanism that you had in the Clinton administration, which was a reflection of the fact that Strobe Talbott had been a housemate of Bill Clinton back at Oxford. There was only one interagency group in the Clinton administration that was not chaired by the NSC, and that was the Russia and post-Soviet space group [under Talbott]. But that allowed that group to balance equities off. You didn't have that structure [in the Bush administration].

Ultimately, it should have been the deputies committee in the Bush NSC, but I

³ Ambassador Pifer later elaborated via email: “Indeed, when Putin agreed at the May summit in Rome to reemergized NATO-Russia relations, he did so knowing full well that NATO would hold another summit later that year at which it would invite other countries to join the alliance, most likely including the Baltic states.”

never got the sense that we were looking at those issues [and weighing them against one another].

And so, obviously, if you're talking about missile defense, we [the interagency group on missile defense] want to get [what it thinks is] the best American outcome; [00:36:00] [likewise, the interagency group on] NATO enlargement [wants to get] the best outcome [of U.S. interests]. But if at some point, if you're going to build a sustainable U.S.-Russia relationship, you can't win on every issue [with Moscow]. And there was no mechanism or no conversation I recall in where people said, "Okay, look, maybe on this issue, let's not go for a hundred percent. Let's go for fifty percent so that in Moscow, they say they got a win." My, Steve Pifer, candidate for that would [have been] missile defense, because I've always been skeptical about missile defense [and its prospects to work]. But the stovepiping, and then we were trying to win on every issue, and if you're sitting in Moscow, you're not seeing an American investment or an American interest in taking account of Russian concerns on at least some issues. And I think that then began to lead to the frustrations in 2004 and then later.

But again, the NATO question was kind of a non-issue. The invitations were extended in 2002, and [the second round of enlargement] happened in 2004. And, in contrast to the Russian opposition to a Membership Action Plan for Ukraine and Georgia in 2008, you didn't have anything like that kind of opposition [from Moscow].

BEHRINGER: And speaking of Ukraine, you were ambassador there from 1998 to 2000, and in 2004, the Orange Revolution breaks out in Kyiv. What was the Bush administration's role in supporting the revolution both before and after it happened? And what was the effect on the Russian perception of Ukraine in the United States?

PIFER: Yeah. No, it was interesting. In 2003—I had actually retired [in late 2004 and was in] the retirement seminar when the Orange Revolution began. But in 2003, [00:38:00] we—and by we, I would say it was me; Carlos Pascual, who was our coordinator for assistance to the post-Soviet space; and John Herbst, who was the American ambassador in Kyiv, and we had a conversation, and we later ran it by Dan Fried, who was the senior director [for Europe, including Ukraine,] at the NSC. Looking at the [2004 presidential] election [in Ukraine], it was pretty obvious already in the fall of 2003, that it was going to probably boil down to [Viktor] Yushchenko as the opposition leader versus the Kuchma candidate, who was going to be [Viktor] Yanukovich. Hands down, Yushchenko would have won an election if the election was conducted among U.S. government [officials]. And we asked ourselves, “Should we do something to help Yushchenko?” And at the end we concluded, “No, we should not.” The first reason was the right reason, which was, “It's not our election, it's a Ukraine election. This kind of interference would not be appropriate.” The second reason was [that, when] we thought about it, we [concluded], “We don't understand enough about the dynamics of Ukrainian politics to know whether

a U.S. lean toward Yushchenko would help or hurt.” And so we decided, “We’re going to stay neutral.”

We went through and we said, “What kind of assistance should we provide for the election[?]” We had 10 or 13 million dollars allocated for assistance for election-related activities. And we went through that list and said, “Are every one of these activities, are they things that we can justify as being nonpartisan?” And I felt very comfortable that they were. It was things like training election monitors. It was training journalists how to cover elections. Now, there was work done by IRI⁴ and NDI⁵ on party-building, and our instructions to them were the same as the instructions I gave NDI and IRI when [00:40:00] I was in Kyiv, [which] was, “Whenever you hold a seminar, for example, on party-building, anybody, any party that walks in that door gets the training. If the communist want it, that’s fine. If whatever, the party of power wants it, that’s fine.” Now, what normally happened was the communists didn’t want any training from the Americans. The party at power was getting the other training. And so the groups that came in tended to be the more pro-democratic, pro-reform forces. But that, to my mind, “Hey, we offered it to everyone. If they wanted to self-select and not take our training, [that is their choice].” But we were very comfortable [that our election assistance package was non-partisan among the Ukrainian candidates].

And John Herbst, the ambassador—he was adamant on this, that we needed to be very neutral on this. And I remember I gave an interview at some

⁴ The International Republican Institute

⁵ The National Democratic Institute

point in 2003 where I was asked about the coming election, and I said, “This is Ukraine's election. The American interest is to see a democratic outcome, and we'll support whoever Ukraine chooses.” And then I added language I'd used back when I was in Kyiv. “Of course, we hope that the election will produce forces that will be interested in having a good relationship with the West,” which struck me as not particularly controversial. And I got a call the next day from Ambassador Herbst saying, “Please drop that line because what's heard here is that we support Yushchenko.” And I said, “Okay, point taken, I will drop that line.”

So we tried to be pretty careful. I think—now, again, this is where I get a little bit more into surmise [since I was leaving government service], but I actually had a lot of conversations with people at the time—I think the U.S. government was surprised by the Orange Revolution.⁶ It [the Orange Revolution] caught them [U.S. officials] off guard. They did not anticipate that you'd have the numbers [of Ukrainians] going into the streets [in protest]. And then the U.S. government did move fairly quickly. And the big step was [00:42:00]—let's see, [Senator] Dick Lugar was on the ground at the time, but I think Secretary Powell went out probably on the third day of the revolution and said, “We're not sure we can recognize this result [of the run-off]. There are real questions here.” And that was the right call because there were tremendous

⁶ Ambassador Pifer later elaborated via email: “which began immediately after the run-off election between Yushchenko and Yanukovych and results suggested that Yanukovych had won, but there were lots of questions about the validity of the reported results.”

questions about the election. It was pretty clear, I think, that Yanukovych's forces had stolen the election. But again, it was a reactive U.S. position.

Now, there's on the Russian side this narrative that we somehow orchestrated it and funded it and all that stuff. And I just—if we did, it was not evident to most of the people in the U.S. government at fairly senior positions who were working on this question.

BEHRINGER: And, of course, the revolution in Ukraine happened after the revolution in Georgia, and Secretary Powell was involved in managing that relationship as well. I had a question about Powell's visit to Moscow in January 2004 after he visited Tbilisi. I'm not sure where you were in the government at that point, but just in general, do you remember—if you remember something about that visit or if you remember anything in particular about any of Secretary Powell's visits or interactions with the Russians while you were at State.

PIFER: No, yeah, I don't recall that—I wasn't on that particular trip, in part because it went to several places. So I think Beth Jones, who was my boss, probably would've covered that because of numerous stops. I think Powell had a very good working relationship with [Russian Foreign Minister] Igor Ivanov. They got along well. And they tried to get some things done and such, but there were certain limits. Powell couldn't say, "I'm going to reverse policy on missile defense," things like that. But at that level, there was a pretty good working relationship. [00:44:00]

BEHRINGER: And in the second Bush term, Condoleezza Rice moves from the national security advisor to secretary of state. I know you weren't at State at the

time, but could you assess her influence on and management of U.S.-Russian relations and particularly compare her to how Colin Powell handled the relationship? And do you think her background as a Soviet or Russia expert affected her thinking on Russia? Or how did it affect her thinking?

PIFER: She certainly had an understanding of Moscow. I think, as secretary of state, the advantage that she had over Secretary Powell was that she had a much better relationship with the president. It was pretty clear to us at State that, when Powell came out with a position, and he was against Rumsfeld, Cheney, he was going to lose. But I think the strength of Secretary Rice's relationship with the president—she could prevail on some of those questions. But she also came [to the State Department] at a much more difficult time.

I'd chart a timeline. In [May] 2002, you had the summit in Moscow between Bush and Putin, which was a pretty positive event from the view of both sides. I had to go out about five days ahead because we had five or six joint statements, including one lengthy statement [setting] the framework for the U.S.-Russia relationship. And there were four or five issue-specific joint statements. And I remember—and I give credit to my Russian counterpart—I got there, and we had these statements, which are all full of brackets. And usually this is one of the most painful exercises. I wasted way too much of my life negotiating with the Russians on joint [00:46:00] statements.

But this was [working with] David Chikhvishvili, he'd been the deputy chief of mission at the [Russian] embassy in Washington. I knew him fairly well. And when I got there on the first day and [we had] all these brackets [in

the joint statement], he said, “Steve, we both know most of these brackets are in there as trade bait. Let's have an exercise. Let's just go through and see how many we can get rid of. And at the end of the day, we'll go back and [if necessary] we'll do it the old way.” And we went back through this in about three hours and went through all the documents and came up with a relatively few number of brackets where there really were issues that he and I needed guidance [from our respective bosses]. I said, “I've got to go back to Washington.” He had to check with [his] people. And so we had the documents actually in fairly good shape.

The framework document, which was eight or nine pages, really talked about a broad range of cooperation. It really laid out the bones, including things like, we're going to cooperate on missile defense, and things like that. And, I think, one of the failures [in the relationship] was that we never really then moved to fill out all of the pieces there. And so that was a problem. Then, as I said, in 2003 Bush is distracted with Iraq, Putin's distracted with domestic developments.

And then there was another thing where I think there was a failure—and I'll blame the National Security Council on this one. My boss, Beth Jones, she hated [working on] joint statements more than I did. And one of her abilities was to basically say, “I'm not going to work the words. You go to work the words.” But we came up with this idea and we said, “Look, instead of doing joint statements, let's come up with what we called the action checklist.” And we sold the NSC on it. We sold the Russians on it. And it was prepared for the

summit meeting that took place in Camp David in September of 2003. And it was a list of about maybe 25 or 30 issues, issues that were problems between Washington and [00:48:00] Moscow. These were issues that we would like to resolve. And so we would define the issue. We would set a timeline—in some cases three months out, in some cases a year out—for resolution.

The innovation to my mind was we would then say, on this issue undersecretary of state John Bolton and deputy foreign minister Sergei [Kislyak]. But it [named those responsible for resolving the issue]. And from my perspective, the U.S.-Russia relationship had so many agencies involved—there were so many equities, and in some cases, egos, involved. [The Russia desk at the State Department is not going to] run the [U.S.-Russia] relationship. Whereas, take Ukraine—we had much more of a leadership role. On Russia, what it was going to be was, “Can we coordinate all the pieces and keep them headed in the same direction?” And I saw the checklist as a real tool that we [could] use because we [could] call people up and say, “Look, the deadline’s in a week, you haven’t solved this. The president wants this solved.” So we came up with this checklist. The presidents blessed it at Camp David. Within a week, it circulated to all secretaries of the cabinet by National Security Advisor Rice saying, “Here’s the checklist. Here’s your marching orders. Get these things done.”

And within two or three months, the first four deadlines came up, and every single one was missed. And then a couple more deadlines were missed. And in one case, blatantly false information was given the NSC as to why it was

missed. And I was calling on the phone—I think it was Tom Graham and Dan Fried [at the NSC]—and saying, “Look, guys, the checklist is failing right now. Can you get the national security advisor to call the deputy secretary of defense or the deputy [00:50:00] secretary of energy and say, ‘Hey, you need to get on this guy and get this done.’” If that happened, it was invisible. And the bureaucracy very quickly learned that the checklist was a meaningless exercise. [There was no cost to missing the deadlines.]

I didn't hear anything about it from the NSC until I think it was April or May of 2004, when they wanted to be able to report lots of things had been accomplished [for an upcoming Bush-Putin meeting]. I said, “They haven't been accomplished. We've missed most of the deadlines.” And at that point, had we been doing the work—and again, the State Department didn't have the oomph to push the U.S. government to deal with that—but I think, had the NSC pushed the government more on that, maybe we would've resolved some issues and not allowed them to fester.

So that was a problem [beginning] in 2003. You also have the problem in [late] 2002 [or 2003], where there was, at least at the State Department, growing concern that things were going [a bit] awry in Russia—the Khordokovsky arrest, but also they begin to tighten up in terms of domestic politics. There was a memo that went up to Secretary Powell that was drafted by our Russia desk. It was a very good memo that said, “Things are going wrong in Russia, we have to keep an eye on that.” Then you have the accumulation of issues, and you have drift in 2003-2004. And then again, the stovepiping [of issues related

to the Russian perspective] we were not addressing issues in a way that gave sufficient weight to their concerns.

I was out of government, and I guess it was the [Bush-Putin] summit meeting in Bratislava in 2005 where they came out with this joint statement. And I remember reading it [and] thinking this would be a great joint statement at the beginning of the first [Bush] term, [but it was] kind of a weird statement at the beginning of the second term, [when Bush had been dealing with Putin for four years]. And I remember asking—I think it was Tom Graham—at a [think tank] session about this and saying, “What's different? Why should we assume changes [now]?” And I didn't get an answer that struck me as very encouraging that there would be changes. And then you begin to see the frustration set in [on both sides]. You had the 2007 Munich speech by Putin. You had missile defense. There was a brief point there where it looked like there was going to be a possibility for cooperation. Both sides were talking about it, but the sides had something different in mind. The U.S. wanted to deploy ten ground-based interceptors—a two-stage variant of the interceptors that were in Alaska—and wanted to put ten of those in Poland and a radar in the Czech Republic. And these were supposed to be oriented, looking at a threat coming out of Iran. Although I think, as Secretary Gates later conceded, the radar that was supposed to go into the Czech Republic had a 360-degree view and could see all the way to the Ural Mountains.

And the Russians did not like this. What the Russians said [was], “What we can do is we have a couple of radars that look south. Let's cooperate, and

we can provide you data from those radars. So we'll help you watch Iran." But the friction was, the U.S. side said, "Great." But what we [meant]: "We'll take that in addition to going forward with our radar in the Czech Republic and the ten GBIs⁷ in Poland," and they said, "No, we propose this in place of that." And so there was about four months where it seemed like cooperation was possible, but then the sides realized they were talking past each other. That didn't go well.

And at the same time you had the approaching end of the [00:54:00] START I treaty [which was due to expire in 2009]. So there were discussions between Washington and Moscow about whether something might continue after START I in addition to the SORT treaty [which would not expire until 2012]. But what I heard—I had a conversation with a senior Russian official. And he said, "What you Americans are proposing is, basically, to limit warheads—limit operationally deployed [strategic] warheads as the SORT treaty does." And he said, "The American position entails no limits on [strategic] delivery vehicles. And it entails no limits on reserve strategic warheads. How is that not an immediate breakout situation?"⁸ And I have to say I was sympathetic to the Russian position. And one of the things that then got Obama fairly quickly to the New START [Treaty] was an American readiness to limit delivery vehicles as well [as deployed strategic warheads].

⁷ Ground-based interceptors

⁸ Ambassador Pifer later elaborated via email: "The Russian concern was that the United States, by adding reserve strategic warheads to its unlimited number of strategic delivery vehicles, could rapidly exceed the limit on operationally deployed warheads and break out from the treaty."

But again, those were issues where the sides [in the second Bush term] just were not in sync.

Of course, you had the Georgia conflict, although I think the U.S. government narrative [of] the Russian invasion of Georgia was not correct. [To be sure,] the Russians were ready for a war with Georgia. They wanted to have a conflict with Georgia. But the reason that the war broke out on the night of August 7-8 of 2008 was because the Georgian president made a really bad decision to invade South Ossetia, and it was, to my mind, an inexplicable decision. There was no way that the Russians were going to lose that. And, as we saw, the Russians reversed [matters and won] within a few days.

But it was interesting to me, what I had heard—again, I was outside of government now, so you have to take this with a grain of salt [00:56:00]—but the Russians had conducted a fairly major exercise in the Caucasus just before the conflict broke out. What I was told was that exercise had ended and troops and equipment had actually been loaded on trains, and those trains were heading north away from Georgia, away from the Caucasus, back to home bases when the conflict broke out, and they had to stop the trains, reverse them and send them back [south]. That suggests to me that the Russians—who I think, again, were only too happy to have a conflict with Georgia—were [not] prepared to have it on August 7th, August 8th.

Now again, from the outside, I heard there was some pretty strong advice given to President Bush, including [by] at least one person—I don't know who—but I was told the suggestion was made that the U.S. Air Force

could launch airstrikes to bomb and close off the Roki Tunnel, which [provided] the most direct route [for the Russians to move troops into South Ossetia]. And what I understand the president said, “Are you crazy? I’m not going to war with Russia over Georgia.”

MILES: So apropos of this point, it’s around now where the United States is offering Membership Action Plans to, of course, the Georgians in this immediate context, and of course, the Ukrainians in 2008. Could you talk a little bit about what your view at the time was of the wisdom of offering MAP to Ukraine and Georgia, whether or not you’ve changed your views since, in the intervening years, any thoughts you have on how the Bush administration handled that issue at the Bucharest summit, et cetera? Thank you.

PIFER: Let me say, I think actually Ukraine could have had a MAP in 2006. And I remember the conversations in the summer of 2006, and I was talking to people in the U.S. government, [and] also [00:58:00] with allies. There was almost this assumption that at the [foreign ministers’ meeting] at the end of the year, Ukraine would get a MAP. And the interesting thing was the Russians had not, in 2006—they were not publicly opposing it. They were not raising the stink that they raised in 2008. What derailed that plan was, because of domestic politics, [President] Yushchenko appointed Yanukovych as prime minister. And although Yushchenko thought that they had agreement that Yanukovych would support Yushchenko’s proposal for a MAP, Yanukovych’s first trip to Europe to meet with the European Union—this would’ve been September of 2006—he also [made] a stop at NATO and [said], “I want to have a good

relationship [with NATO], but I don't want a Membership Action Plan," at which point, that kill[ed] the deal. NATO would extend a MAP to a country if it didn't yet have full popular support, but it was not going to extend a MAP to a country where the executive branch was divided [on the question].

Now, 2008, there were a couple of differences. One was, the Russians did come up on the net very quickly to oppose [a MAP for Ukraine and Georgia]. I think it was in February of 2008 when Yushchenko was in Moscow and, at a press conference, Putin there says, "I'd hate to have to start targeting nuclear missiles on Ukraine if that's what you're going to do." But first of all, the Ukrainians did not handle it well. [Sometimes in diplomacy,] you ought to be careful about asking a question before you know what the answer is.⁹ Second, it [the Ukrainian MAP letter] got leaked. I think Senator Lugar was briefed about this but didn't know that the letter had not yet been delivered, and he mentioned it [at a press conference]. And so NATO actually heard about it [the Ukrainian request for a MAP] first publicly as opposed to actually getting the letter.

Though the thing to me—and this was a tactical mistake by the Bush administration—the Bush administration, as far as I can tell, did no lobbying between the [01:00:00] time when Ukraine made evident its interest, which was in mid to late January of 2008, up until the Bucharest summit in early April.

There was no U.S. campaign to say, "We want this to happen." What I was told

⁹ Ambassador Pifer later elaborated via email: "In January 2008, President Yushchenko decided to send a letter to the NATO secretary general requesting a MAP, this time endorsed by Yuliya Tymoshenko, who had succeeded Yanukovich as prime minister. The Ukrainians probably should have privately tested the waters at NATO first."

was that President Bush was very much on board with the idea of getting a Membership Action Plan for both Ukraine and Georgia, but that there were hesitations coming from both Secretary Gates and Secretary Rice, and that [there had to be] time to let those [concerns] play out, but the president would handle it. And, if it was handled, I don't think it was handled until right before Bucharest. But then the plan became, "I, George Bush, will persuade my allied counterparts at the first dinner [of the NATO summit] to do this." And he failed.

You had [German] Chancellor [Angela] Merkel, you had [French] President [Nicolas] Sarkozy opposed. I was told that, [among] the allies in the room, the majority favored Membership Action Plan[s for Ukraine and Georgia], but Germany, France, and maybe four or five others opposed it. So there was no consensus. A German diplomat told me [asked me] a day or two after the summit asked me, "Can you explain to me your government's policy on this?" He said, "The request is made by the Ukrainians for MAP in late January." He said, "We in Berlin hear nothing from the Americans in February and March. We assume this is not a big issue for you[r government]. And then your president comes to dinner and this is the top of his agenda." And he said, "By that time, we'd taken a position."

Now, I'm not sure, had an American diplomatic campaign launched in February, would that have changed things? I don't know. But I think it turned out to be tactical mistake by the Bush administration. The absence of an American voice there let [01:02:00] positions get settled that were in opposition

to what President Bush wanted. And then it led to this very strange outcome. What I had heard—this second- or third-hand—was that, at [some] point [as they debated the MAP questions for Ukraine and Georgia], the leaders decided to throw all of their ambassadors, their perm reps [to NATO] out of the room. So it was just the leaders and the national security advisors, so it's Condi Rice and Angela Merkel are working on language. And again, this is my surmise, but Merkel [offers as a consolation prize to Bush that the summit statement can say], “We have decided that they [Ukraine and Georgia] will become members of NATO. We have today decided they will come in—.” NATO had never said that about any [aspiring] member until the day before they were going to sign the membership agreement. And I think had perm reps been in the room, they might've said, “Boss, maybe you don't want to [say] that.”

I think [it was] Kurt Volker [who made an interesting comment:] “It's kind of interesting.” He said, “The easy question was the MAP.” He said, “We skipped that. We went right to we're going to say we're going to make them members of NATO.” So they didn't get a MAP, but I think the language came out in a way that was probably not going to be something that would be calming the nerves in Moscow.

Now, having said that, my views have changed. I think for the last seven or eight years now, maybe even longer, I've been telling Ukrainians, “Do not push a MAP because one, the answer [will be] no. And particularly, since 2014—if NATO was not prepared to do a MAP in 2008, it's not going to [give you] a MAP while you're at war with Russia.” I [have also] said, “The second

point is that a MAP conveys no security guarantee. So what happens if, say, tomorrow, September 29, NATO announces that Ukraine has a MAP, and the Russians take a whack at Mariupol on September 30th? What's going to happen? What's NATO going to do? NATO's going to likely do nothing, and that's not going to [01:04:00] be good for Ukraine. It's not going to be good for NATO.”

The third point I made to them [the Ukrainians], and I made this point to them when I was back in government, back in 2001 or 2002, when they wanted an intensified dialogue—which is always the step before you took a MAP—and there was not a readiness within NATO to agree to the intensified dialogue. My argument to Ukrainians was, “Forget about the title, put a MAP’s worth of content into your annual action plan and just do it. It strikes me that the Russians seem to care about the title. They don't seem to care about the substance.” And it's an argument I still make to the Ukrainians, is that, just put the stuff in, just do things. A problem that Ukraine has [had] with NATO is they are not often that great on implementation, but my advice would [now] be forget about the title, just do stuff, and then be ready for—because, at some point, that window may open politically and then you want to then be prepared to say, “Look, we’ve checked all the boxes.”

BEHRINGER: And we've heard two stories, or two versions of analysis. One is that the failure to give Ukraine and Georgia the MAP was seen as a failure of deterrence, that then Russia used it as an opportunity to invade. And the other side sees it as a provocation, that promising them membership but not offering the MAP

was still provocative enough that it convinced Russia to invade. Would you like to weigh in on that?

PIFER: It's hard to say, because I think what happened in 2014 with regards to Crimea—I think the Russians had a plan in the safe for, “this is how we take over Crimea.” The decision was made in a very ad hoc [01:06:00] way. In fact, Putin did this long documentary a couple of years after Crimea was taken. And it was interesting. He said, “When we made the decision, it was on the night of February whatever.” And [he named] the people in the room; there were, like, four people. And his foreign minister wasn't there. It was surprising how small that circle was, but it just means it was a spur-of-the-moment decision.

I think [the Kremlin became] a little bit panicky when [in late February 2014] you had acting President Turchynov and acting Prime Minister Yatsenyuk say, “Our number one priority now is to sign the Association Agreement with the European Union.” And that's interesting because, if you go back as late as 2010-2011, you'll find people like [Foreign Minister Sergey] Lavrov saying, “We have no problem if the Ukrainians want to join the European Union. It's NATO that's an issue.” It's only really in 2013 that the Russians visibly begin agitating against signing the Association Agreement.

But the Kremlin panicked when they saw Ukraine heading that way. They were discombobulated by what had transpired in Kyiv in those very few days [at the end of the Maidan Revolution] in February. But I think they [in the Kremlin] also saw that this will [seizing Crimea would] play well at home politically, and Putin's popularity ratings shot up to, what, the high 80

percents—a short, bloodless war is always good for your standing at home. And I actually wonder if maybe that was one of the factors that led them into it. And then maybe they thought that played so well, but then they started Donbas in April of 2014, which to my mind, didn't turn out so well for them.

Had the Russians stopped after Crimea, they would've [01:08:00] [likely] gotten away with a slap on the hand in terms of [Western] sanctions. The major sanctions kicked in after Donbas [and the MH-17 shootdown]. And my guess, is had they stopped at Crimea, a number of Europeans would have been saying, “Well, they [the Russians] do have a historical case about Crimea.” And they do have a historical case about Crimea, but I would say it was negated by what happened in 1991, when everybody said, “We accept the borders as they are[, and in 1991 Crimea was part of Ukraine].”

BEHRINGER: And I have one more question, and then I'm going to throw it to Simon to see if he has anything else. But this one has to do with similarly looking from the Bush administration to the Obama administration. After Georgia, basically all the constructive programs between Russia and the United States are terminated, and things go in a deep freeze. And then, when Obama comes in, he starts the Reset. I was wondering, what types of lessons do you think the Obama administration took from the Bush administration's experience, and was the Reset at that moment the right policy to go ahead with?

PIFER: I would actually agree that the Reset wasn't the right policy [after the first few years]. And what they should have done is in, say in early 2011, say, “Okay, Reset's finished. We're moving onto something else.” But if you look at Reset, it

delivered the New START treaty, which I would argue is in the U.S. interest. It delivered Russian help on Afghanistan, including allowing us to move lethal military equipment directly through Russia, including direct flights crossing Russia. It got a Russian position that was much more supportive on Iran. It was in 2010 when the UN Security Council voted an embargo on conventional weapons sales to [01:10:00] Iran[, and Russia went along with that, even though the Russians sold conventional arms to Iran].

There was a bit of ambiguity in the [UN Security Council] language. And I remember asking people in the U.S. government, because at that time, the big [Russian] sale [to Iran] that was being talked about was the S-300 air defense missile. And I remember asking, because the language was a little bit ambiguous, does it [the embargo] cover air defense? And the response I heard from people in the U.S. government was, “We hope so, but we’re not fully comfortable—if the Russians send an S-300 system to Iran, we’re not sure that that violates the terms of that particular language from the United Nations.” And then, I think, in September or October of 2010, the Russians said, “We’re suspending the sale of the S-300. We’re inviting an Iranian team to come back [to Moscow] and negotiate the return of the deposit [for the sale] because it does cover it.” So I think there were things arguably that were very much in the U.S. interest [during the Reset].

Now, again, it partly was because on New START there was a different approach. The Obama administration came in and said, “We want to go back to

the START I type of approach [as opposed to SORT]. We think arms control is still important.”

There was, I think, a certain chemistry between Obama and Medvedev. They were both of the same generation, similar backgrounds. They were both kind of new-thinking folks. There's no doubt in my mind that Putin was still the one calling the shots in Moscow, but I think Putin gave Medvedev a fair amount of leeway. And so New START was done. New START would not have been done had Putin opposed it.

And it was interesting. I remember talking to somebody in the administration, probably I guess it was right after the first set of meetings that had taken place in London between Obama and Medvedev. And the attitude was basically, we're going to try the Reset. [01:12:00] We think there's some things that we can do in the Reset that will be useful for specific U.S. interests. It's not like we're locked into this. If the Reset doesn't deliver, fine. We'll try something else with Russia, and we'll move on.” And what they found was that the Reset actually paid off fairly well.

Now, after 2011, things [began to come] undone. And then when Putin came back into office again, he brought in a different attitude. But again, part of his approach, to my mind, was driven by domestic politics. If you look at 2000 to 2008—and this is what I would hear from Russians when I would go to Moscow—they would say, “Putin has this informal social contract with us in which we understand we're going to have no political voice, but there's going to be a better economy. Our living standards are going to rise.” And Putin got

lucky. The price of oil went up and, from, 2001 until 2008, the Russian economy was growing at six to seven percent a year. So regime legitimacy was based on good economic performance. And I think at that time, most Russians were prepared to say, “Okay, I’m gonna look away from what’s happening in terms of the closing political space, because I can get a better apartment, I can travel to Turkey. Life is better.”

When Putin came back into the presidency in 2012, he assessed correctly—again, this is my surmise—that the economic situation was not going to allow that kind of a basis for regime legitimacy. So you see him talking about Russian nationalism, Russia as a great power, getting [its] place back in the world. And I think that explains part of Ukraine, part of that was behind Syria. And so that makes it a more complicated relationship because you’re dealing with Russia, not only some difficult geopolitical factors, but also you’ve got all of this domestic politics [01:14:00] in Russia that are driving Putin’s calculations [and some of his foreign policy].

And then, for a brief period, missile defense came up again. Missile defense, to my mind, has been the bugaboo in the relationship, probably going back to the late Clinton years. But in late 2010, there’s a NATO summit. Medvedev goes. It was held in Lisbon, and there’s agreement between NATO and Medvedev to explore [NATO]-Russia cooperation on missile defense. And the U.S. took the lead on this with NATO’s blessing, just because it made sense since the main elements were going to be the European phase-adaptive approach with the [U.S.] SM-3 [missile interceptor] in Romania and Poland.

And, again, what I heard [from] people in the administration was there was very quickly a lot of common ground between the sides. It was interesting because we were hearing what was going on in official channels [and, at the same time,] there were at least four track IIs that I [was] aware of in early 2011 working on this issue. I was involved in two of them.

And everybody was coming up with the same set of ideas. There would be two jointly manned NATO-Russia centers. One would be—they didn't want to call it a joint data exchange center because that had been tried back in the Clinton administration, but nothing came of it. So they talked about a data fusion center, [which would] take early warning data from Russia's systems, from U.S.-NATO systems, combine them, and send the combined product back to both sides, so you [each] would have a fuller picture of the missile defense environment around Europe. And then the second idea would be another jointly manned center, which would be a planning center, where you [the sides] would talk about concepts of operations, things like, if you had a missile coming from somewhere out of Iran that could be engaged by both sides, what protocols would you have in place so that, if you each fired an interceptor, the interceptors engaged the Iranian warhead, not each other. [01:16:00]

And if you'd asked people, I think, in April of 2011, there was a lot of confidence, "We're going to come up with an agreement here." Something happened in May, and there was the G8 summit in France in May, and there was going to be an Obama-Medvedev bilateral meeting [on the margins]. Under Secretary of State [for Arms Control and International Security Affairs]

Ellen] Tauscher was in Moscow. She met with Deputy Foreign Minister [Sergei] Ryabkov, and I actually saw them after they'd spent a day talking—I was there on [a separate meeting], and we met at a reception. They both said, "We think we have a deal on missile defense." And they [also] said, "We have both exceeded our instructions and have to go back to home for advice."

The next day, I saw Ryabkov on a separate thing. I asked him, "How are you coming on it?" And he [said], "I've still got work to do to sell it." And I think what happened is—I haven't yet found what actually was agreed and why it fell apart—but my impression is that both sides, both Washington and Moscow, said, "No, that's too far."

And that to my mind is a turning point because I think, after that point, you see less talk about missile defense [cooperation], and the Russian rhetoric becomes more hostile towards it. But I think there was an opportunity that we may have missed. I don't know why it was missed. Again, I do know that at least the two negotiators thought they had something, but they both—they agreed to that but it went beyond what they were authorized to do.

MILES: To wrap it up, let me ask you a big picture question reflecting on the eight years, which are the topic of our study and have [01:18:00] been, for the most part, the topic of our conversation today. And thanks again for such a fun conversation. It seems to me that it's fair to say that things looked pretty rosy vis-à-vis Russia during the early years, right? This is, George Bush says that he's looked into Putin's soul and likes what he saw. And then, by the time we get to the departure of the Bush administration at the very beginning of 2009, I think

that that would not be the refrain from the president. Indeed, it's not. He's saying much more hostile, negative things about Russia at this time.

So how do you make sense of this almost paradigm shift in the relationship between the two? Is this a story of Putin learning and changing his attitude towards the United States? Is this a story of misunderstanding, that the Americans misunderstood the Russians early on and “true Russia,” if you will, is what you get in 2008? Is it some other dynamic? How do you make sense of this big change?

PIFER: I would describe the relationship during the two Bush terms as going through three phases. The first one was 2001-2002, and perhaps into the first part of 2003, where it was rosy, that on the American side, there was a “We can forge a very positive relationship with Russia. We can accomplish what we need to do in terms of specific interests.” And the Russians were sending signals that they agreed.

Now, part of it is also, remember, is at that point in time, Putin is still dealing from a fairly weak hand. The Russian economy is just beginning to start growing after the horrible [01:20:00] nine years of the nineties, where the economy collapsed, where the military went basically unfunded, things like that. Then you had late 2003-2004, what I would call drift; the two leaders were focused on other issues, and the sides were not paying enough attention to things like the 2002 framework and the action checklist in September of 2003. They were not doing things to implement the bold vision that the two presidents had [laid out]. And, I think that, at some point, that's on the

presidents. The presidents or their national security advisors should have been saying, “Okay, we need to do things to keep this relationship moving in the right direction.”

And then, as a result of those frustrations, Putin comes to the conclusion that the hopes, expectations he had for the relationship in 2001-2002 aren't going to be realized, so he starts looking at a different course. The Russian economy begins to put him in a situation where he has more wherewithal. So I think it was in 2006 where, there was a—two things. I remember Fox News asking me to come on because they were excited. Bear bombers¹⁰ began flying off the coast of Alaska for the first time in, like, fifteen years. And the [Russian aircraft carrier] *Admiral Kuznetsov* makes a cruise out into the [Atlantic]. And I said to these guys, “What this signifies is, after fifteen very difficult years, the Russian military finally has enough money where it can buy the fuel to do these kinds of things. These things were very common. We shouldn't get all ratcheted up about them.” I remember actually telling a Fox interviewer once, said, “Look, let me give you some perspective on this. The *Kuznetsov* is about two-thirds the size of an American attack aircraft carrier. There are eleven in the United States Navy,” and I was able to check on the website [01:22:00] at the Pentagon, and, like, seven of our carriers are at sea all around the world. And that's just because that's the normal tempo of operations [for the U.S. Navy].

But from Putin's perspective, he concludes that the United States, the West, are not prepared to meet him on his terms. The added problem, of

¹⁰ This is the NATO reporting name for the Russian Tupolev Ty-95 bomber.

course, is that you see greater authoritarianism, which is going to be a problem for us [Washington and the West] in any case. But also, his economics begin to get to the position where he can be more challenging. So he has the capability, even though it turned out to be a pretty miserable operation, he had the ability to slap down Georgia in 2008. Now, I think they've learned some things about weaknesses and they've now corrected a lot of those deficiencies, they've put the funds back into the military so that they have more military capability now. And I don't think the Russians think they have the military capability to challenge the United States, but they do feel that they have certain advantages in geographic areas, including the post-Soviet space.¹¹

And then, as Putin's views shifted now, I think he's come to a conclusion that we are *glavnii protivnik*, the main opponent[, and perhaps his narrative of Russia reasserting itself as a great power requires that Russia have a main opponent]. And, at this point, I don't think we can change that [view]. I'd also say that I do worry that the channels of information that feed information to Putin are pretty narrow and pretty slanted. So I don't think he operates with a full picture. The way he talks about the Orange Revolution and the Maidan Revolution, I think he actually believes that these were not manifestations of popular discontent with a stolen election in 2004, or with Yanukovich's greater turn towards authoritarianism in 2013- 2014. He talks about [those events] in a way that [suggests] he really does believe these were organized [01:24:00] by the CIA and MI6 and German intelligence, and I just don't think that was the case.

¹¹ Ambassador Pifer made this observation prior to the 2022 Russia-Ukraine war.

And so, he has this worldview, which may be shaped by the fact that he's not getting a broad range of information, that leads him to interpret the worst.

So, Secretary Clinton, in 2011, expressing concern about [the Russian Duma] elections, when there's all sorts of evidence on the internet of ballot boxes being stuffed, things like that—that becomes not just a criticism that the elections were manipulated, but that is, “It's Secretary Clinton and the U.S. government are organizing these demonstrations.” And you even see some references by Russians to say, “Well, the Orange Revolution, the Rose Revolution, the Maidan, those were all attempts at a sort of U.S. hybrid warfare, but the real goal is to pull it off in Russia.” And that, to my mind, is just total fantasy, but I do worry that Putin, to some extent, buys into that notion[, that the United States aims for a color revolution to unseat him in Russia].

I don't think he was there in 2001-2002. I think he's evolved in that way [his view] over 20 years. Again, I do [believe] that there was a chance—I'm not sure it was a big chance— [but] we might have been able to forestall that shift [in his view], had we, during the Bush term, been able to find some way to give on [some issue]—like I said, I would have given on missile defense—but [in] some way where we could demonstrably show the Russians [that] we were not pushing for a maximum U.S. win on this issue because we know it's important to you, and we want to make an investment in the relationship. And so here we are.

MILES: On that note. Thanks so much.

BEHRINGER: Thank you. This was really terrific. [01:26:00] Thanks for giving us all the detail and all your time. We really appreciate it.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]