U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: Condoleezza Rice

Assistant to the President for National Security Affairs, 2001-2005
Secretary of State, 2005-2009

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[**Begin Transcription**]

BEHRINGER: My name is Paul Behringer. I'm a post-doctoral fellow here at the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University.

MILES: My name is Simon Miles. I'm an assistant professor of public policy at Duke University.

RICE: My name is Condoleezza Rice. I'm the director of the Hoover Institution. I was national security advisor from 2001 to 2004 and secretary of state from 2005 until 2009.

BEHRINGER: Thank you so much for joining us today, Dr. Rice. We'd like to start off with a background question. You have a Ph.D. in Soviet studies and a deep knowledge of the Soviet general staff. How do you think your academic background informed your approach to Russia as national security advisor and then secretary of state?

RICE: Well, actually, my Ph.D. was in political science, and it was more in comparative politics. And there's a reason that I make that distinction because what I've studied all my life is institutional change and how to think about when institutions are overwhelmed by new circumstances and what that means for their either flourishing or diminishing. And so, in both times that I served in government for George H.W. Bush, from '89 to '91, and for George W. Bush, we were dealing with really unprecedented events that were from the international system as a whole—from '89 to '91, watching the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dizzying effects, and then, of course, being the wartime president with

the attacks on the Twin Towers in 2001, and then that leading to Afghanistan and Iraq.

And the reason I talk about it in that way is that what I think my academic background did was to allow me [00:02:00] to step back and to actually have a framework for understanding those events, not just as a series of unfolding circumstances, but when you looked at the structure of the Cold War: What was breaking down, what was going to be new about it, what was going to be the role of the linchpin of the Cold War, which had been Germany? And then thinking from a policy perspective: What did you now have to do to make sure that Germany was still a democratic linchpin for NATO and for a Europe "whole and free"? as President George H.W. Bush put it.

And then, in 2001, understanding that our entire concept of security had been really assaulted. We had always thought of security as something external to the country. We had not been attacked on our territory since the War of 1812. And I remember thinking that we didn't even have institutions that dealt with domestic events. Everybody else had an Interior Ministry that was like our FBI-plus. Our Interior Department did Indian reservations and national parks. We didn't have a command for North America. It was the creation of institutions on the fly.

And then finally, when it comes to the background on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, I think it gave me a stronger sense of how incredibly disruptive to the Russian psyche the end of the Soviet Union really was. And I think people need to understand that it wasn't just disruptive because the

Soviet Union collapsed, but the Soviet Union was roughly the outline geographically [00:04:00] of the Russian Empire, so this was a collapse of everything Russians had known for the better part of two centuries.

BEHRINGER: And you write in your memoir that President Putin used to tell you, "You know us," in your conversations with him. What do you think he meant by that? What was he trying to say when he said that to you?

RICE: Well, it maybe is even more revelatory—one comment that he made to me after I became secretary of state. I went to visit Moscow, and he said, "It's really good now that you're secretary of state because you understand Russia, and that means we will finally get the attention that we deserve." And I thought, "You really think the U.S. government doesn't pay a lot of attention to Russia?" But it said to me that my background—the fact that he knew I'd written on Russia, I spoke Russian, I'd spent time in Moscow in language training—that he felt that I was going to have a deeper understanding of Russia and its aspirations than others. And I think he rather liked that association.

He would speak to me sometimes in terms that he probably wouldn't have spoken to another secretary of state. He said to me, once, "You know, Condi, you know us—Russia's only been great when it's been ruled by great men like Peter the Great and Alexander the Second." I doubt that was a reference he would have used with most secretaries of state. So, I think he thought that I had this deep understanding of who they were.

BEHRINGER: And as the Bush administration came into office, was there some type of debate about how to approach relations to Russia or the different schools of

thought, and what was your analysis of how U.S. policy toward Russia should change from the Clinton administration?

RICE: [00:06:00] I think we were all still caught up in the notion that you could integrate Russia into the international system, into the international economy. We would have had no disagreement with the Clinton administration about the expansion of NATO, for instance, and, in fact, expanded it further.

If there was anything, it was a sense that the Bush administration didn't want to be in the nation-building role, but that related more to what had happened in the Balkans than in Russia itself. I think what's really interesting, though, is that, with the exception of wanting to do missile defense and get out of the ABM Treaty and build a stronger military, I don't think that there was a great deal of fundamental difference about what it was we were trying to do with the Russians between, say, George H.W. Bush, Clinton, George W. Bush—I would say all the way out to the current administration—that there was going to be a kind of integrationist narrative about Russia.

What really happened though, of course, was that whatever it was we were thinking about relations with Russia was changed in a flash on September 11th. Putin had actually mentioned to us when we were in Slovenia for that first meeting—he had spent a lot of time on what a troubled place and what a troubling place Pakistan was. And the Russians, of course, had accused the Pakistanis after they had left Afghanistan—probably rightly—of supporting the insurgency in Afghanistan. They had quite strong ties to the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan. And so, this counterterrorism issue had come onto the agenda

[00:08:00] in Slovenia in July of 2001. And I remember thinking that Putin was overheated about that set of issues.

Even going back a little bit, in 1999, I had gone to Saudi Arabia as an oil company director, Chevron director, and I was known already to be working for George W. Bush in his campaign, and they spent a lot of time decrying how they had tried to help the Russians by building cultural institutions in the Caucuses, and the Russians had rejected it all. And now, of course, you understand that what they were rejecting was Saudi money for what they considered to be extremist views.

So, it all started to come together that really, aside from the Moscow Treaty and the ABM Treaty—which we should discuss—I think Putin felt that he'd found a new strategic concept for the U.S.-Russian relationship, and it was around terrorism. He was the first to actually call President Bush on 9/11. I think Tony Blair was the first to actually talk to him because the president was trying to get to a safe location, but I talked to Putin that day, and I remember very well that he immediately said, "We're standing down our exercises. If there's anything we can do." And it wasn't long before we developed extremely supportive and extremely useful counterterrorism cooperation with the Russians. We developed law enforcement cooperation with the Russians. The Russians were the first to become members of the Proliferation Security Initiative. And so, the relationship was built more and more in those first years around this common threat.

And I think the fact that President Bush took the view that anybody's terrorism [00:10:00] problem was our terrorism problem was actually quite attractive to the Russians so that, while we decried their tactics in Chechnya, we did understand that there was a significant part of Chechnya that had given over to Islamic extremism. When we liberated Mazar-i-Sharif, we found Chechens fighting there. And so I think the relationship for those first years was really very much around the common threat of terrorism.

And just two more incidents that I think are important to record—when the kindergarten was attacked in Beslan in 2004, I will never forget: we were on the road campaigning with President Bush, and President Bush, without hesitation, came out and said that it was a terrorist act, it was akin to what had happened on 9/11. While the Europeans were saying, well, you know, the policies in Chechnya and so forth and the freedom fighters and this and that. And so, our clarity about the terrorism issue was extremely attractive to Putin.

They were extremely helpful in Afghanistan. They supplied the Northern Alliance with, of all things, donkeys. I remember talking to [Russian Defense Minister] Sergei Ivanov and saying, "You're not coming through with the supplies for the Northern Alliance," and he said, "Well, it's hard to find donkeys." And I said, "Donkeys?" And he said, "Yeah, that's how they travel in those high mountains."

So, the relationship was very strong, and I think it's why the decision to withdraw from the ABM Treaty went so smoothly. We actually coordinated our statements about withdrawal from the ABM Treaty—the Russians saying they

were saddened by it [00:12:00]. They thought we were making a mistake, but, as Putin put it to me, "I'm not going to jump up and down about your leaving the ABM treaty." And on the heels of that, of course, we got the Moscow Treaty on offensive nuclear weapons.[1]

So, looking at what we're seeing right now, it's hard to imagine how actually smooth the relationship was in the first three or so years.

MILES: So, I know Paul wants to ask you a bit more about your views on missile defense and how that played out, but of course, we should talk just briefly at least about the meeting in Slovenia in June of 2001, and, of course, the now-infamous "looked into his eyes" moment. Can you talk to us a little bit about that first meeting between the two presidents, and we'd also, of course, be very interested in your reactions, both at the time and with the benefit of some hindsight, to the first indications from President Bush about his assessment of Vladimir Putin, the individual.

RICE: When Putin walked in—I had met him in '92, when he was deputy mayor of St. Petersburg—and so he walked toward us, and he carried himself like an athlete, almost a swagger when he walked, but as he approached us and started to talk, you could see that he actually wasn't all that confident. He spoke in a pretty soft voice. And President Bush recognized that one of the problems was—they had terrible economic problems. They were still trying to come out of the '98 crash. And President Bush said to me at one point, "Should I offer to buy Siberia?" And I said, "What?" And he said, "Well, they need to develop it, and

[1] The Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty (SORT)

we bought Alaska. Maybe we should buy Siberia." And I said I didn't think that was probably the way to start [00:14:00] the conversation with Putin, who was a very proud man about those sorts of things. I, later on, had a conversation with Sergei Ivanov, in which he said, "You know, Don Rumsfeld took me to Alaska." He said, "It's so beautiful. It reminds me of Russia." I said, "You know, Sergei, it used to be Russia."

So I didn't think that was probably the way to approach him, but President Bush was always looking for ways to connect with the people that he talked with. He would ask about their families. He would ask about where they came from. He had a really poignant discussion one time with [German Chancellor] Gerhard Schröder, whose father died on the Eastern Front in Romania. And I don't think anybody even knew that Gerhard Schröder's father had died on the Eastern Front, but he revealed that to President Bush.

So, I think that's how you have to understand the context of "I looked into his eyes." He was always trying to find some way to connect, and it got a little out of control, that comment, and I remember thinking, "Oh, no, we're going to be trying to explain that one." But he also felt that Putin, in their private conversation—they did have one conversation that was just with interpreters. And Putin had told this story about this cross that his mother had given him—an Orthodox cross. There was a fire at the dacha, and the only thing that had survived was this cross, and he thought it had been an act of God. And the president, who's a religious man, was attracted to that. And I remember saying to the president, "You know, I'm not so sure about that story."

But now, looking at who Putin has become, this connection to Russian Orthodoxy and the like—even when he was deputy mayor of St. Petersburg, I remember thinking to myself, "Why would he, a KGB man, [00:16:00] be alongside this reformist mayor?" Of course, [St. Petersburg Mayor Anatoly] Sobchak was a Russian nationalist. And so, the nationalist Putin was starting to come through already then. But I think that's how you have to understand the "looked into his eyes."

BEHRINGER: And you mentioned the ABM Treaty in the context of that first meeting a little bit, coordinating with the Russians [on] withdrawal from the treaty. And then the next year, President Bush goes to Moscow to sign the SORTagreement. Could you talk a little bit about your views on missile defense and nuclear arms agreements with Russia and what the thinking was in pulling out of ABM and then putting together the SORT treaty?

RICE: We had come to office—President Bush, one of his pillars in his campaign had been missile defense because he couldn't understand, like most normal humans, as opposed to us arms control junkies, why defenses were bad. From his point of view, it was just going to be to defend against the North Koreans or the Iranians, because we kept talking about strategic stability, but the hard thing for people to recognize or to accept is that somehow, by leaving yourself vulnerable, you make the world more stable. And so, he was always interested in missile defenses. He was interested not in Star Wars-like missile defenses, but in limited missile defenses that could be used against these small attacks.

And he kept saying, "We're not trying to disable the Russian strategic forces," and he made that argument to Putin. Putin didn't object that much. It's much later—and that's a transition we need to talk about—but it's much later when it becomes clear that we're going to put [00:18:00] interceptors in Poland and possibly the Czech Republic and Romania that he gets upset about it.

And I think it had less to do, actually, with missile defense and more to do with what began to happen to him after the color revolutions in 2004, 2005, particularly the Ukrainian color revolution, [during] which he began to think that the problem with his strategic concept with the United States was that we didn't intend to stop at just stopping terrorism. We intended to spread democracy. And he could go along with the first. That was great. But once it became about the Freedom Agenda, which was very clearly enunciated in President Bush's second inaugural speech—now Putin was off that train because he started to think that maybe we really intended to push that agenda into Moscow, right up to the boundaries of Moscow. And you have to then understand the transformation of his thinking even about missile defense in that context. It becomes more now about the territorial encroachment—not of missile defense or of forces, but the territorial encroachment of an idea, which is democracy. And it comes at the same time that Putin is becoming more authoritarian at home in reaction to those same events.

MILES: So, all the while, there's another meeting between the two presidents—this time, Crawford, Texas, at the Bush family ranch. We've heard from some others who've served in the administration that this had to be explained to the

Russians as being a good thing, not a downgrade from the White House, but this was actually a plus-up, and they should feel [00:20:00] very good about a trip to Texas. Could you talk to us a little bit about the decision for the first dedicated summit between the two presidents and how that played out, as you witnessed it?

RICE: It's—remind me of the date. It's late 2001, right?

MILES: It's October 2001.[2]

RICE: Yeah, right. So, the president—again, as you just said, he thought this was a great thing to invite them there, but the Russians only knew Camp David and the White House, and I think they thought they were being downgraded. And then it was explained, and, of course, Putin reciprocated by having us at his dacha. So they finally got the concept of doing this as an honor.

It was still the counterterrorism phase of our relationship. In fact, they had been together in Shanghai when Kabul fell and talked about—there was a moment at which President Bush said, "This thing"—meaning the Taliban—"is unraveling like a cheap suit," and I could see that the translator couldn't quite figure out how to deal with that one. And so, we just let that go, but they even had conversations at that moment about whether to invest the city, whether to actually take Kabul. Well, in fact, the forces had done it before they could make any decisions, but I just say that to show you the kind of depth of cooperation and consultation they were having during that time. So, that's mostly what Crawford was about because that was mostly on our mind.

[2] The summit actually took place on November 13-15, 2001.

There was one very funny incident, which is that the Russians had gotten the time change wrong, and we're all out there, and Putin shows up an hour early for dinner. And the president [00:22:00] says to me, "*Somebody* forgot to tell *Vladimir* about the time change." Well, I was the one who apparently was supposed to tell Vladimir about the time change. And I said, "Mr. President, if a former KGB officer and the now-president of Russia can't figure out a time change, you know, it's actually not our fault, okay, they should be able to do that."

But it was a very friendly, easygoing set of meetings. Putin met Barney for the first time. And then, when we went to Russia, he made it clear that his dog was bigger and faster and better than Barney.

MILES: To be fair, not a high bar to clear.

RICE: Not a high bar to clear, no, especially—and it was this lab, this huge lab that was kind of like this [gestures]. The relationship was great at that point, but I want to emphasize it was mostly around counterterrorism. It was mostly around arms control. There wasn't that much that was particularly contentious.

We had some differences that would start to emerge about the Georgians already because the Russians kept threatening to send troops into the Pankisi Gorge because the Georgians weren't clearing out the terrorists, and they believed the Pankisi Gorge had become a staging ground for terrorists in the Caucuses. I remember telling Sergei Ivanov—I said, "You know, Sergei, come on. Your generals aren't going into the Pankisi Gorge. It'd be a death trap. Give us some time to train the Georgians." And so we did that—and I

remember they had a conversation about that at Crawford. But there wasn't much that was contentious, frankly.

BEHRINGER: Georgia becomes a major issue in 2003, of course, with the Rose Revolution, but, prior to that, [00:24:00] there are a few other things that happen. One is the Bush administration goes ahead with the so-called "Big Bang" expansion of NATO. What had been your thinking on NATO expansion up to that point? Was there any debate over how many states to bring in at that moment?

RICE: There really wasn't. The Clinton administration had started a lot of that work with the Baltics. [Former Secretary of State] Madeline [Albright], in particular, had been a big advocate. And I think we never believed that the Baltics were going to be left out. We believed that the Baltic states had been forcibly incorporated—that had been our position for 50 years—and we weren't going to back down from bringing the Baltic states in. There wasn't much disagreement about Romania—you know, the southern flank. But if there had been anything that people might've focused on, it might've been the Baltic states.

What's really interesting is Putin really didn't raise it. NATO expansion just never came up in our conversations until the issue of whether to put missile defenses in Poland and the Czech Republic and Romania. Then he got animated about it. But all of this post hoc stuff about how they felt so humiliated by the enlargement of NATO and so forth—I spent a lot of time with them. It just wasn't an issue.

BEHRINGER: The other thing that's going on in the fall of 2002, spring of 2003 is the run-up to the Iraq War. What do you remember about efforts to bring the Russians on board with that? And do you, in particular, remember any conversations with Chief of Staff of the Presidential Administration Alexander Voloshin and others about Russian assistance for rebuilding Iraq? Did the Russian officials raise Iraq in your discussions with them as a sticking point then or later, [00:26:00] anything like that?

RICE: So I actually went to see Putin about this. We knew that we were probably getting close, and the Russians had voted for the first resolution, that there'd be serious consequences. It was pretty clear early on that they weren't going to support the war in Iraq. But probably the most harmful thing that happened was not with the Russians—it was that the Germans and the French joined forces with the Russians. Because the Germans and the French carried weight in ways that I think the Russians really didn't about Iraq. And after we had invaded Iraq, I went to see Putin in it must've been summer of 2003, and he had one thing in mind—his contracts. That's all he cared about was oil contracts. And he pretty much told President Bush, "I feel bad for you because you're going to lose people, and that's always a hard thing," but this was not a big strategic issue with the Russians. It was all about the oil contracts, and would we assure them.

And again, my counterpart was never Voloshin. My counterpart was Sergei Ivanov. Early on, in Slovenia, President Bush asked President Putin, "If I can't get ahold of you, who should I talk to?" And he said, "Sergei Ivanov." And

the president said, "You should talk to Condi." And so, Ivanov and I established a channel that we really used. I don't think I talked to Voloshin twice in my entire time. The person Putin trusted was Ivanov.

MILES: So, before we move forward into the second term and, of course, your new role in the administration, let's talk a little bit [00:28:00] about the color revolutions—Ukraine, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, et cetera. Can you talk a little bit about one, how these were viewed from the White House, and two, was there any sort of concern on your part, on the part of others, that the Russians might see these as threatening, or that these could have an impact on relations between Washington and Moscow?

RICE: No, we were 100 percent supportive of the color revolutions. And remember that it kept going. It wasn't just in the former Soviet states. It was also Lebanon at this time, and there just seemed to be a kind of wave that was very favorable toward overthrowing these governments and moving toward democratic governments. And we didn't see a contradiction between wanting to have good relations with the Russians and what was happening in the color revolutions.

I think we might have—and maybe I'm the one who should have seen this—we might have been late to understand how Putin saw them. There was just one incident which suggested to me that the Russians were unnerved, and that was about Ukraine because I went to visit Putin in 2004 at his dacha, and Yanukovych popped out of a closet, frankly, out of a door. And he said, "This is Yanukovych. He's running for president of Ukraine." And I said in my book, it was like he wanted to say to me, "This is my man in Ukraine. I haven't lost

interest in Ukraine. Don't forget it." So, there was that moment, but for the most part, we were [00:30:00] just very supportive of the color revolutions and figured people had found their time.

MILES: Looking back, it's become clear that Putin has—or at least he says that he feels that the United States played a role in all of this, which has always been guffawed at, of course. I think there are many people in the intelligence community who wished they had the chops to pull off something like that. But do you think that that influenced his dealings with you? Not just his sense of insecurity on his borders, but also a sense of American skulduggery here?

RICE: Not right away, certainly. I don't know if he actually believed that we were behind these. He's got a conspiracy side to him, so maybe, and he was, after all, a KGB officer, and one thing we know about the KGB is they had an overestimation of the CIA. So maybe he actually thought that we were party to this, but it really didn't affect the relationship that much at that point in time.

In fact, what's interesting about this whole period—you have the terrorism stuff, you have the Moscow Treaty and so forth, then you have the color revolutions. And it's almost as if it takes a while before it starts to affect his view of U.S.-Russian relations. Because what I remember most from that period of time is they were actually pretty helpful on Iraq. We formed the P5+1[3] on Iran, where the Russians were extremely helpful. And even go-betweens for us with the Iranians when the IRGC[4] was sponsoring those militias in Iraq—we

[3] The UN Security Council Permanent Five (United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom) plus Germany.
[4] Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

told the Iranians through the Russians, "We will not cross into [00:32:00] Iranian territory, but if we catch any of your people in Iraq, we will arrest them or kill them," and we felt confident enough to send that message through the Russians.

And the whole negotiation around the Iranian deal—we made progress in finally removing our objection to the Russian Bushehr reactor. I remember very well the meeting with [Russian Foreign Minister] Sergei Lavrov, and he was going on and on about how the Iranians needed civil nuclear power, and he said, "The Bushehr reactor is just related to that." And I said, "Well, if we accepted the Bushehr reactor, would you be willing to take the rods back to Russia?" And he said, "Of course, but you've never asked before." And I thought, "That's true. We had never asked before." And so, remember, we got the Security Council resolution with the Russians voting for it that said the Iranians had to stop enrichment. So this was a period of really pretty tremendous cooperation.

Similarly, on North Korea, the Russians were one of the members of the six parties, and they put a lot of pressure on the North Koreans. They were a member of the Quartet[5] on the Middle East. And if you look at the statement that came out the day that Hamas won those elections in the Palestinian Territories, it's very tough on Hamas, saying that it has to accept Israel's right to exist. The Russians are all a part of that.

[5] The United Nations, the United States, the European Union, and Russia.

So we're getting really good cooperation on other fronts with the Russians—I mean, really good cooperation—and it continues really [00:34:00] through 2006-2007. We make a couple of trips to Russia. One is to attend the 60th anniversary of the end of World War II, and they have quite good discussions there. I think what was mostly in Putin's mind was, who was he going to select as president to so that, when he got ready to return, it was open. Sergei Ivanov was one of the possibilities. [Dmitry] Medvedev was the other. We went to the parade on Red Square, and Sergei Ivanov was defense minister, and he was going by in the trucks, telling the troops, "*Vnimanie, vnimanie*"—attention, attention. And I said to President Bush, "He's never going to be president of Russia. He's too strong." And sure enough, he chose Medvedev, and it broke his relationship with Sergei Ivanov for a long time.

But we went back for the 300th anniversary of St. Petersburg where Putin really did browbeat every leader in the world to coming to this really stupid ceremony where they had people painted gold, whirling around, and they were playing the "1812 Overture," and cannons were going off, and people were dancing—it was just bizarre. But the president went because he didn't want to offend Vladimir. So, he went. And then after that, we stayed in St. Petersburg, and Putin took us—this was in July, and it was White Nights, and we went on along the Neva with Sergei and me and Putin and Lyudmila[6] [00:36:00] and President Bush and Mrs. Bush. And President Bush said to him, "I was in your gym, and you have a ballet bar. Why?" And Putin said, "Because

[6] Lyudmila Putina, Putin's then-wife.

Lyudmila is taking ballet lessons, and she's taking 'Swan Lake'. And if I tried to lift her"—because she was kind of chubby—"I would be a dead swan," and it was one of those moments when you didn't want to laugh, but you did. And then President Bush asking him why the prison, which is right there on the river—"You know, you could sell that property to developers." And so, the mood was extremely light. We were dragged off in July to a performance of the Nutcracker at the Mariinsky, which Sergei Ivanov and I sneaked out of to go see another ballet company.

So they were doing everything they could to build the relationship. And I'm sure we're going to cover the Bucharest Summit, but aside from some tensions beginning to grow around missile defense, and aside from the fact that we had to start speaking out about Anna Politkovskaya being murdered, and so we were becoming more active in commenting on human rights in Russia. The strategic issues—Middle East, Iran, North Korea—were going actually quite well.

BEHRINGER: We've gotten into the second administration here, and your role as national security advisor changes to secretary of state. How does your role on Russia policy change, if at all, and could you talk a little bit more [00:38:00] about whether there was this kind of shift toward perhaps being more critical of Putin on his domestic flank, and was there any strategic review at the midterm here?

RICE: You know, I don't actually believe in strategic reviews. I think, basically, we'd been in office for four years, and when I became secretary, I knew what we had

to do. We had to rebuild relations with the allies. We had to get ourselves out of a position where everybody thought they were negotiating between us and the Iranians. I had to get us back into a position where the North Koreans couldn't claim that we were the obstacle, and I had to launch something on Middle East peace. And, in each of those, Russia played a pretty big role. Really using the Quartet to do the things that we want to do all the way up to the Annapolis Conference,[7] really using the Six-Party Talks.[8]

So my job was to free diplomacy. We had been—I want to say agnostic, but that's not true—I think people would say even a little bit hostile to some of the diplomatic entreaties. I remember a conversation with Vice President [Richard] Cheney, who I adore and we're really good friends, but I was saying something about doing something with the North Koreans and he said, "Mr. President, we have to maintain our credibility on the use of force." I said, "Mr. President, if there's one problem the Bush administration doesn't have, its credibility on the use of force. People think if they look at us the wrong way, we'll use force. That's not our problem. Our problem is people don't think we're serious about diplomacy." And so that was the hallmark [00:40:00] of what I was trying to do, and that meant a pretty intimate relationship with the Russians on some of these strategic issues.

At the same time, things were going downhill domestically in terms of the reign of Putin. I think the interesting thing is it really wasn't as much—it

[7] A conference on peace in the Middle East held in Annapolis, MD on November 27, 2007.
[8] Negotiations on North Korea's nuclear program, including the United States, Japan, South Korea, China, Russia, and North Korea.

was sliding that way. I mentioned Politkovskaya being murdered. They were starting to put out these laws about foreign interference in civil society groups—if you were getting money from foreigners, that was—so, there were clearly changes coming. In 2006, I remember going and watching—I always turned on television when I got there to get my Russian ear—and I had a meeting that afternoon with some young entrepreneurs, and I said to them, "You know, television looks like it did when I was a graduate student here in Soviet times." And one of the entrepreneurs said, "Oh, I can tell you what television looks like. The first story is about the great man. The second story is about agricultural production being up. He said, the third story is about whatever innocent people the United States killed this day. And the fourth story was about which of his potential successors is up or down." And he said, "But who watches television?" He said, "We use the internet."

And so things were definitely sliding, but I think the real, systematic crackdown comes when he comes back as president, not as much during this period—although again, it was definitely sliding [00:42:00] into a more authoritarian approach not very tolerant of dissent, but not the Putin's Russia that we would see with the stolen election, which is when he begins to blame Hillary Clinton for practically everything.

He told people—Mike McFaul[9] has told me this—that "President Bush and Condi Rice really understood us. It was the rest of them that wouldn't." So, he had this notion that he had this relationship with Bush, and maybe with me,

[9] Dr. Michael McFaul, Stanford University professor and U.S. ambassador to Russia during the Obama administration.

that was understanding of their concerns, even though we were pretty tough on human rights and the like.

MILES: So before we get to Putin redux, let's talk a little bit about '07-'08, in which, of course, a lot of things happen—Georgia, Bucharest. But first, I wanted to ask you about February 2007 and Putin's speech at the Munich Security Conference. We heard from your colleague in the administration, Bob Gates,[10] about his reaction having been in the room. I wonder if you could talk to us a little bit about both the reaction to this speech, I guess in terms of the delivery style, but also the substance, and I would flag, for example, you mentioned that Iraq wasn't really a big thing. He was really interested in his contracts, and then we get this speech with explicit and even more oblique references to the Iraq War as evidence of American lawlessness, let's say, in the use of force.

RICE: I think this transition that's starting to take place is that, if you're going to start to transition to a more authoritarian regime at home, you need an enemy abroad, and he chose us. But there was a disconnect because dealing with them wasn't very [00:44:00] hard until we get to the Georgian period, and 2007-2008 is pretty important in that regard.

And so, I think you have three things happening with him. One is the color revolutions are starting now to really feel like they might be encroaching because it's beginning to show that these countries are not just independent. They actually want to be aligned with the West, and I think he finds that very

[10] Former U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates

threatening—remember, they tried to poison Yushchenko. And so the tentacles were starting to reach out.

Secondly, I think that they were starting to now—you know how people can do this. They now go back over time, and they say, "Maybe the United States was coming after us all along." And so, you now start to get the Iraq War and NATO expansion and all these things that had not mattered at all in the conversation started getting built up into a narrative about the United States and Western imperialism.

But I think it really comes, more than anything, from, "I now see the face of the United States, and it's coming after me." And so, you start now to crack down on civil society that uses foreign money and all kinds of things. So, you can't de-link those two. This is really very much—and it happens with the Russians—authoritarian at home, they get aggressive abroad. And that's how I read that speech, but it's a while before it has much of an impact on other elements of the relationship. We keep working together on Middle East peace. We keep working together on North Korea. In fact, in October of '06, the North Koreans are going to test what they say is a ballistic missile for the first time—a long-range ballistic missile—and I remember the Russians actually phoning up [00:46:00] and saying, "Can any of your missile defenses point our way?" So, the relationship was still pretty good.

2007 is a turning point. They're getting very aggressive with the Georgians. Whatever idiot it is that decided there should be Russian

peacekeepers in Abkhazia and Ossetia—that would be the OSCE,[11] by the way—so that they had a staging ground already in Georgia. That had not been our decision; that had been an OSCE decision. They were embargoing Georgian products.

In fact, I went to Moscow, and I was kept waiting for a really long time, which was unusual. And finally, we pass by the Kremlin, we pass by Putin's dacha, and we pass out into this lodge out in the middle of nowhere. And they're having a birthday party for Ivanov—not Sergei, [Russian Foreign Minister] Igor Ivanov—and [FSB Director Nikolai] Patrushev, of all people. And Putin says to me—it was really very manipulative—he says, "You're a Russianist. You would have given anything to be in a meeting of the National Security Council of Russia, wouldn't you, when you were a young academic?" And we sit down, and they're telling bad Georgian jokes and drinking Georgian wine. So, it was just a bizarre scene. And the only person who was with me was [U.S. Ambassador to Russia] Bill Burns. And finally, I said to him, "Mr. President, we have some things to talk about." And they had been so tough on Georgia that President Bush had told me to tell them that any attack on the Georgians—this is 2007 [00:48:00]—would cause a rupture in U.S.-Russian relations. And we were also trying to get them into the WTO at this time, so I was trying to help them with that—they were very supportive. But then I said the word about Georgia, and Putin stood up, and now he's peering over me, and

[11] The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

I stood up too, because that's instinct. I'm pretty tall. And we back up, but it was the first time I'd seen that kind of hostility from him.

So something was clearly changing, and Frank-Walter Steinmeier and I—the German foreign minister—spent the summer trying to find an agreement for Ossetia and Abkhazia because we knew this was a powder keg. And so that's the lead-up then to both the Bucharest summit and the Georgian war.

BEHRINGER: And if we could move to Bucharest next, could you talk a little bit about what your advice was to President Bush about extending the Membership Action Plan [MAP] to Georgia and Ukraine ahead of the summit and then give us your version of events about how that went down.

RICE: I had no reservations about the Baltic states, none. This time, I really had reservations, and I wasn't sure of what I was going to recommend. And I went to Davos, and I met with Yushchenko, and he was practically in tears and saying, "We have to have MAP. If we don't have MAP, they're going to destroy us. Don't you understand? They don't believe that Ukraine is a real country." Well, gee, guess who was right about that? And so, I got back to Washington, we had a National Security Council meeting, and I said to the president, "Mr. President, I've never been indecisive [00:50:00] in telling you what I think, but I really can't tell you what the right course is here. I know that NATO's open-door policy is important, but I have to tell you, I think with the Russians this might be a last straw." And you asked about my background, and I talked a little bit about how the Russians viewed Ukraine and so forth. And it was a very

long discussion. The intelligence community had come in with an assessment that this would be a last straw with the Russians. I think Fiona Hill actually gave the briefing. And we batted it back and forth, and ultimately the president said, "I have to stand on principle, and we'll go try to make it work," but we knew it was really an uphill climb.

The night before I got there, Tori,[12] who was our ambassador to NATO at the time, came and she said that it had not gone well in all of the meetings. And so we had a dinner that night. The president had a dinner with [German Chancellor Angela] Merkel. I had a dinner with the foreign ministers, and it's the most uncomfortable dinner I've ever been at because I decided—sometimes when you're secretary of state, you will overwhelm the conversation, so I would sometimes step back and let somebody else speak first. And so, I said, "Frank, why don't you speak?" And he did. And he said something about, "We can't take on countries that have frozen conflicts," and Radek [Radosław] Sikorski, the Polish foreign minister, just exploded, and he said, "You were a frozen conflict for 45 years. You should be glad nobody thought that about you." And it was really uncomfortable. And he went on to talk about all the Germans had done to Europe, and they'd been rescued by democracy, and, how could they turn their backs on democracy? And then the Poles jumped in, and the Czechs jumped in, and it got [00:52:00] pretty awful. And that's when I tried to pull it back.

[12] Victoria Nuland

But we went to the next day—we knew we didn't have an agreement. And that's the famous scene of Angela Merkel and I trying to negotiate with the East Europeans in Russian because it was the only language everybody spoke. But we came to this agreement that we thought was a pretty good compromise. I remember though—now, it's funny because, now, the press is saying, "Oh, it was the worst of both worlds. You've got the—." And I remember people thinking that it was a throwaway line, that trying to defend it with the precedent actually meant something. And all of them saying, "Oh no, you got defeated—they didn't get MAP, so you came up with this silly line about, they'll one day be members."

So I did say to the president as we were leaving, though—because Putin then came to the NATO Council, and I'll never forget—it was Bucharest. It was really dark. This room was very, very dark. And Putin started going on and on, and he got deeper and deeper into the history. And, "Ukraine is a made-up country." And I remember hearing it in the Russian and thinking, "Did I hear that right?" and then listening to the translation. And afterwards, we all walked out, we took a picture, Putin left, and I said to the president, "I guess we can go to Sochi now, because that would have been one hell of a bad meeting if we'd done MAP and tried to go to Sochi."

And so we did go to Sochi. Again, very friendly. Putin was intent on showing us all of the Olympic sites that he'd built. I remember thinking, "What a weird place to have a Winter Olympics." It was about 80 degrees that day. And that night, he introduced us to Medvedev, who had been, "elected"

[00:54:00] president and was about to take over. And they were doing the Cossack dances, and President Bush said, "I should try that." I said, "No, trust me. You shouldn't try that. That's actually really hard." And our last meeting—it had been in Kennebunkport, the last U.S. meeting, which again, went very well. We did this strategic concept.

But Georgia broke the relationship irrevocably. I fully understood that this was a powder keg. I fully understood that the Georgians had allowed themselves to get provoked and had fired on Russian peacekeepers, and so the Russians had the pretext that they needed. But we focused, really, on two things. One was now, keep Georgia independent, and number two, keep Saakashvili in power. Don't let them get to Tbilisi. And those minimalist goals—we sent destroyers into the Black Sea. We brought the Georgian forces back from Iraq. We delivered humanitarian goods by military airlift. We were trying to send signals, but—I don't know if Steve Hadley's told you the story, but we're all sitting there and everybody's getting more and more worked up, and at one point, Steve Hadley said, "You know, are we really prepared to go to war with the Russians over Georgia?" And it really brought everybody up short because we realized that we had really limited options by that time. And so, we just said, "We've got to keep them from taking Tbilisi."

When the war was ending, the French were in the chair of the European Union, and [00:56:00] they had negotiated a ceasefire that was just ridiculous. I mean, French diplomacy, right? They'd negotiated a line that was 15 miles from Tbilisi for the Russian soldiers. I went to see Sarkozy in the south of France, and

he said, “No, no, we didn't.” And I just whispered to his aide. I said, “Did you all look at a map? Did you actually look at a map?” And they had not. And when they looked at the map it was then left to me to go renegotiate it with the help of Alex[ander] Stubb, who was at that time the OSCE chair and was foreign minister of Finland, and he worked the Russian side, and I worked the Georgian side.

I remember going. The Georgians were just exhausted. They’d been up five nights in a row, and they'd signed this thing because, basically, the French had told him to sign it. And I said to them, “No, you don't have to take that deal.” And so we did what we could, but people ask, “Why didn't you have stronger sanctions?” Well, there was, one month later, that problem called the financial crisis, and sanctions were not going to be on the table.

BEHRINGER: Thank you for covering so much ground. I know you've got to go. As just a brief wrap-up, I was wondering if you could comment quickly on this question of whether the Bush administration misjudged Putin, and he changed over the course of his first two administrations, or if he was always this way and even misread him or something like that.

RICE: Oh, I don't think we misread him. Look, I've told you—I knew he was an avowed [00:58:00] Russian nationalist. I knew he had ambitions and aspirations. He'd tell me about them. He wanted to be Peter the Great. I understood that. But when people say things like that, it's like, so what do you then do? Do you say, “Okay, so we won't deal with you because you have these aspirations of Russian greatness.” No, you try to dissuade them. You try to deter

them. You try to go ahead in carrying out your agenda of the integration of the East Europeans into the West and the Baltic states into the West. You try to get their help on the Middle East peace and North Korea and Iran. You watch warily what's starting to happen inside of Russia, and you press them really hard on things like the laws that would outlaw foreign support for civil society. You speak about it when you have the opportunity—I met with Politkovskaya's parents and family.

But it's not as if you've "misjudged" them because you tried to work with them. That comment is made by people who never actually were secretary of state, I guarantee you—academics like me, who then never had to go actually do anything. And, by the way, their [the Russians'] help is immeasurable during the whole War on Terror, so of course you're going to accept their help in that regard. But did I ever think that Vladimir Putin was a Jeffersonian Democrat? No. And, toward the end, when Georgia breaks out, [01:00:00] it's very clear then that these aspirations have become more than aspirations. Now, they still worked very well together through the financial crisis. And that was important to the world at that point.

But, just as a kind of coda, would I have thought that we'd see what we're seeing in Ukraine today? That is a different Putin. Not that the aspiration is different, but the willingness to take that kind of risk? That's what's different. And that's where you have to wonder whether it's isolation, hubris, some of both, running out of time, somehow that he felt it—that's what's different. It's not that the aspiration wasn't always there.

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