U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

Interviewee: Angela Stent

Member, Office of Policy Planning, 1999-2001
National Intelligence Officer for Russia and Eurasia, 2004-2006

Interviewers:

Paul Behringer,
Post-Doctoral Fellow, Center for Presidential History, Southern Methodist University
Simon Miles,
Assistant Professor, Sanford School of Public Policy, Duke University

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[Begin Transcription]

BEHRINGER: My name is Paul Behringer. I'm from the Center of 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.

STENT: I'm Angela Stent. I'm director of the Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies and a professor of government and foreign service at Georgetown University.

BEHRINGER: Thank you so much for joining us today, Dr. Stent.

STENT: I'm delighted to be doing this.

BEHRINGER: If you wouldn't mind starting by just describing the transition from the Clinton administration to the Bush administration and what the Bush administration's intentions were toward Russia as they took office.

STENT: Sure. Between 1999 and 2001, I worked in the Office of Policy Planning at the Department of State. And since I was not a political [appointee], I was there for the first six months of the George W. Bush administration.[1] At the end of the Clinton administration—even though you'd had this kind of outsized Bill and Boris relationship—the relationship by then between the United States and Russia really had deteriorated. And you'd had Yeltsin in ill health. You'd had the bombings in Serbia. You had the Kosovo War to which the Russians had objected. There was

[1] Words in brackets throughout the transcript indicate instances where Dr. Stent later provided clarifications.

the war in Chechnya. And for all of those reasons the relationship really had deteriorated.

And so, during the election campaign, before President Bush was elected, there were a number of strands. Condoleezza Rice had published a major piece in Foreign Affairs where she talked about the need to normalize relations with Russia, that the U.S. could work with Russia, we shouldn't be paying so much attention to it [00:02:00], and we should maybe rearrange our priorities. And then you had the House Republicans who would publish something called the Cox Report, where they greatly criticized the Clinton administration and particularly Vice President Gore for aiding and abetting corruption in Russia and saying that the next administration should push back from that.

And so the relationship was bad. There were these accusations of corruption, but then, as the new Bush administration came in, one of the first acts was the expulsion of a number, a significant number of Russian diplomatic personnel from the United States because they were accused of doing more than just being diplomats—of espionage. Secretary of State Powell had to convey this to the then-Russian ambassador Yuri Ushakov, who is one of Putin's closest foreign policy aides. And so there were diplomatic expulsions [from both countries].

But in the State Department itself, particularly the Office of Policy Planning, we participated in a review of Russia policy—all administrations do that when they come in. They tend to review many aspects of foreign policy, including

Russia policy. And as part of this review, we in the Office of Policy Planning—and Richard Haass was the head of it then—actually wrote a memo thinking about what it might mean were we to offer Russia membership in NATO. So this was another issue of contention between the Clinton administration and the Yeltsin administration, was the admission of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to NATO. And that was an example of a forward-leaning policy saying, if Russia really did what it needed to do to join NATO—and Putin had explicitly asked already—[00:04:00] what were the chances that Russia could join NATO? Then that would already lead Russia in a direction that would be beneficial, we thought at least, internationally. The memo never went very far. We did send it up to the secretary of state.

So I would say that, right from the beginning of the Bush administration, there were disputes—as there are, I think, in every administration—between people who favored a more pragmatic policy toward Russia—focusing on dealing with Russia internationally, focusing on issues like arms control, finding ways where we could work together—and those who were much more focused on democracy and human rights and what was happening internally in Russia. And in 2001, Putin only been in office a year. And he still looked as if he was maybe interested in greater Russian integration with the West. He hadn't yet really embarked on a policy of repression, but those issues were there, I would say right from the start, and of course the issues got more contentious as time went by.

BEHRINGER: You raised NATO. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about what were the different views on NATO and Russia. You mentioned that policy paper you wrote, but what were the other options that were available to the Bush administration, and which one did they go with?

STENT: Right. So I think the one option was continued enlargement. The decision to enlarge NATO itself was quite contentious in the 1990s. There were those people—foremost then among them George Kennan, who's really the dean of American Russia policy—who warned that this would lead to a great deterioration in relations with Russia. But there were those in the Bush administration—and they obviously did win out—who believed that that NATO should be further enlarged. [00:06:00] The really contentious issue was, could you satisfy the security needs both of Central and Eastern Europe and of Russia at the same time, and it proved impossible to do so. In other words, for the Central Europeans, enhancing their security meant being part of NATO that could protect them against any future Russian desires to come back and encroach on their own freedom. And from the Russian point of view, as it was defined by the Russians, any form of NATO enlargement was encroaching on Russian security because Russia, in essence, views its defense perimeter not as the borders of the Russian Federation, but really as the borders of the former Soviet Union. And so, right from the beginning, there was a clash between that.

There were some in the Bush administration who were more skeptical about NATO enlargement, but you did get the Big Bang in 2004, when you admitted the rest of Central Europe and the three Baltic states that had of course being part of the Soviet Union. And then when it came to further expansion, there I think even Secretary Rice and others and Secretary Gates were also more skeptical. In other words, the idea of admitting any other post-Soviet state—and we don't really count the Baltic states as post-Soviet states—but the rest of the post-Soviet space, like Georgia and Ukraine —even they believed that was probably a bridge too far. So those debates went on. But Vice President Cheney himself was adamant about not only the need for the 2004 expansion, but the possibility of further expansion, as were a number of people who worked in his office. And I think President Bush himself was persuaded.

MILES: Can I just ask quickly if you had a sense [00:08:00], for example, of Condoleezza Rice's opinions. One of the interesting things to me about the Bush administration is how many Russia experts—I guess maybe we should say Soviet experts—it brought in. I'd love to hear about just how some of the other key players—Rice included, but not exclusively—maybe brought their backgrounds to bear on thinking through that type of question.

STENT: Right. So Thomas Graham on the National Security Council started off in Policy Planning and then went to the National Security Council. He was one of the people that was much more in favor of a more realpolitik view, that we deal with

Russia pragmatically on issues where we have common interests and that we don't focus on what happens domestically in Russia, but also, as part of that, that we have to be very careful of taking actions that would really—from the Russian and the Kremlin's point of view—threaten their own security. From his point of view, certainly there was more skepticism about that. Now, you also had on the National Security Council—Thomas Graham just had the Russia portfolio. That's how that was organized in the Bush administration. Dan Fried had Europe, and he is someone who is much more focused on what happens domestically in Russia. He'd also had experience as ambassador to Poland, so he was also focused on what was happening in Central and Eastern Europe and was very much more a believer that all of Central and Eastern Europe and other countries, including in the post-Soviet space, at least should have the right to choose which foreign policy alliance they were in. Within the National Security Council itself, those two points of view, particularly Thomas Graham's and Dan Fried's, were often in opposition to each other.

In Vice President Cheney's office, a number of people [00:10:00]—often people who come to this with a background knowledge of Central and Eastern Europe, or maybe Ukraine, or other countries—a group of people who were very supportive of Georgia and really thought that Georgia should get into NATO. In the State Department, you had David Kramer, who eventually became the assistant secretary for democracy, labor, and human rights, who was very focused on what

was happening domestically in Russia and also supporting movements, both inside Russia and within the post-Soviet countries, of people who were in opposition to more repressive regimes and who wanted more democratic regimes. And he [Kramer] was in favor of further NATO enlargement. There really were quite deep divisions there [within the Bush administration].

BEHRINGER: Thank you. And so moving to the presidential relations more directly—so Bush and Putin have the famous meeting in Slovenia in June, 2001. And could you talk a little bit about what the significance of that first personal interaction was?

STENT: Sure. President Bush came in. We'd had the expulsion of the diplomats. But then President Bush made his first trip to Europe. And he really wasn't very well received there. I'm talking about Chancellor Schröder, President Chiraq. The European media had belittled him, didn't take him that seriously. His reception in Europe, Western Europe particularly, was not very good. And then he went to Slovenia, and I think one of the important points is that the way that President Putin [00:12:00] treated President Bush on their first meeting was much more respectful than the way he was treated by some of the other European leaders. President Putin has a background as a KGB case officer. He had done his homework. And he I think had thought seriously about how to talk to President Bush. One of the things he really wanted to impress on President Bush was the danger presented by Islamic fundamentalism. He thought that the United States hadn't taken that danger seriously enough. So he wanted to talk about that. We

also know, according to President Bush, that the meeting started off with Putin reading from note cards. And then it was President Bush who asked him about the cross that President Putin was wearing. And the story there is that Putin's grandmother's house had burned down and yet the cross had been saved. So they actually talked about, apparently, about religion together.

So the point about this is, in the U.S. Russian relationship, the personal relations between the presidents are extremely important, more so than in many other countries. And that's because we don't have that many stakeholders in this relationship. Russia isn't an important economic partner. We are the world's two nuclear superpowers. But there aren't that many networks of interconnection as there are with many other countries and including even with China, which is a much more important economic partner to us. So really, the relationship between those top leaders drives much of what's happening. And so the fact that they were able to establish this personal rapport there was very important and it set the relationship on quite a positive trajectory. Of course, we had the infamous press conference where a reporter asked President Bush how he viewed Putin [00:14:00] and he said that he admired him and he got a sense of this soul. And this was maybe not something that they had discussed in preparation for the press conference. But the reason it was important was because 9/11 then happened just a couple of months later, Putin was the first leader to call President Bush and offer assistance. And I would say the high point of the U.S.-Russian relationship in the

past 30 years since the Soviet collapse was the fall of 2001 when the U.S. and Russia were working together, and the Russians actually did help the U.S. in the initial campaign in Afghanistan to rout the Taliban. The meeting in Slovenia facilitated that cooperation going forward.

BEHRINGER: And another purpose that of that meeting was to convey the intention to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty, if I'm not mistaken. The Russian seemed to have communicated pretty clearly that they didn't want that to happen. Why did the Bush administration go forward with it and with plans for missile defense more broadly?

STENT: So this was something they inherited. The missile defense program was something that had been percolating for a decade, though not everyone in the Clinton administration actually favored it, it was certainly favored by the U.S. Congress—and it was decided that a missile defense system would better protect the United States, particularly from rogue actors like Iran. So when the Bush administration came in, in principle everyone had agreed to this already. And it did mean the dismantling of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty [00:16:00], which had been signed by Richard Nixon and [Leonid] Brezhnev in 1972.

And for the Russians, that seemed to be very destabilizing. One thing you have to understand is that the one area where post-Soviet Russia and the U.S. were equals was in this nuclear realm. We are the world's two nuclear superpowers. Even after the Soviet collapse, Russia was still a nuclear superpower. And these

treaties not only were very important in terms of what they actually controlled—in other words, how many of these systems you can have—but it's the symbolism. It's Russia as an equal partner to the United States. And of course, with the Soviet collapse, it was very hard to justify the fact that Russia was an equal partner to the United States, given its economic and other problems. So the withdrawal from the ABM Treaty was really, from the Russian point of view, seen as a sign of disrespect to Russia, of breaking a treaty, and potentially dangerous from the beginning. The Russians said, we think that this is directed not only against Iran, but missile defense could be directed against Russia itself. And President Bush did come into office and appointed people like John Bolton and others who were very much opposed to Cold War-era arms control treaties, including the ABM treaty, and they were dedicated as soon as they came into office to have the U.S. withdraw from it.

BEHRINGER: And how would—

MILES: Sorry Paul, can we just keep going with this verbal early turbulence theme, if we may? We've had 9/11, we've had ABM. What about the other big episode in the early Bush years, and that's the Iraq War? Can you give us a sense of how it seemed to you that the Russian leadership reacted to [00:18:00], understood those early-2003 decisions in particular?

STENT: So now we come to the beginning of the litany of complaints that we've heard from Putin and Russia since 2002. So we should also, by the way, say that after the withdrawal from the ABM treaty, President Bush and President Putin did sign the

2002 SORT treaty—again, a brainchild of people like John Bolton—which was a sort of minimalist arms control treaty, I don't know, three pages long. And so that would put an end to the arms control aspect of the administration.

So, from the Russian point of view, Russia did have economic stakes in Iraq. The Russian government had a complicated relationship with Saddam Hussein. In the Iran-Iraq war, the Russians hedged their bets. Yevgeny Primakov, who had been the foreign minister of Russia, had held various other positions, who was the leading Arabist, had these personal contacts with Saddam Hussein which he had to tried to use in 1991, to get Hussein to withdraw from Kuwait. And they summoned him again then in the run-up to all of this. So from the Russian point of view, the U.S. decision to invade Iraq—it touched a number of very raw nerves. One of these is the United Nations. So I come back to the fact, why does one take Russia seriously in the post-Soviet era? It's a nuclear power and it has a permanent seat and a veto on the United Nations Security Council. So to take actions, military actions, as happened in Kosovo, that are not sanctioned by the United Nations Security Council, again, diminishes Russia's role [00:20:00] as a major power. It seems to be ignoring its role.

The Russians were really not consulted about the Iraq War. The U.S. then made these decisions. It talked to its allies toward the end of the period just before the invasion. You did have the head of the presidential administration, Alexander Voloshin, coming to the United States. He was given briefings at the CIA. He was

given briefings in different parts of the U.S. government, but even from the Russian point of view it felt to them as if the U.S. focused very much on Russia's economic stake in Iraq and not on the security stake. From the Russian point of view, the idea of invasion and destabilizing this part of the world, not too far from where Russia is, was really seen as a major potential security threat to them. And so those consultations seemed to be very unsatisfactory.

And then of course, in the run-up to the war, you then had the wooing of Russia by Germany and France by Schroeder and Chiraq, and you eventually had the "axis of the unwilling"—you had those three countries that opposed the war. And that particular grouping didn't really outlast the war very long. It didn't turn into something more permanent. But from the Russian point of view, the fact that the U.S. took military action in a country much nearer to Russia than to the U.S., thereby potentially destabilizing the Middle East area without having UN sanctions [approval]—that was a source of major opposition. And then the principle of regime change [00:22:00]—the idea that the United States could go into a country in the Middle East and essentially depose a leader and then put in power people that were more palatable to the U.S. and its allies—of course, this was a NATO operation. The principal of that [regime change] was seen very negatively in Russia. And then it was also later on connected to the color revolutions in Russia's backyard—the Rose Revolution in Georgia, then the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. So I think it was a mixture of all of those things, and the

fact that the Russia really hadn't been consulted on this [the decision to invade Iraq]. It had just been informed.

BEHRINGER: And as you just mentioned, the color revolutions coming right on the heels of the Iraq invasion—if you could expand a little bit on how the Russians viewed those and could, or should, the Bush administration have handled their approach or reaction to the revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan differently? Or did they take a broad-brush approach to those three?

STENT: One of the essential premises of Russian foreign policy under Putin—not only under Putin, but particularly now under Putin—is that Russia does have a right to a sphere of privileged interests in the post-Soviet space. Again, that its defense perimeter is defined not as the borders of the Russian Federation but as the borders of the former Soviet Union, and the idea of pro-Western governments coming near to Russia was seen as a threat, was certainly defined as a potential threat. So if you start off in Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze was the president of Georgia and [00:24:00] had been one of the last Soviet foreign ministers. He didn't have a great relationship with Russia—there were a lot of tensions—but from the Russian point of view, they had made their peace with him. You had these breakaway regions in Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia [and Adjara], that didn't want to be part of Georgia and that were supported indirectly and directly by the Russians. And the Shevardnadze government was quite corrupt.

So when you have Mikheil Saakashvili and his two colleagues coming along and then, as a result of what was said to be a falsified election, having people out in the streets demanding a change in government—this is the kind of thing that, from the Kremlin's point of view, was of great concern to them, was very threatening to them, the idea that people could go out in the streets and then could change the government. And the point about all of this is that even though the U.S. didn't explicitly support one group over the other, Saakashvili himself had been partly educated in the United States. He had a lot of enthusiastic followers in the United States, including in the office of the vice president. And so the Russians definitely saw the hand of the West in the Rose Revolution, even though once it had taken place, you did get the then-Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov come over, work with Saakashvili, and one of the breakaway regions [Adjara] was actually returned to Tbilisi, was reincorporated with Tbilisi, with the help of the Russian government, partly. So that was seen already as the West meddling in Russia's backyard, and then the fear, could this happen in Russia too?

The [Ukrainian] Orange Revolution was more threatening to the Russians because there was a direct [00:26:00] U.S. role in this. Yet another disputed election—and Ukraine is more important to Russia than Georgia is. Not that Georgia isn't important, but Ukraine is really the most important country in the post-Soviet space for Russia. So when you had an election coming up in Ukraine in 2004, and the Russians were explicitly supporting Viktor Yanukovych—he was

their candidate. He was from the east, and they sent money and people to help him. And then you had Viktor Yushchenko running against him, who had been for a time the head of the Central Bank. He had an American wife—actually a former student of Georgetown who I taught—and he was associated with the United States and Europe and the West. And the Russians had invested a lot of time and considerable amount of money in Ukraine, but USAID and there were NGOs as well who were active in Ukraine, including Open Society, which is funded by George Soros [whose democracy-promoting activities the Russians dislike].

And so from the Russian point of view, they looked at it—and they didn't differentiate between the Bush administration and George Soros, not understanding that George Soros was hardly a supporter of the Bush administration—but they saw these two groups, the administration and the NGO led by George Soros, as supporting a candidate, Viktor Yushchenko, who was opposed to their candidate. So they saw a direct U.S. role in this. And then of course, when you have all the demonstrations out in the streets, and eventually it was Secretary of State Colin Powell who said, "We do not accept the results of this election." And then you had a committee, a group that was mediating with the then-Polish President Aleksander Kwaśniewski [00:28:00], [Valdas] Adamkus from Lithuania, and the Russian Boris Gryzlov trying to broker an agreement between the warring factions, and eventually they then held the election again and

Yushchenko won. So from the Russian point of view, the U.S. hand was there, they claimed it was all supported by the "special services" of the U.S.

Now, when it came to Kyrgyzstan, there were some different issues there because what you had in Kyrgyzstan was a U.S. [military] base—and that was goes back to the initial campaign in Afghanistan—and the U.S. base, and the government of Kyrgyzstan that was then overthrown was doing quite well from the U.S. base. There is some evidence that, in 2005, the Russians in fact were supporting the groups that opposed the government in Kyrgyzstan. The Russians didn't like what happened in Kyrgyzstan. But in the end, the Kyrgyzstan government that replaced the one that was overthrown maintained its ties to Russia. From the Russian point of view, it was definitely the Orange Revolution that was seen to be the most directly threatening to their own interests. After the Orange Revolution, you have the beginning of much greater clampdown inside Russia against opposition groups.

BEHRINGER: And if I'm not mistaken around 2005—you can tell us more specifically—you moved from State Policy Planning to the National Intelligence Council? Is that correct?

STENT: So I was back at Georgetown. So I was in [00:30:00] the National Intelligence Council in 2004 and 2005—so those two calendar years. When I started there, this was just after the Rose Revolution. It was certainly in the lead up to the Orange

Revolution. And then I was—well, do you have a specific question you want to ask?

BEHRINGER: I was just going to ask if you could tell us a little bit more about the differences between working in the State Department Policy Planning, and the work at the National Intelligence Council, what type of work you were doing there and what it was like to work there during the Bush administration?

STENT: Sure. So in the State Policy Planning, you're supposed to be doing longer-term thinking, but of course you find out very soon that you can't really do the longer-term thinking unless you really know what's going on. And in that position, you have to keep on top of what's happening in the regional bureaus, but you aren't giving policy advice.

The National Intelligence Council sits atop—when I was there, it was 15 different intelligence agencies. I think it's now 16. And it's supposed to and does provide longer-term or future thinking. But it does a number of things. The most well-known product of the National Intelligence Council is the National Intelligence Estimate, and I guess the most infamous one in recent years was the one that said Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. So when I was there, we certainly did a National Intelligence Estimate looking at Russia and what it was going to do in the future. And I will say one thing about that. Interestingly enough, even in 2005, it was very difficult at that point to imagine how quickly Russia would come back as a world power [00:32:00] under Putin. I think at that point we

saw what Russia was doing, but we probably didn't realize how quickly Putin's Russia would make it back.

So that's one of the things you do there and then you do things that are more immediate. I was there during the whole Orange Revolution part. So what you do is you coordinate the views of the different intelligence agencies. So all the time during that Orange Revolution, we would have sometimes daily, depending on what was happening, meetings of all of the different intelligence agencies or those that were involved in it, plus the State Department, the National Security Council. So we would meet virtually and try and figure out what's going on. And during the Orange Revolution, that was a period when we were really trying to figure out whether the Russians were going to intervene directly—they didn't—but it's those kind of questions that you certainly ask.

And then the other thing that the National Intelligence Council does is also to bring in outside experts to talk about issues. So every four years it puts out a Global Trends [publication]. And they put one out in 2004. And so, during 2004, we had a number of conferences with colleagues—think tanks, academics, other people. We had one [meeting] in Budapest and in other places talking about global trends. And that [publication] is unclassified. It's available on the website. So it's a mixture really of trying to bring into the intelligence community the views of other people, and then also gathering the views, coordinating the views of different intelligence agencies on subjects of immediate interest.

Now, the other thing that I have [00:34:00] to say is when I started at the National Intelligence Council it was still part of Central Intelligence. That is to say, the director of the CIA, Central Intelligence, who was George Tenet—we were under him. And then, while I was there, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the ODNI, was set up. This was a direct response to 9/11, to the idea that 9/11 could have been avoided had the different intelligence agencies had more coordination and had people not been so siloed. So when they set up the ODNI—and the first DNI was Ambassador John Negroponte—we then shifted from reporting to the director of the CIA to reporting to the director of the ODNI, of National Intelligence. That [transition] was a little bumpy because in all of those things, you have to figure out who it is that you have to tell what to. In the end, it worked. Today, one could question, and people do question, whether it made sense to set up an entire new intelligence bureaucracy. But at the time, I think the intent was so that people would be better prepared. And I do remember one of the things we did discuss after the Orange Revolution is—and I think this happens in a lot of other cases—why did a lot of people not foresee that this was going to happen in Ukraine? And so those kinds of questions we had to ask ourselves, which is, what is it that we're not seeing? And that was all at that period in the Bush administration.

And then, in 2005, [00:36:00] the events in Uzbekistan—which we haven't talked about yet, but that was also very important in terms of the U.S. presence in

Central Asia. There was a riot in the prison [in Andijon]. A number of people associated with a group called Akramiya, which was an Islamist group, had been imprisoned. The Uzbek government, which was very repressive, had said that they were all fundamentalists and terrorists. Other people have assessed that this was a group that wasn't necessarily a terrorist group but was advocating for their right to worship in the way that they wanted to. You had a prison riot, they somehow got in weapons from the outside. The government clamped down very hard on that. It killed we don't really know how many people, but it's probably in the hundreds.

And as a result of that, there was a debate within the Bush administration about what to do about this., Secretary Rumsfeld was someone who believed that it was very important [to maintain good ties with the government of Islom Karimov]. We had a base in Uzbekistan—we had one in Kyrgyzstan, one in Uzbekistan—and it was very important to keep that base and that, as he himself said, "This is a neighborhood, as in many neighborhoods in the world, where there are no saints." Whereas the State Department, and particularly the bureau dealing with human rights, wanted to sanction and did sanction Uzbekistan for what it had done. Anyway, in the end, the Uzbeks kicked the U.S. out of the base in the Karshi-Khanabad. Later on, they modified [revived] that military relationship, but at the time in 2005, we were kicked out. So there was quite a lot that we were also trying to understand in the intelligence community about the role that Russia played and then Russian intentions, what we thought [00:38:00] was going to

happen in Uzbekistan. So that was another major issue with which we had to contend in the couple of years that I was there.

BEHRINGER: And also in that 2004 – 2005 range, there's the Bush reelection, and then, if I understand correctly, there was an attempt—this might've even happened earlier right after the fissures opened up over Iraq—to patch up the relationship a little bit. Rice has that famous phrase, "Punish France, ignore Germany, and forgive Russia." If you had to talk about what went wrong, why that sort of reset maybe never happened, or why it was a false start between, say, 2004 – 2006 range, what went wrong there? Rice describes going to Moscow and has a very tense meeting with Putin and there's the meeting between Bush and Putin in Bratislava, I believe in 2005, that is a low point in their relationship together. So can you talk a little bit about what were the issues that prevented the U.S.-Russia relationship from getting back on track there?

STENT: So I'll begin maybe with a story. In 2004, the Russians for the first time had a meeting of something called the Valdai International Discussion Club, which still exists today. And I was a national intelligence officer, but I was invited to this meeting. It was a meeting of foreign experts on Russia. And in 2004, we went to Russia [Novgorod and Moscow]. [00:40:00]. And in fact, we arrived there just in the middle of the hostage crisis in Beslan. And that was when Chechens and other fundamentalists [North Caucasian terrorists] took schoolchildren hostage and their parents and teachers in the school. And that was going on actually when we

arrived there, and it ended very badly. The Russians in the end went in and killed the terrorists, but they also killed a lot of the people who were in that school.

And so we had this meeting with Putin. We went out to his residence, which is just outside of Moscow, and he kept us waiting—he keeps everyone waiting. But what was very interesting in that meeting was even though this was a time when the U.S. media, for instance, were criticizing the Russians for the way this had ended, he, Putin himself, was, he was critical of the media, but he still had some pretty positive things to say about President Bush. He was critical of what had happened in Iraq, but what he said about President Bush was clearly complimentary and the message was clear: that they hoped the President Bush would get [re-]elected. So I think that's an important data point.

I think what happened was that—I think you have to go back to 2001 the first reset that Putin, in fact, initiated, I would say, by offering support to the Bush administration by providing information about what was happening in Afghanistan. And then you have to say, what were Putin's expectations from that? His expectations were that the United States would not only not criticize Russia for what it was doing domestically but would really understand that Russia had a right [00:42:00] to assert privileged interest in the post-Soviet space. I think the expectation was, and this is a phrase I use from a Russian colleague, that what Putin wanted was an equal alliance of unequals. In other words, he wanted the

United States to treat Russia as an equal, even if it wasn't. And part of that was recognizing this sphere of influence.

So then, if you look up what happened, it's everything we've talked about—withdrawal from the ABM Treaty, and then it is the invasion of Iraq, the war in Iraq, and then the color revolutions. And the color revolutions to Russia symbolize that the U.S. doesn't accept that this is a Russian sphere of privileged interest and that the United States is supporting these groups that Russians saw as a threat to them. Then you have much harsher rhetoric about Russia, not from President Bush himself, but certainly from the vice president's office. And support for different opposition groups inside Russia, support for these opposition groups in the post-Soviet space.

And I think that's why it was very difficult at that period, even though there was somewhat more outreach from the United States, to improve ties to Russia, because Putin and the people around him in the Kremlin did feel directly threatened by some of the things that the U.S. did, but also [by] what some of the officials said.

BEHRINGER: And then, in 2007, of course we have the famous speech at Munich and you write that.—and it's also apparent in the memoirs too—that the U.S. delegation, or some members [00:44:00] at least, were stunned by the delivery of this speech. In retrospect, if we look at what the Russians were saying, it seems almost obvious

that they were not happy with the way that relationship was going, but why were U.S. officials taken aback by this speech?

STENT: Oh, the Munich security conference—and this was the first and only one that Putin ever attended—is a gathering of defense and foreign policy officials from different countries, and I would say now the speeches are somewhat more confrontational—well, certainly the Russian ones are—but up till then there certain conventions that were observed where you didn't have speeches that were that confrontational. For Putin to stand up there and say publicly essentially that the U.S. was a danger to the whole world. It was trying to dictate to everyone what they should do. It wasn't obeying the rule of law as Russia saw it. It wasn't respecting the United Nations. It was just that all of these resentments had built up. Now, it's also true that Vice President Cheney had made a pretty fiery speech in Lithuania, a former part of the Soviet Union, now a member of NATO and the European Union, in which he attacked Russia quite clearly for putting pressure on its neighbors, particularly for using energy leverage. So that was a pretty explicit and public attack on Russia. And then, after that speech, he had gone to Kazakhstan, hardly a beacon of democracy, run by an autocratic leader, but which had lots of energy reserves and where U.S. companies were involved. And the U.S. had interest there, also in Central Asia having to do with the war in Afghanistan, although we didn't have a base there [00:46:00]. But the fact that he went to Kazakhstan and praised its leader, President Nazarbayev, as a kind of [secular]

modern Islamic leader, et cetera, et cetera. So those things were very galling to the Russians. From the Russian point of view, it looked as if there were complete double standards there. And they didn't believe for a moment that the U.S. really cared about democracy and human rights, that it was just criticizing Russia and, again, supporting opposition parties in Russia. So I think all of those things fueled this decision by Putin to just throw down the gauntlet and, instead of talking in diplomatic language, to just blast the United States. And I don't think anyone expected it, they didn't see it coming.

BEHRINGER: And in your book, I think you also mentioned that some people saw it as Putin playing to his domestic audience. I was wondering if, not only in this case, but if you could talk more broadly about the role of domestic politics in U.S.-Russia relations.

STENT: From the Russian point of view, it's very important. I would say that coming into power, Putin tempered the view that he'd had clearly when he was in the KGB that the United States and NATO were the main enemy. But I think one can see now that that probably never went away. So one of the things that Putin has done is to appeal to his own population by pointing [to] the West, particularly the United States, as an enemy and as a threat to them, he talks about [the U.S. wanting] regime change [in Russia]. He didn't talk about it that explicitly during the Bush administration, but by painting the U.S. as a threat, given what happened in Iraq and the color revolutions.

And also, what's interesting is for the first [00:48:00] eight years in office, really, so for the whole of the Bush administration, for Putin's time in office until 2008, oil prices were rising and the Russian standard of living was rising, and therefore Putin's own popularity went up, but there was still a need to explain particularly the greater repression. So when Putin—the way he's always dealt with opposition and he dealt with it then, is by increasingly clamping down, domestically curtailing freedom of speech, freedom of assembly. And he certainly began to do that after the Rose Revolution in Georgia. The explanation for this is partly, blaming the West and particularly the United States, for trying to undermine his role, trying to attack Russia, to quote-unquote "grab a juicy bite of Russia." So the image, the enemy image of the United States has been a very important part of legitimizing Putin's rule and even though it's more amplified today, it was certainly there during the Bush administration.

BEHRINGER: And then, how about in the U.S. context? You talked a little bit about the how the bureaucratic politics of reorganizing the intelligence agencies affected the way that the United States worked. What's Congress's role, and how did that play out?

STENT: Yeah. So interestingly, Congress is obviously very important on many levels, including in policy toward Russia. If you look at the U.S. Congress, it was certainly in many ways behind [00:50:00] the Bush administration—as it was in the Clinton years, too—in terms of being willing to reach out to Russia.

You had this Jackson-Vanik legislation going back to 1975, when the Congress passed the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which tied the granting of most-favored nation status to the Soviet Union to its policy on Jewish emigration and emigration in general. The Soviet Union collapsed—again, this is seen in Russia, in post-Soviet Russia particularly, as undermining its legitimacy, as disrespect to Russia because, even under Gorbachev, and certainly after Gorbachev, Russia relaxed its emigration policy. If you want to leave Russia, you can leave Russia. And so they kept saying, why don't you remove this Jackson-Vanik Amendment and give us most-favored nation status, which the U.S. affords most countries with which it trades. And yet every time this came up, there was some other group in Congress that said, "No, no, wait a minute. We don't like what Russia is doing here or there." And that had to do with Russia's support for the Iranian Bushehr nuclear plant program, for a variety of other things that Russia was doing.

And a number of times, President Bush promised President Putin that he would make sure that this happened, that the Jackson-Vanik Amendment was lifted, rescinded, and it never was. The Russians don't fully understand how the American political system works. They really think that President Bush could pick up the phone and tell whoever was leading this charge in Congress, "I want you to do this," and they do it. Well, we all know that doesn't work like that here. So that was, I think, a constant irritation. And that's somewhere where I would say Congress, on a number of levels, made it more difficult for the U.S. when it wanted

to reach out to Russia. Something like lifting Jackson-Vanik, [00:52:00] which didn't happen until 2011, would have, I think, gone some way to changing the narrative that one heard from Russia.

And then, I think, you continued to have throughout the Bush administration different groups of people who disagreed with each other about policy towards Russia, and then you have different lobbying groups, as we know in the U.S., that feel very strongly about Russia—Eastern European groups, Ukrainian groups, Polish groups, people whose roots are in Central and Eastern Europe or in Russia or the Soviet Union itself, many of whom wanted to make sure that there was a much tougher policy toward Russia. And then you had other groups who wanted to reach out to Russia more. And one thing that's very interesting and that's never happened in the post-Soviet time is you've really never had a group in Congress that lobbies for Russia. They've had attempts to do that, but they've never really worked out. We can discuss possibly why this is so.

So you had a lot of different pressures on the Bush administration, particularly when it came to issues like NATO enlargement to Georgia—not so much to Georgia, but to Ukraine, there was a very effective also lobbying group of people of Ukrainian origin and who advocate on behalf of Ukraine and that was reflected again in the upper echelons of government. And that, for the whole eight years of the Bush administration, that never really changed. And these kinds of

turf battles—not so much turf battles, but also really disagreements about how to treat Russia continue.

MILES: So can we pick up on that thread, apropos of NATO membership and Georgia and Ukraine? So when in, I believe it's the summer of 2008, the [00:54:00]—what do they call it?—the Membership Action Plan comes out of the Bucharest summit. One, am I correct that at this point, you're out of government and back at Georgetown. But two, what was your response to that? Were you surprised that they'd been this forthcoming? Were you surprised that they weren't more forthcoming in bringing them into the alliance? How did you proceed?

STENT: So my understanding is the issue of a Membership Action Plan for Georgia and Ukraine, was on the back burner. And then President Bush, somewhat belatedly, realized you had this [NATO] Bucharest summit coming up in February 2008. And really nothing had happened about it [to move forward the discussion on Ukraine's and Georgia's Membership Action Plans]. First of all, he [asked] his own officials to talk to the Germans and the French. What was clear at this point was that the Central European countries and the Baltic states were in favor of granting these Membership Action Plans. The U.S. government was divided. As I said before, I think both Secretary Rice and Secretary Gates were very skeptical about whether this was the right thing to do. But one thing we do know is that the German and the French governments definitely didn't want to do it. They saw this as a provocation toward Russia. In the case of Georgia, you had these territorial

disputes, you had frozen conflicts there. And that wouldn't have made sense either, and they were very much against this. And so you had, belatedly, this attempt by the Bush administration to persuade Germany and France, but it wasn't going very well. [00:56:00]

The parties show up in Bucharest, and nothing has been decided, and Putin is arriving on the second day of the summit. And so you had a very contentious meeting there which went through for much of the night with the Americans and then the Germans and French trying to hammer out, what do we do about this? How can we come to a consensus on this? And the Georgian President Saakashvili had already said some pretty intemperate things, I think unwisely, about Chancellor Merkel. So everything was thrown into the mix there, and so they came out with this compromise which said, Ukraine and Georgia will join NATO, but they weren't giving them a MAP. In retrospect, this was probably the worst thing that they could have done, because, if you're an American, you could look at that and say, "Okay, Ukraine and Georgia will join NATO at some point in the future, could be 10 years, could be 20 years, who knows?" If you're a Russian, it says in black and white, "Ukraine and Georgia will join NATO." And that could be an imminent threat to Russia.

So Putin arrived the next day. As we know, he was very angry. It's the only NATO summit he's ever attended. And he said to President Bush, "George, Ukraine isn't even a country. Part of it used to be part of the Austro-Hungarian

Empire, but most of it was part of the Russian Empire." And this is a phrase that he's repeated a number of different times. And so it seems to me the problem with the Bucharest Communique is that, in a way [00:58:00], it gave Russia license not only to go to war with Georgia in August of 2008 to say they wanted to prevent Georgia from joining NATO, but also annexing Crimea, because Putin—one of the justifications he gave was, once the government changed in Kiev in 2014, he was worried that you'd see NATO ships in Sevastopol, in Crimea. So in retrospect, you had the worst of both worlds because neither Ukraine nor Georgia were in fact given Membership Action Plans. The issue—it's not off the table, but it's very far in the future. And yet, it was an excuse for the Russians to take aggressive action, to go to war with both Georgia and Ukraine, to make sure that they didn't join NATO.

BEHRINGER: So then the conflict in Georgia erupts a little over a month later. Can you give us an assessment of how U.S. officials handled the crisis?

STENT: I would say that the U.S. was divided on this. There were people in the Office of the Vice President who were encouraging Saakashvili as he tried to stand up to the Russians, and he did take actions. He was determined to reincorporate South Ossetia and Abkhazia into the Georgian state. But then there were other officials, both Secretary Rice, Daniel Fried, who were very, very clear in telling Saakashvili, "Don't provoke the Russians because we're not going to come and help you." And then there were others, not in the Bush administration [01:00:00], outside—

Saakashvili had a number of friends in the United States who very much backed him up and encouraged him, both Democrats and Republicans. So there was that side to it. And I think he heard what he wanted to hear. So he took actions that were provocative. The Russians knew how to provoke him.

The war then starts, and, during the height of the war, National Security Advisor Stephen Hadley understood that because there was some ambiguity about what the U.S. should do, that there actually had to be a vote on this. And so he did convene—there was a principles committee that was convened by Stephen Hadley. And he asked everybody to go around the table and to vote, do you think that we should militarily back Georgia? And of course, the answer was no. President Bush was opposed to that too. And so the U.S. didn't, nor could we have, because we weren't obligated to, and we could have gotten into a direct conflict with the Russians. And Secretary Rice then said when the war was over, was quite clear to President Saakashvili, again, "Don't be provocative." And so she went, she stood on a platform with him and President Saakashvili did exactly the opposite of what she told him—she recounts this in her memoirs—and started criticizing all kinds of things.

The Bush administration did the only thing it could have done, which was to encourage a cease fire to try and rein President Saakashvili in. Georgia was defeated in five days. Even though the Russian army at that point was not in very good shape—it's in much better shape now—it was still very easy for the Russians

to defeat the Georgians, given [01:02:00] the imbalance in military forces. Yes, the United States, we did have a program, a train and equip program with the Georgians' army, where we'd [the U.S. military] helped them, and this had to do with also dealing with that kind of ungoverned spaces where you had all kinds of terrorists. But certainly, the Bush administration couldn't have done more [should not have gotten involved militarily].

Now, what it did do at the end of the war was to cut off or contacts with Russia above the deputy assistant secretary level—and that really did curtail the number of contacts. You still did have one more meeting between President Bush and President Putin at the end of the year before he left office. And of course, you also had a meeting between the two of them during the Beijing Olympics, which were happening at the same time as this war in Georgia was going on. But there certainly was then a cutoff of some of the contacts.

MILES: So on the meeting level, on the sort of interpersonal level, and zooming out just with an eye on the clock, do you think that the Bush administration misjudged Vladimir Putin as a leader—and I don't just mean, for example, the perhaps regrettable comments about seeing his soul early on—but more broadly, do you think that there were misjudgments of the nature of the Russian government, regime over the course of these eight years? And if I could just then say, and what about the flip side? Do you think that the Russians understood the Bush

administration, or did they make their own misjudgments about [01:04:00] the situation in Washington?

STENT: At the beginning of the Bush administration, this was a period when Putin was reaching out to the West more, when he gave the impression that he wanted Russia to be more integrated with the West. And again, you hit the high point of 2001. Judging by what Secretary Rice said after the end of the Iraq War, forgiving the Russians—I think there was still the belief that one could cooperate with Russia. It probably took longer to understand the nature of what Putin was doing, and that was this slow, steady, clampdown domestically and the beginning of a much more assertive foreign policy. [By] 2007 with the Munich [Security] conference, by then, no one really had any doubt about what Putin was about, and then [came] the Georgia War. But leading up to that, people did fail to understand exactly how much Putin had altered the course of where Russia was going, was tamping down on all freedom of expression and determined to reassert Russia not only in its own neighborhood, but then later on in other parts of the world. There were people in the Bush administration who understood it better than others, and from the beginning had. People in the Office of the Vice President and in some other parts of the government or other individuals did understand this. But the ones that still wanted to keep up with some [01:06:00] pragmatic interactions. After all, you did have a meeting in Sochi in 2008, between Bush and Putin, where you had a checklist of all the issues on which the U.S. and Russia needed to

engage, that checklist hasn't really changed that much since then. But people failed to anticipate exactly how quickly the relationship could go down and how antagonistic it would be, and how much this was, I think, tied to Putin's own sense that his expectations had not been met after 2001, that somehow Russia had been betrayed. Those expectations were wrong from his point of view, but those were his expectations.

The Russians tend to prefer Republican to Democratic presidents in general, because historically, Republican presidents in fact have been less concerned about what was happening in the Soviet Union or post-Soviet Russia. They haven't pushed a democracy agenda—certainly the last year of the George H.W. Bush administration, which overlapped with the post-Soviet Russia, did not push, didn't have a really much of a democracy-building agenda—and it's Democrats who tend to have been more active on that. They were taken by surprise, as the Bush administration went on, about how much democracy promotion, in fact, did become part of the agenda, the Freedom Agenda, and not only in countries like Iraq, but in Russia itself. Even by the very end, and even after President Bush left office, President Putin was not that critical of him, at least publicly. So I think they misjudged the Freedom Agenda aspect [01:08:00] of this and what they saw as regime change. They really did begin to fear that would somehow be applied to them. By the end of the Bush administration, from their point of view, that's what they saw.

BEHRINGER: And then, if I can ask, this'll be my last question, and then I'll see if Simon has any other follow-ups, but taking a step back even further, you've written quite in-depth and eloquently about U.S. relations over the last 30 years. And I was wondering, given the overall-amicable relationship between Presidents Bush and Putin and the—and this is a recurring theme of U.S.-Russian relations almost, with Yeltsin and Clinton and Reagan and Gorbachev—is there something in U.S.-Russian relations that's intractable, that prevents a grand bargain from coming together for the United States and Russia?

STENT: So the times when things have worked best are, first of all, when you have good relations between the presidents—you said Reagan and Gorbachev was certainly one era, Clinton and Yeltsin was another, and of course Bush and Putin. And if you look back, you can say the times when the relationship has worked best is when we in [01:03:00] fact were allied against a common enemy, and we had limited goals. So go back to World War II. We had the grand alliance—Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill. We had a common enemy, Hitler. We wanted to defeat him. When he was defeated, that relationship fell apart.

And interestingly, after 9/11, the Russians themselves kept going back to World War II. They said [01:10:00], we have an anti-terrorism alliance with the United States, and this is just going to be like World War II. We have a common enemy—Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism. And in the fall of 2001, it was true. The Russians wanted Al Qaeda defeated, they wanted the Taliban defeated,

because it was threatening them, their own country, and certainly their backyard. The problem there was also that, after that was over, we and the Russians don't necessarily share a common definition of what a terrorist is. For the Russians, it's much more focused on whether those terrorists are actually threatening Russians or not. But I think in general, you had the initial route of the Taliban in Afghanistan, and once then you got all of these other series of events, things began to fall apart.

I think, in the Putin years, the sine qua non moment, really, for having a better relationship with the United States would be the U.S.'s recognizing Russian sphere of privileged interest in the post-Soviet space. And that would mean jettisoning 30 years of saying that we believe that these countries, independent countries now, have the right to choose which alliances they belong to and what kind of domestic system they have. Until and unless that happened, it's going to be very hard to come to a grand bargain with Russia. Thomas Graham, when he was at the National Security Council, he did hold talks with the Russians on trying to talk about the post-Soviet space, but, by his own account, it was very, very difficult. And it's really, until now, been very, very difficult.

If you had a U.S. administration that were willing to sit down with the Russians and talk about regulating relations in the post-Soviet space, then possibly you could come to some kind of grand bargain with them. But until [01:12:00] that's possible, it's very difficult to see unless you really do have a successor to

Putin who has a different view of Russia's role in the post-Soviet space. It was very difficult to see how you could come to any kind of grand bargain with Russia, unless there's something else that happens globally, where again, we have a common enemy, but at this point we're not in that position.

BEHRINGER: Simon, did you have something else you wanted to ask?

MILES: Well, maybe just briefly, I remain really interested in the gap between the personal relationship and the actual progress made in the relationship. And Bush and Putin met a lot, not [01:06:00] only, neutral third-party sites, Putin got invites to the family compound in Kennebunkport, the Bush Ranch in Crawford. How do you make sense of the role of a president like Bush as really needing to be the driver of the relationship? And I was struck by an earlier comment that you made that this wasn't going to come from Congress, right? That Congress has got plenty of constituencies that are militating in the opposite direction. So could you talk a little bit about the role of the president—it seems, almost indispensable role of the president in that relationship? And I would also love for you to, if you would expand on why you think it is that there's no Russia caucus in a positive sense at the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue.

STENT: Maybe I'll start off with the Russia caucus and then I'll go back to the post of relations. So successful caucuses, successful lobbying groups, [01:14:00] if they're ethnically based, they have to be unified. You think about Armenian Americans, Turkish Americans—there's a Turkish lobby—Ukrainian Americans. The problem

with Russian Americans is there are different waves of emigres and many of them don't talk to each other. So part of the reason why you don't have an effective Russian lobby of Russian Americans is those Russian Americans are often at each other's throats and they would have to be more united in what it is that they're trying to advocate for with Russia. And that then affects what happens on the Hill. If you have a caucus on the Hill, like people who support, let's say, Armenian Americans, that's partly a reflection of the lobbying groups themselves here. So that's partly it. And in the last 30 years, the Russians have made various attempts, they've hired PR firms, to try and create a Russia caucus. The last Russia caucus was headed by Dana Rohrabacher and, when he was defeated, it doesn't exist anymore. But those lobbying groups just haven't been very effective, and it may be because what they're being asked to do, the PR firms, isn't very effective. It's also sometimes because, when the Russians have sent some of their parliamentarians here to talk to members of Congress, those talks haven't gone so well. So I think it's maybe a reflection of all of those things. And then, if you did have a lobbying group in Congress, a Russia caucus, what would you be advocating for? Is it supporting President Putin? And if it's supporting President Putin, then you're going to meet quite a lot of opposition in the U.S. Congress. So far, I think [01:16:00] that's what explains it.

Now, if you go back to the personal relations, I do think that they're inordinately important, as I said before, because we don't trade very much with

Russia. Russia is not economically important to us. It exports arms and hydrocarbons. And, even though we are now importing more Russian oil because of Venezuela, in general it's not that important. So you don't have all of these different business groups in both countries that interact with each other and form and widen the stakeholders. Then, the Russian system is top-heavy, particularly under Putin. Under Putin, institutions have become less important. Informal relationships are important, but also lower down officials often don't feel empowered to make decisions. So you can send American negotiators at the assistant secretary or the deputy assistant secretary, whatever level, to go to Russia and talk to their counterparts, but they find it very difficult to come away with very many concrete results because their Russian counterparts don't feel empowered to make decisions. And I think, as the Putin regime has developed, that's become even more important. So that's why the relations between the presidents are very important. President Bush is very good at interpersonal relationships. He understands those very well. He and Putin did have an understanding. The irony is that the visit to Crawford, Texas in December of 2001 was a real privilege. Not that many foreign visitors went there—particularly, this was right in the beginning. And in the beginning, the Russians didn't understand. Maybe they wanted the Oval [01:18:00] Office meeting in 2001—they got the Oval Office meeting—but the Crawford one was very important. When they sent their advance people down to the ranch and they were shown the ranch, they thought

that this was where the servants lived and they were told, no, no, no, no, no, this was when the president and his family go. So once they adjusted to all of that, that the meeting was important, even though it was at the same time that the U.S. was withdrawing from the ABM Treaty. But I think the fact that they were there, that they had these conversations, that Putin actually sat in on President Bush's intelligence briefing while he was there—all of these things solidified a strong personal relationship, which did last for the eight years, even though a lot of other things intervened. Even toward the end when Putin came to Kennebunkport, he had both Bush father and son there—President George H.W. Bush. He [Putin] also understood that that was a great sign of respect for him—to have both of the presidents there. They discussed a number of issues. They were still trying to come to a compromise on missile defense. And even though that didn't work out, from the Russian point of view there is this great focus on being shown respect in a number of ways. It's respect, in terms of respecting the legitimacy of Russia's view of the world, which is harder for the us to do, but the personal respect is a very important part of it too. And President Bush never came up with insulting phrases for President Putin. The level of personal respect explains why this relationship, despite all of the problems in the U.S.-Russian relationship [01:20:00], particularly in the second Bush term, I think it explains why Putin still has, I would say, a pretty positive view of President Bush.

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