

U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

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2001-2005

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[Begin Transcription]

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

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

VOLKER: My name is Kurt Volker. I am a former U.S. diplomat, having served, among other capacities, as U.S. ambassador to NATO and also as a U.S. special representative for Ukraine negotiations. And I'm currently a distinguished fellow at the Center for European Policy Analysis.

BEHRINGER: Ambassador Volker, thanks for joining us today. Can you begin by describing your background in U.S.-Russian relations and your various roles in the George W. Bush administration?

VOLKER: Absolutely. It actually goes back much before that. Even as a graduate student at George Washington University, one of the areas of focus that I had was on U.S.-Soviet strategic issues, including nuclear issues. When I joined the Foreign Service after my first tour doing consular issues, I was then placed as the desk officer for the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe negotiations—CFE Treaty—and that involved coordinating U.S. and then NATO negotiating positions for reducing conventional arms in Europe, and the negotiation took place in Vienna between NATO and the Warsaw Pact. That was in, I would say, 1989 until '90, '91, something like that. When the treaty was concluded, we immediately started to

run into issues with implementation. I had to have meetings with the Soviet delegates as part of a larger delegation during the course of the negotiations. And then, once we were looking at some of these implementation issues yet again—and this was already an introduction into the [00:02:00] way in which Russia behaves and negotiates.

Later on, I had several other assignments, including working at NATO headquarters for Lord Robertson, working for Senator McCain in the U.S. Senate. When Lord Robertson was secretary general—this was during really the heyday of the NATO-Russia Council, and there were actual meetings and actual efforts to work cooperatively on some issues.

I then went to work in the Bush administration in the White House as the director for NATO in Western Europe and was particularly responsible for NATO enlargement. And that was, again, a lot of intersection with Russian issues and Russian concerns and also involved launching the upgraded NATO-Russia Council in 2002 at a summit meeting in Italy. After that, in 2002-2003, Russia objected to the U.S. invasion in Iraq, and I think that was really the beginning of the long-term deterioration in U.S.-Russia relations, Russia deciding to take on United States and to take on the West. It was a dream of Vladimir Putin to restore Russian greatness, but in the first year or two of Putin's tenure, it wasn't obvious to us that this was at the expense of the United States and at the expense of the West. Russia could have been a cooperative member of the international community, but after 2003, it was

clear that was not the direction they were heading in. And it became more and more clear over time, including their invasion of Georgia in 2008 and their invasion of Ukraine in 2014, and their seizing of territory from Georgia, seizing of Crimea and Eastern Ukraine from Ukraine. So [00:04:00] a lot of intersection there. And then during my time as the U.S. special representative for Ukraine negotiations, that was a part of my job—was to lead the U.S. engagement with Russia, seeking a means of implementing the Minsk agreements and restoring Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity.

BEHRINGER: And taking it back to that first meeting between Presidents Bush and Putin in Slovenia in June 2001, the two leaders established a strong rapport. What was your view of Putin at that moment?

VOLKER: Well, it was interesting because we had a positive view of Yeltsin for the most part, but in his later years, he was clearly—he had a reputation for overindulging in alcohol and for not being fully on his game. And there was an attempted coup that he saw down. So he had a positive reputation. As he was no longer really able to govern effectively, there's a lot of question, “Well, who will govern Russia?” And there were many potential candidates who we thought of as, well, they could succeed Yeltsin. And it was Putin who Yeltsin turned to as the person that he wanted to take over. And the first election there, he won, and it was a genuine election—probably because of Yeltsin’s support it was easy for him to do. But nonetheless, it appeared to be a genuine thing. And Russia had, under Yeltsin,

gone through both democracy but also kind of a “Wild West” capitalism and a deterioration in rule of law and a sense of pervasive corruption and fire sale of state assets, which went into the hands of a number of oligarchs. [00:06:00]

So, Putin was seen as someone who might be a good technocrat. He might be good at reestablishing some law and order, being more on the job and on the ball than Yeltsin was in his later years. So there was a positive hope that he could be somebody who could lead Russia into modernization and a more normal democracy than the “Wild West” democracy that it had had up to that point. And that's why I think President Bush wanted to establish a positive relationship with him. It was an affirmative goal that we want to meet and see whether we can build a better kind of relationship with Russia under Putin than we had ever had with the Soviet Union and even improving on what we had with Yeltsin. That was the goal.

BEHRINGER: Do you remember what your reaction was to their first meeting? What your impressions were?

VOLKER: Yes. I was still living in Brussels at the time. I did not come back to the National Security Council until August of 2001. So this meeting took place earlier. I was a little surprised at the quickness—how soon in the administration we organized a U.S.-Russia meeting. Normally these things are prepared, and normally they follow on a lot of other engagements. We did have a NATO meeting, and that's where I met President Bush the first time. We did have a U.S.-EU meeting, but even so, I

would have thought it would come a little bit later. And I was also surprised at how positive the rhetoric was coming out of the White House. The statement from President Bush that, “I saw his soul”—that seemed a little optimistic to me, but give President Bush the benefit of the doubt of wanting to encourage and to pull Putin towards the West. [00:08:00]

BEHRINGER: And one of the purposes of that first meeting was to inform the Russians of the U.S. intent to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. And subsequently the Russians seem to have communicated their displeasure—although they said they wouldn't respond in kind—but why did the Bush administration end up withdrawing from the ABM Treaty and going ahead with missile defense?

VOLKER: Because we believed that there was a growing threat of nuclear missile attacks, small numbers, from rogue states. And we already had North Korea developing nuclear weapons, Iran with an intent to develop nuclear weapons—they didn't have them at the time—and Pakistan and India and China already having them. And so there was a sense that the risks of even one nuclear warhead hitting the U.S. or hitting our allies were growing and needed to be mitigated. And this was not about countering the Russian arsenal, thousands and thousands of weapons. We're really talking about handfuls. And so we wanted to both be able to deploy a system capable of shooting down handfuls through kinetic—the interceptor rocket physically colliding with the missile and blowing it up. So having the ability to do

it, having the sense that risks were higher, and that we needed to relieve the restrictions of the ABM Treaty in order to proceed with this in accordance with our agreements.

So we didn't want to violate the ABM Treaty. So we gave proper notice of an intention to withdraw. And we also offered to Russia both a new nuclear agreement, and we also offered to work cooperatively with them [00:10:00] on missile defense development technologies, a theater missile defense program that we would work on cooperatively with Russia. So Russia, as you say, they were not thrilled with our seeking relief from the ABM Treaty. We had the right to do so, however, and they acknowledged that. And for several years, we did discuss and work together on theater missile defense with Russia. It was only about 2007, when President Putin gave his famous Munich speech where he just kind of blew up the whole relationship with the West—that's when Russia first objected to any kind of missile defense in Europe. Prior to that, we had been talking about it quite a bit, and we never had those kinds of objections.

BEHRINGER: I definitely want to get to Munich and return to missile defense later, but first wanted to ask about 9/11. Less than three months after the Slovenia meeting, 9/11 happens. How did it change the relationship between the United States and Russia? And also, can you talk about the impact it had on Russia's relationship with NATO?

VOLKER: Yeah. Putin was one of the first people to call President Bush and to express solidarity and concern over the attack. He pledged support for the U.S. in responding to this. That was appreciated by President Bush. NATO also, for the first time in its history, and the only time so far, invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, which is the collective defense mechanism. So the NATO allies were also saying they would support the U.S. as an act of solidarity. This led the U.S. [00:12:00] to identify bin Laden as the mastermind behind all this—al-Qaeda—and that they were able to operate with impunity in Afghanistan because of the Taliban. And so it led to the U.S. invasion of Afghanistan, throwing the Taliban out of power and hunting down bin Laden.

At the time, again, Russia had apprehensions about this. It did not like the establishment of U.S. bases in Central Asian states to support the operations, but it went along with it enough. It was not going to get in the way of the U.S. on this because it understood the terrorist attack that took place against the United States. I would also note that after 9/11 there was the Moscow theater terrorist attack where they used poison gas, killed a lot of people. And that was also an expression that Russia also had terrorist issues and that we sympathized with them in pushing back against terrorism as well. So, in those early days—we're talking 2001-2002, a fair amount of solidarity.

And, as I said, in May of 2002, at a summit in Italy, Pratica di Mare, we actually reinforced the NATO-Russia Council. So the NATO-Russia Founding Act

had created something called the Permanent Joint Council. And it was a small symbolic thing, but in the Permanent Joint Council the allied nations all sat in alphabetical order, and then Russia was off by itself. So it was allies and Russia. And we agreed that, no, in the new NATO-Russia Council, we're just going to sit in alphabetical order, and we're going to have an open exchange, open meeting with everybody. It's not two sides of the table, but we're all just talking. And that [00:14:00] was intended to improve the dialogue with Russia, treating them not as a member, but as an equal participant in the conversation.

BEHRINGER: And can you talk a little bit about how did it work in practice? What was your assessment of that move?

VOLKER: Well, again, in the early days, we had more problems with the allies than we had with Russia. [Laughs] We had agreed among the allies that we would pre-coordinate the agenda for NATO-Russia Council meetings so that we had a common NATO position, even though we wanted a free flow of information. And we had pressure from two sides. We had some allies who wanted to restrict the topics on the agenda because they didn't want to discuss them with Russia—that was the restrictive side. And we had others who didn't want to pre-coordinate because they felt that it was not in the spirit of an open conversation if we pre-coordinated—that would be Germany, for example. So, we had to keep herding cats in NATO in order to keep this going the right way. But nonetheless, we were able to set out a cooperative agenda with Russia in a number of areas. Theater

missile defense was one of them. Peacekeeping—best practices and methodology and work together—was another one. Search and rescue at sea was another one. After the Kursk submarine incident, we also had the experience of having tried to help the Russians. We had, “Okay, what about submarine search and rescue?”

So there were a number of specific areas that we identified for cooperation with Russia. We created working groups. We had mil-to-mil¹ contacts. We had various committees of NATO bringing in their Russian counterparts on those committees. Russia ended up with a fairly large delegation at NATO, [00:16:00] which was accredited as a partner, so they could come into the cafeteria and come into the meeting rooms and have a lot of informal interaction. We knew a lot of them were intelligence officers, but at the time we still thought that, well, the intelligence officers will nonetheless be reporting back accurately “this is what NATO is.” And that may actually help alleviate some of the fears and paranoia that had previously existed in the Soviet Union, and then Russia, about NATO. So we thought, “Well, it's probably worth the trade-off” at that time. So, in the first few years, it seemed like we were actually developing a decent cooperation through the NATO-Russia Council.

BEHRINGER: And then you mentioned Iraq in your opening comments. So, after 2003, Condoleezza Rice has this famous phrase where, “We're gonna punish the French, forgive the Russians and ignore the Germans. But at the time, and after Russia's

¹ military-to-military

opposition, and then the invasion goes forward—were the Russians constantly raising Iraq in your discussions with them as an irritating point to them?

VOLKER: Once the invasion took place, there was a moot point to say, “Oh, you shouldn't do it.” We're already there. They were concerned about various issues as a result of the invasion, including the rise of the Sunni terrorist groups separate from al-Qaeda, including the dispersal of Saddam Hussein's military. So they were concerned about some of the side effects. They also were looking for opportunities to engage and [00:18:00] reestablish leverage in Iraq. One of the things—they had been influential with Hussein, and they felt that they lost that with the U.S. invasion, and so they were looking at ways to engage, which were not always to the U.S. interest—but looking for those areas where they might provide an alternative for the Iraqi leadership or certain pieces of Iraq as compared with the U.S.

And it's hard to talk about this without talking about Iran, and one of the critical things that I saw even back in those days is that Russia would say they don't want Iran to have a nuclear weapon, but then they would do everything possible to be Iran's best friend within the P5. So that they were offering civil nuclear technology, they were offering to be the ones to provide and recover the fuel for a civilian nuclear program, they were providing air defense radars for Iran. So, they were clearly trying to position themselves as an Iran supporter while still not breaking ranks with the P5 on Security Council resolutions to say Iran should not have a military or an indigenous nuclear capability. So they were already, in

2003-2007 period, looking for wedge issues to make Russia take a slightly different view closer to that of some of our adversaries in order to have a stake in the process and a seat at the table.

BEHRINGER: Was there ever a sense that they were actively working against the United States in Iraq? [00:20:00]

VOLKER: Before the invasion, yes. And maybe—if you got this from Condoleezza Rice—but there were a couple of things. There was an air defense package that they provided to Iraq before the war. There was also efforts to prolong the period of inspections and mediation in order to delay or avert a U.S. intervention. As you may remember, the initial push for a U.N. Security Council resolution to authorize the use of force, because of the belief that [Iraq]² was developing a weapons-of-mass-destruction program and could use that to provide those weapons to terrorists—that push took place in the spring to the middle of 2002 and resulted in a first U.N. Security Council resolution in the autumn of 2002.

The original idea was that one resolution would provide the Chapter VII authorization if Iraq did not fully comply with all demands of the P5 and the International Atomic Energy Agency. But we didn't get that all-in resolution in one shot. The French and the Russians said, “No, we need to give them a warning resolution, and if they don't behave, then we'll authorize Chapter VII in a follow-on resolution,” which would be after 90 days, I guess it was. So the Bush

² Ambassador Volker accidentally says “Iran” instead of “Iraq” here.

administration reluctantly went along with that in order to keep France and Russia and others moving in the same direction. But by the time we got to January of 2003, the French then moved the goalposts and said, “Well, they cooperated. [00:22:00] They just didn't cooperate a hundred percent, and so we need to give them more time.” And the Russians, of course, didn't want to do the Chapter VII authorizing resolution either.

And so we had disarray, and instead of the two-step resolution process that we had agreed on, they were now not willing to do the second step. So Russia was objecting alongside France in the Security Council in January of 2003, and the Bush administration at a certain point decided to go forward anyway because there was pressure not to let any Iraqi WMD program go too far. Of course, we had mistaken intelligence, but we all did at the time, not just—and it was deliberately laid information from Saddam Hussein trying to convince people that he did have nuclear weapons and a WMD program—I should say chemical weapons and a WMD program—so deliberately misled information that made it into our intelligence. But we decided to go forward anyway, partly out of the concern that he would actually succeed in developing a robust WMD program, and partly because if we were going to do something about it in a timely fashion, the initial attack had to be when the weather was not unbearable, and so that was driving it towards the spring rather than waiting till the summer. So, in that sense, yes, we were at odds with Russia at the time of the invasion.

BEHRINGER: And also, in 2003, the Rose Revolution in Georgia happens. And then, in the following year, there's a color revolution in Ukraine. Would you differentiate between them in terms of significance, and in what ways did the Bush administration support the revolutions before and after they occurred? [00:24:00]

VOLKER: This is a great question. The first one, the Rose Revolution in Georgia—that was one that was really spontaneous and indigenous. Shevardnadze had been a friend of the U.S. We had a close relationship with Georgia under Shevardnadze. And I would go so far to say that the U.S. was too uncritical of Shevardnadze during that time. I think that he allowed a level of corruption to grow up in Georgia. He allowed some ethnic conflicts to continue. There was the growth of an armed movement that he took advantage of—I guess it was funded by Russia, but he took advantage of that in order to help maintain his hold on power. And when we got into the elections in 2003, by this time the Georgian people were pretty fed up, and he did not win the election outright, and people went to the streets and protested. And Saakashvili and a coalition of others who are now no longer on speaking terms, but at the time were all working together, said, "We need to have a genuine democracy in Georgia, none of these phony elections, and Shevardnadze has to go." And Shevardnadze did leave. And an interim government took over, led by Saakashvili. They organized an election. They ran, they won.

And that was the Rose Revolution and a change of power that really brought an incredible development of democracy to Georgia compared to

anything that had happened before in the former Soviet space, other than the Baltic states. So, the U.S. was a little slow and reluctant to support Saakashvili [00:26:00] and the Rose Revolution, but at a certain point, as the whole mood of the country made it clear that they were behind this and not behind Shevardnadze, we then agreed but insisted that Saakashvili then immediately restore constitutionality and hold a proper election and go on from there. So that's the Rose Revolution.

Then after that, you had, as you said, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. I think it was in part inspired by events in Georgia. And, if my memory serves here, what you had was an election where—let me get this straight. Yushchenko, I believe, was running in this election. And, similar to what happened in Georgia, could have claimed to have won, and certainly had a big backing of the public behind him—maybe not as large as the opposition in Georgia had, but still could claim to have. And perceptions that the vote was falsified, and perceptions that this was a turning point for Ukraine away from a corrupt post-Soviet system into something more open and democratic.

That being said, I think the U.S. was a little bit buoyed by how the revolution in Georgia went, the Rose Revolution, that it created such a good model that we thought, “This is a repeat in Ukraine and something that’s deserving of U.S. support.” And I think we came to that conclusion much more quickly than we did in the case of Georgia. And, as far as these go, I think [00:28:00] Georgia is

small enough, and Russia has a lot of influence in Georgia and doesn't feel threatened at all—language, culture, history, and so forth is different, they're not Slavic and so on. So the Georgian revolution alone, did not cause significant concern in Russia.

The Orange Revolution, on the other hand, did. And, as you may have seen in an article just published a week ago, Vladimir Putin gave this historical manifesto of his view of why Ukraine is not really a country and is really part of Russia and should be part of Russia, and any efforts to prevent it from being part of Russia are attacks on Russia. So, he explained that, but he had that view already back at the time of the Orange Revolution. And he was quite unhappy with the fact of the revolution, and the U.S., as I said, supported this much more quickly than we had done so in Georgia. And then he began to think that, “Okay, this is a plot. This is the West undermining friendly governments, governments that are friendly to Russia in our neighborhood, parts of the former Soviet space, and turning them against us.” And so, he was much more upset over the Orange Revolution.

And this, I think, was the beginning of everything we've seen since then. Once Yushchenko was running for election, of course, he was poisoned and nearly died. We've seen the use of poison now many times from the GRU.³ Eventually, after a term of Yushchenko that was largely ineffective, partly because of deals that

³ The foreign military intelligence agency of the Russian Army General Staff, commonly referred to by its Soviet abbreviation GRU, for *Glavnoe razvedyvatel'noe upravlenie* (Main Intelligence Directorate).

Russia did with the Prime Minister Tymoshenko, who was very self-interested and looking at the cashflow for herself and her family, [00:30:00] which Russia took advantage of—that led to Yanukovych being elected. Yanukovych was clearly Putin's choice for who should lead Ukraine. In fact, I believe Condoleezza Rice tells the story of meeting with Putin in the Kremlin and while there, after their meeting, Yanukovych is ushered into the room and says, “I want you to meet the new leader of Ukraine.” [Laughs] And so, clearly a signal that he was claiming Ukraine and claiming to control the direction.

Yanukovych did serve as president and did steer a path to make Ukraine somewhat subordinate to Russia. And he engaged in massive corruption and held Ukraine back economically and then eventually decided that Ukraine would not be pursuing a path toward an EU membership, and that brought people out into the streets with the Maidan. And so here you're confronted with another revolution, which the U.S. again supported, saying, “No, the people should be listened to, and he has been a corrupt leader.” And he was still in power and used violence to put down protests, killed a hundred people. And this set off Ukrainian society. “We don't like you, but you can't kill your own people.” So, when that happened, the protest just went nuts, and he fled the country.

And, once he fled the country, then they brought an interim government. They created a pathway for, again, new elections to restore democracy under the constitution. So this again was something that Putin saw the U.S. as having

supported, if not orchestrated, [00:32:00] and determined that he would not allow Ukraine to be this successful experiment in democracy because I think he viewed these colored revolutions as eventually finding their way to Russia, and he certainly did not want any kind of colored revolution in Russia.

BEHRINGER: And of course, related to the issue of Ukraine and Georgia during the Bush administration is NATO expansion. And the so-called Big Bang expansion happens in 2004, although it had been decided on much earlier than that, if I understand correctly. What was your role and position on NATO expansion and the Bush administration's decision to go ahead with the so-called Big Bang expansion to seven countries?

VOLKER: Several things. First off, the first round of NATO enlargement—Poland, Czech Republic, and Hungary were invited to join NATO in 1997, ratified in '98 by the U.S. Senate by an 80 to 19 vote. So it was not unanimous, and we had significant opposition from Senator Warner and from Senator Moynihan in particular. But it went through by 80 votes, so enough to amend the NATO Treaty and add these countries. The fears that people had at the time—that this would create a new dividing line in Europe, that these countries were not ready, that it would cost us hundreds of billions of dollars—those fears turned out not to be true. And so, by the time the second round of NATO enlargement came under President Bush at the Prague Summit, November 2002, there was a lot stronger U.S. support for that, just because of the success of the first round.

Second, in 1997, we did the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council. We tried to create a cooperative framework for working with Russia. As I said, that was also working reasonably well. [00:34:00] And so we wanted to continue and extend this. And that's why we created the NATO-Russia Council and tried to upgrade the relationship in May of 2002, before the November 2002 Prague Summit, where we invited these countries to join NATO.

Third, we had the experience of 9/11, and we came to the conclusion that our enemy is not Russia, or—China wasn't even on the table very much at that time. Really, the enemy is terrorism, and we all share a common concern about terrorism, and we want as many countries working together and on our side as possible in this effort.

So hesitations over whether these countries were ready—take Romania, Bulgaria, for example, say, “Well, are they really ready?” Slovenia didn't make it in the first round in '97 because people said, “Well, you know, can't take Romania and Slovenia, they should stay behind too, and then we'll have another wave later on.” But, by now, everyone said, “We need to bring in all the countries, so let's just go ahead and do the Big Bang,” as it was called.

And that was not—we had signals from Russia that they were not going to formally block this, try to block this in any way. Again, they thought it was a mistake, we shouldn't do it, but we understood that, okay, we are going to go forward and do this.

MILES: Can I jump in? I'm noticing a little pattern in some of your comments of a period of successful Russian participation in this or that forum, framework institution, and then the success tapering off, sometimes quite abruptly, sometimes gradually. I wonder, reflecting back on this yourself, do you see their initial participation in some of these frameworks as [00:36:00] having been sincere? Or do you suspect a degree of cynicism in participating in some of these multilateral—?

VOLKER: A little of both at the very beginning. I think Putin was trying to figure out, “Can I work with Tony Blair? Can I work with George Bush, or not?” And I think he felt very quickly—so we're not even talking up until 2003—he felt by 2002, so a year—he said, “These guys are not listening to me. They are just moving ahead with their agenda, so this is never going to work, and I need to stand up for Russia.” His goal, stated from the time he became Russia's president the first time, was to restore Russian greatness. So that was his agenda. And I think he thought that the West would just welcome a strong military, strong Russia, Russian sphere of influence, and so forth, and didn't understand that the West would not recognize a Russian sphere of influence. They would recognize Russia as a country, but all of these other places are independent countries. And we spent decades developing our support for that. And the Charter of Paris and a New Europe, 1990, made it clear that there should be no change of borders by force. Every state has a right to choose its own security orientation, its own relationships, its own form of political governance. And so Russia seeking to overturn all of this was never going

to be something the U.S. or UK or any of these countries concerned would ever support.

So, I think he may have entered in with some sincere intent at the very beginning because he misunderstood [00:38:00] what everybody else in the Euro-Atlantic area believed. And once it was clear that we're never going to see things the way Russia sees them, he did treat them more cynically and try to use these mechanisms and organizations as a means to disrupt them.

You may remember in 2011—we're skipping ahead a bit, but Madeleine Albright co-led with [Hubert] Védrine a wise man's group for NATO to develop the guts of a new NATO strategic concept, and they wanted to travel and hear the views of all kinds of actors within the alliance and outside the alliance. So, they went to Moscow. And, first off, he made them wait for three hours before meeting with them—typical Putin tactic. And then when he met with them and he was asked what would he like to see with NATO-Russia cooperation, his answer was that NATO needs to disappear. “I don't want cooperation with NATO. I want NATO to be dismantled, and I'm going to oppose NATO every step of the way.” So clearly by 2011, he was willing to articulate that publicly. I would argue, again, the Munich Security Conference was a very calculated statement of Russian opposition to the West, but one that had been building for years before that, and he was doing what he thought he needed to do to strengthen Russia's military capabilities,

its intelligence capabilities, stabilize its economy and its budget resources so that he could make that break defiantly without being too weak.

BEHRINGER: And, [00:40:00] after Bush's first term, 2004, you moved from the NSC to the State Department, which gives you a multidimensional view of the administration. I was wondering if you could characterize the different schools of thought and internal conflicts over U.S.-Russian relations within the administration and place yourself within them.

VOLKER: Yeah. Well, that's very interesting. Even during the first term of the Bush administration, you had the "strategic engagement" school and you had the "got-to-push-back-on-Russia" school. So, for the first couple of years, everybody was inclined to say, "Let's give it a chance, try to work with Russia." And in that camp you had Steve Hadley and Tom Graham in particular, who were saying—and these are at the NSC—saying, "This is what we should be doing." State Department [is] largely in agreement with this. As Russia began to do bad things, as we saw them, then you have people break off from that and say, "This is not good." And that included David Kramer, who was a DASS⁴ in Democracy, Human Rights and Labor Bureau—no, I'm sorry, State Policy Planning. He was State Policy Planning doing Russia. You had David Kramer, you had Dan Fried, you had myself who were saying, "This is not good. We should not be giving gifts to Russia at a time when they are doing things against our interests."

⁴ Deputy Assistant Secretary of State

So this started to collide, but Secretary Rice and President Bush, I think, were still inclined to keep trying with Russia into the early part of the second term. The relationship between the State Department and the NSC in the first term was fraught. The State Department opposed the invasion [00:42:00] of Iraq. Colin Powell did his part at the UN to make the legal case but privately was against it. And underneath him he allowed a culture of opposition to grow up within the State Department, even though it was the administration's policy. So this was a problem, and it meant that the State Department had less of a role in the first term. Second term, Condoleezza Rice became the secretary of state. So now you had President Bush's closest confidant and advisor being the secretary of state. This puts State in a primary seat, a primacy, in foreign and national security policymaking in the administration.

Then you had Condoleezza Rice as secretary of state, Steve Hadley as national security advisor, and President Bush was obviously still there, and they continued to try to give engagement with Russia a chance, particularly at a visit in 2005 in Russia—I think it was in Moscow, if I remember correctly. But President Bush went to a meeting with Putin at his dacha. President Putin had a fairly large dog—I believe it was a Siberian wolfhound—let the dog out, running around. He did this with Merkel, and he knew in advance that Merkel was afraid of dogs. And so this was a deliberate intimidation tactic. Bush is not afraid of dogs, but he did it anyway. And the comment from Putin to President Bush, after doing this, was,

“bigger, stronger, and faster than Barney.”⁵ And President Bush took this back to the hotel, came into the room where we were sitting, waiting for a readout of the meeting [00:44:00]—Condoleezza Rice, Steve Hadley, Dan Fried, and I were all there—he told the story and he said, “I want you to remember that. I want you to remember, next time we talk about working together with Russia, remember that.” And we didn't stop seeking strategic engagement with Russia after that. We did, however, go immediately from there to Georgia, where he had a huge visit—so popular in Georgia, basically for supporting the country's transition to democracy—and massive crowds at Freedom Square in Tbilisi. And, so, he didn't back down from supporting others who are on the march to freedom. So, he did the meeting in Russia in order to try to keep the engagement with Russia, but then he also went to Georgia.

This effort to keep trying with Russia lasted until the Beijing Olympics, where, while sitting there with President Bush, Russia invades Georgia, and Putin doesn't say anything to Bush about it. Bush finds out after they've been together that, “What? Russian troops have just let down the guard, and they're going in?” So, it basically ruptured the U.S.-Russian relationship from that point forward under the Bush administration.

President Bush—and this is an important part of the history here, and I guess you're a presidential history museum. President Bush always, always, always

⁵ President Bush's dog, a Scottish Terrier, was named Barney.

stood up for the right of people to be free, [00:46:00] that they have the same inherent rights to build their own societies that have freedom, democracy, market economy, security that anybody else has. And so, he was always supporting freedom and democracy, never willing to compromise on that. And so, he saw all of these countries that were making their way as inspirations and people that deserved our support—Baltic states, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Georgia, Ukraine, and so on. So he wanted to support them. And, at the Bucharest NATO Summit, in the lead-up to this, many of us were trying to keep the prospect of NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine on the table. We were getting pushback from France and Germany and a couple of others. And, interestingly, Rice and Hadley and Bob Gates, who was secretary of defense by then, concluded that, “We should let this go for now. We're not going to get there. Let's not blow up the alliance over this.” And this came to President Bush—I think the summit was in April, so this was probably in February—and President Bush said, “No. We are not going to give up on these people. We will support them. Go out and make it happen. Do your best. And if we go to the summit disagreeing with our allies, I want to talk about it there. I don't want to give up.”

So that's what happened is they went to the Bucharest summit with Germany in particular, France also—France having bought off Greece—opposing NATO Membership Action Plan [00:48:00] for Georgia and Ukraine. As I understand the conversation, it was something like this: President Bush meets

with Chancellor Merkel and says, “You oppose a Membership Action Plan for Georgia and Ukraine because of Russia, that you’re saying that Russia has a veto over their future, and I can never accept that.” And Merkel says, “No, no, no, no, no, that’s not true. It’s not a veto for Russia. Those countries just aren’t ready.” And so, “But the Membership Action Plan is supposed to help them get ready.” And the German view is, “Well, no, because it’s a path of automaticity. Once you give them the Membership Action Plan, there’s no stopping them, and they’re not ready. So, they need to do more first.” So, President Bush says, “So what you’re saying is that they can be a member of NATO, but just not a Membership Action Plan now.” She says, “Yes, that’s right.” “So let’s say that. Let’s say they will be members of NATO, just not do Membership Action Plan now.” Said, “Okay.” So they agreed to that formula in the Bucharest Summit.

It turned upside down everything we had ever done on NATO enlargement, accidentally, but it turned everything upside down. We had always said, “We will never commit to collective defense and your security until we commit. And so, up until that point, it’s, no, but we will help you, we will work with you, we will give you a means to get there, and we want to see you get there, but we’re not gonna commit to your membership in NATO until we’re finally ready to make that decision.” This did the opposite. It said, “We are gonna commit to your membership in NATO, but we don’t know when or how.” And that was the outcome of the summit, and it infuriated Putin, who thought he had a deal with

Merkel not to let this happen. And I think it also immediately set in motion the plans to invade Georgia. [00:50:00]

BEHRINGER: And—oh, go ahead, Simon.

MILES: I was just going to ask you, apropos Paul's initial question was you moving from the NSC to the State Department—also moving from the Eisenhower Building over to Foggy Bottom was Condoleezza Rice, a Russia expert—or maybe I should technically say a Soviet expert—and so I wonder what role do you feel that she played on influencing, managing, shaping U.S.-Russia relations and how her background as a Soviet/Russia expert shaped her thinking on Russia and U.S. policy towards Russia, broadly speaking?

VOLKER: Yeah. No, she was clearly very, very important, and her experience of speaking Russian and living in Russia gave her an appreciation for Russia as a country. And so she didn't want to see the U.S. just in a government-to-government confrontation with Russia. She wanted to see broader engagement with society, and she wanted to keep the door open for Russia to evolve because she believed that the society could evolve, that there was hope. And so she wanted to keep that door open as much as possible. That is slightly different than Steve Hadley, who just by nature believes in process and believes in the process of negotiating with Russia and of keeping issues on the agenda and talking about them and engaging. So I think she had a little bit more of a personal and a cultural/historical/societal take on Russia. I think Steve's was more policy management and wanting to have

mechanisms of strategic engagement. But she was clearly very important [00:52:00] in that.

She wasn't naive about Putin, and I don't want to convey that. But I think, in a much more sophisticated way and a more grounded way than President Trump, she wanted to avoid demonizing Putin or making him the sole thing in the relationship. She wanted to engage more broadly. Unfortunately, my view on this, in hindsight, is that Putin wanted himself to be at the center of everything and to determine everything on behalf of Russia. He was not as authoritarian then as he is now, but I think he thought in an authoritarian way, and he certainly wanted to use Russian power and influence to make Russia a great power in the global sense.

BEHRINGER: And would you say that Secretary Rice—did she manage the Russia relationship? How would you assess her role in the actual policymaking and assess her performance?

VOLKER: I think she was one of the key people—Steve Hadley, Bob Gates, and the president himself being the others. They were a very collaborative national security team. They were not—it wasn't like Weinberger and Schultz fighting each other every day⁶—it was quite collaborative. She had people underneath her like Dan Fried, who was the assistant secretary, and then acting undersecretary; like David Kramer, who was deputy assistant secretary by this time; and David Merkel, who [00:54:00] followed him, and David became assistant secretary for human

⁶ Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger and Secretary of State George Shultz in the Reagan administration.

rights; like me—I became acting assistant secretary for about six months—all of whom took a very critical view of Russia and wanted to push for stronger pushback. And then you had Steve Hadley at the NSC, but you had Tom Graham still at the NSC, and others—and also the intelligence committee that supported a more—it’s probably unfair to say accommodating, but certainly a prioritization on engagement—and that difference within the bureaucracy persisted. And it was this group of Gates and Hadley and Rice and the president who tried to manage and come to consensus positions among themselves, which they were able to do up until Russia's invasion—well, I should say that triumvirate was overruled by President Bush on the NATO decision that I just described, saying, “No, we should support Ukraine and Georgia.” And then, when Russia invaded Georgia, I think there was no longer any ability to argue for strategic engagement. They had gone too far.

BEHRINGER: So in 2006, in 2007, Russia starts using the energy sector against Ukraine and Georgia a little bit. In 2007, they launch a cyber-attack on Estonia. Can you talk a little bit about what sorts of steps did the Bush administration take to support Europe against these types of tactics?

VOLKER: I would have to say that there were occasional [00:56:00] conversations or warnings to Russia—“don't do this, don't do that”—so you have to say that that's there. But for the most part, I think U.S. policy was reactive. We tended not to expect Russia to shut down a country's internet for a week. We tended not to

expect them to shoot down drones that Georgia put up over its own territory or to take out a radar on Georgian territory using fighter aircraft. All of these things just kept coming as, “I can't believe they did that.” And then a desire to, “How do we get this back in the box?” I hate to say it, but it is very similar to the approach that the Obama administration had and very similar to the approach that I think we see again now, that “Let's contain, let's contain.”

Interestingly, the Obama administration did the reset policy in 2009 in a reaction to what they perceived as too harsh a Bush administration policy. But that Bush administration policy was only harsh for about six months prior to that because, prior to that, there had been this effort at strategic engagement, and all of the things that you just mentioned, all of those pieces of bad behavior by Russia were actually Russian-initiated, and ones where the U.S. was reactive to those things rather than proactive and arguably even not reacting enough.

BEHRINGER: And speaking of being reactive, we finally come to the Munich speech. I wanted to ask, did what Putin said publicly in that speech surprise you at all? What did you think of other Bush administration officials' [00:58:00] reactions and the administration's response to that speech?

VOLKER: Right. Very interesting. So, I was there. I was sitting behind Secretary Gates, who was the senior U.S. representative there. I was very surprised that this was an open declaration of, “We are now at odds with you. We are your adversary.” Up until that time we had issues with Russia, but they had never been assembled in

this way before. Since I had worked on the CFE Treaty early in my career, I was particularly concerned and knowledgeable about Russia's decision to stop implementing the CFE treaty, and I had argued unsuccessfully for declaring them in violation, but the Bush administration didn't want to do that, nor did our NATO allies. And here he comes out and just blasts everything about the European security architecture.

So I start sending updates on this back to the operation center so that they would be briefed around, including to Secretary Rice. I did three, four, five of these, and it was with quotes from what Putin was saying. And then I got a phone call—and I'm trying to remember who called me. It could have been Secretary Rice. It could have been Steve Beecroft, her executive assistant. But she said basically, "Tell Bob not to rise to the bait, that we don't want to create a new Cold War, and, he's not gonna carry the day on this. He's not going to carry the room." And there were gasps in the audience, so clearly [01:00:00] this was a shock to everybody there. And Gates said, "I'm gonna respond with humor. Don't worry." And so I pass that back to her again, and he did respond with humor, and it was quite funny.

But what happened is Putin did not win over the room at all. It was very much a shock and pushback from people saying, "This is unacceptable. This is terrible. How can he say all these things?" But Putin is so smart. He wasn't speaking to the people in the room. He was speaking to German public opinion,

and European public opinion more broadly, that was already upset at Bush administration over the war in Iraq and over any number of other issues—Palestine, climate change, et cetera. So he was speaking to them, and the reaction—he was anticipating this, being a good KGB officer who understood the psychology of Germany—the reaction was: if the Russians are this upset, the Americans must be doing something really wrong. And that's exactly the reaction he got from the public. So, as much as the German security policy intelligentsia in the room at the Munich Security Conference. As much as they were aghast, German public opinion quickly got behind Russia.

And I remember trying to explain missile defense in German media—I went to Berlin and I did several interviews—and saying, “Look, we'd been working with Russia on theater missile defense in NATO briefing about all this stuff for five years. [01:02:00] We have joint committees on this. There is no surprise here. There is no outrage, and we have offered to them, ‘Let's do a joint radar. It could be in Azerbaijan. It could be in Southern Russia. Let's do a joint theater missile defense system. It won't be the U.S. system, but we'll do like a joint venture, and we'll do one together,’ and put so many offers on the table that Russia just now pretended as if never happened and said, ‘Oh, we are so shocked and so outraged, and this has to end’.” And they won. They won public opinion as a result of that.

BEHRINGER: So you touched on missile defense again, which is where I was going to go next. Can you just elaborate a little bit more about—so was the outreach to Russia

on this issue driven by President Bush's desire to establish some type of cooperative relationship? Or how much of it is pressure from the Europeans to find some type of modus vivendi on this, on the problem?

VOLKER: I think Bush's motivation was the need to deploy a missile defense system because of the possibility of rogue missile attacks, and he knew that Russia could be concerned about this as jeopardizing their nuclear deterrent, and he wanted to reassure them, "That's not what it's about. It has nowhere near the capacity or the scale to affect your nuclear deterrent at all." And so he was deliberate to engage Russia, to try to convey this to them, and also to convey that, "We're willing to work on it together, so you should not feel threatened by this."

BEHRINGER: And how did the Czechs and the Poles view the whole thing?

VOLKER: Well, the Czechs and the Poles—they wanted the U.S. [01:04:00] military presence and engagement in their countries, and this was a means to achieve that. So they said, "Yes, we would love to host the radar, or we would love to host the missile batteries," because of what it meant for the U.S. relationship. So these were both, at the time, strongly Atlanticist governments, good relationship with the Bush administration over NATO issues and NATO enlargement issues and so forth. And they wanted to have him there, and they felt that it would cement their status in NATO. And they were more concerned about Russian threats to them and hoping that maybe you could use the system against a Russian launch, or at least an accidental launch. So they were very interested in hosting this. They had

some domestic issues. They had some domestic opposition that needed to be overcome. They were demanding as well in terms of, “Okay, we’re doing this for you. What are you going to do for us?” So, also in terms of finances, things like that—particularly, the Poles were demanding a lot, especially after the war in Iraq, where they didn’t feel that we compensated them adequately for their support. But they did it, and they were supportive. And then—I’m going to skip ahead again—when the Obama administration pulled the rug out from under this, they were livid, and they were dramatically exposed, and the Atlanticist governments in both countries eventually were replaced.

BEHRINGER: And moving to Georgia again in the summer of 2008—so you’ve mentioned how the statement on Georgia and Ukraine acted as a trigger for the invasion of Georgia [01:06:00] in the summer of 2008. I was wondering, what do you think about the view—do you agree with the idea that some have said that, if MAP⁷ had been offered, that would have acted as a deterrent to a Russian invasion, and then can you also just talk about what it was like to start as NATO ambassador in the middle of that conflict?

VOLKER: [Laughter] Yeah. First off, it’s an unknowable—would Russia have invaded anyway if we gave them the MAP? They might have. They might have because they knew it doesn’t mean membership. And I think Putin was ready to draw a line in the sand and say, “You’re never going to take these countries, or they don’t have

⁷ Membership Action Plan

the right to choose for themselves. They're not equal." So, he may have done it regardless. In terms of getting there, it was quite interesting.

I was due to arrive at NATO, after having been confirmed, on August 18th. The war in Georgia started around August 6th, and so I accelerated my arrival by a week—the earliest I could do was August 11th. My flight from Washington to Brussels [01:08:00]—well, before I say that, that was the first NAC⁸ meeting to discuss Russia's invasion of Georgia. So August 11th was a Tuesday, I believe—I'd have to double check. A Tuesday or a Wednesday. I think might've been—now that I think about it, it might've been a Wednesday, because left Tuesday and then got there Wednesday. In any event, there was going to be a NAC meeting to discuss Georgia and Russia's invasion, and there was going to be a NATO-Georgia commission meeting with the foreign minister. So I wanted to get there in time for all of that. My flight from Washington to Brussels was canceled because of a baggage handler strike in Belgium. And so we flew instead to Amsterdam, and the mission sent a car to pick me up and drive me from Amsterdam to Brussels.

Instead of having the courtesy call with the secretary general in his office that I was supposed to have before attending a NAC meeting—there's literally no time—I got there just in time to shake hands in advance and then go right into the meeting. And I thought it was fairly straightforward, that, “Look, we need to issue a NATO statement of support for Georgia. It should have three components. It

⁸ North Atlantic Council

should be a call for a ceasefire, a return to the positions where forces were before August 6th, and it should include support for the efforts of the European Union presidency, Sarkozy, to negotiate a more permanent solution.” Very simple statement.

I was stunned that our allies at NATO would not agree to this. And many of them were represented by deputy ambassadors because it was August, and so a lot of the ambassadors were on vacation, [01:10:00] but they made all kinds of arguments as to why they couldn't agree to this. One of them is, “We're seeing the Georgians this afternoon and we should hear from them first.” Or another was “There's no time, we only have three hours today before the Georgians show up, and we can't possibly negotiate something that quickly.” Three sentences, but can't do it. “Our political leaders in capitals are away and we can't reach them because it's August and it's a vacation, so we can't get approval.” Or, “We don't want to interfere with the efforts of the EU,” even though the statement would have said, “We support the efforts of the EU.” And then the one that really got to me—I just could not get my mind around this—was from Germany, which said, as Russian tanks are rolling across Georgian territory, not even in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but the rest of Georgia, saying, “A NATO statement was a bad idea because we don't want to militarize the conflict.” What on Earth are you talking about, how a piece of paper in Brussels is militarizing a conflict when Russia's running around with tanks?

So, I just kind of lost it. The Georgian foreign minister never made it because the Tbilisi airport was shut down, so we had a meeting with the ambassador, and as soon as that was over, I just went to the media and did as much media in every country's domestic media as I could. So, Germany, France, Spain, Portugal, Italy, Poland, whatever, just talking to the media and making that statement on the U.S. behalf rather than on behalf of NATO. I did this until about 7:00, 8:00 PM, got to the residence—Truman Hall, the U.S. NATO ambassador's residence—by [01:12:00] about nine o'clock at night, was just sitting down—the first time I had been there as ambassador, having flown overnight the night before—sitting down to eat something, and the phone rings and it is Secretary Rice's chief of staff, who had seen my reports from the day and said, "I want you to arrange a foreign ministers' meeting for next week, the 18th." So, I said, "Okay." I then call up a couple of the key allies to let them know this is what I was going to do, and the deputy secretary general, and said, "Hey, you should expect a letter from me in the morning requesting this, and we will want to have a foreign ministers' meeting next week."

So I did that the next day and got the meeting scheduled. Well, a lot of allies were not happy, but it was clear that this was coming from the top, the highest levels now, so they didn't want to say no. And then the next task was to write the agenda. So, if we have a foreign ministers meeting, what do they do? And so I wrote up a cable, with support from the staff, of suspending the NATO-Russia

Council, creating a NATO-Georgia commission, establishing that Georgia would have an annual national plan with NATO, reiterating the commitment to Georgian NATO membership and that the MAP is the essential next step and that we're still committed to the Bucharest formula, probably a couple of other things—suspending all mil-mil stuff with Russia as well—just a number of things that were then part of the decisions that were made by the foreign ministers at that meeting.

And we got all that done. Condoleezza Rice came. We had a great NATO foreign ministers' meeting, even though it was the waning months of the Bush administration—unclear, at that point, what was going to happen in the U.S. election, John McCain versus Barack Obama. [01:14:00] As we got into September, McCain was actually looking like he could win, until Lehman Brothers collapsed and the U.S. economy started taking a hit and then the American public tide just swung to Obama at that point.

And, as soon as the tide swung to Obama, many of our allies said, “Okay, time to restart the NATO-Russia commission, time to get back to normal. We can't not have dialogue with Russia. We have to have dialogue.” So, [laughs] of course, my argument was, “We all have dialogue with Russia. We do it all the time. We're in constant dialogue with Russia. We don't have to do it at NATO.” [Laughs] And we held that off through the final ministerial meetings in a lame duck Bush presidency. And then the Obama administration comes in, Hillary Clinton comes for her first NAC meeting, and they want to restart the NATO-Russian Council

right away, over the objections of the Czechs and the Lithuanians. I anticipated this and had already precooked to deal with the Germans, “what we expect from Russia,” and how, “we will restart the NATO-Russia Council, but we will also be demanding several things from them,” and that was necessary to help bring the Czechs and the Lithuanians and others along. Well, Hillary Clinton came, agreed to all this, we had a “successful” ministerial meeting. Little did I know, the very next day, she's in Geneva with Lavrov pushing this big red reset button. So I knew the meeting was going to take place but not that it was going to go that far in just overlooking everything Russia had just done six months prior. So that [01:16:00] damaged the new Obama administration severely in the eyes of the Central and East Europeans.

MILES: So, as we come to the end of our time, I wanted to—and I'm sure Paul will have a big-picture question too, but I wanted to ask one and ask it first so that Paul doesn't come up with a better one before I can. So, looking at these eight years of the Bush administration and thinking about U.S.-Russian relations, what to you is the dispositive element here—that is to say, is this a Putin story? Did the Bush administration misjudge him early on as a leader who wanted to change and then finally come to understand him as hostile to the United States? Or did he change? Was he sincere at the beginning and then equally sincere when he was making trouble later on? Or is there, or is this a story about something else? Is this just a

story about classic great power politics—great power competition, we're calling it these days, I'm told. How do you make sense of the trajectory of the relationship?

VOLKER: I think it's closest to the first of those. It's a Putin story. He said, when he became president, he wants to restore Russia's status as a great power. His experience was all KGB. And I think he viewed the Soviet Union as a failure because it fell apart, and it fell apart because it clung to a stupid ideology of communism. And if he could free Russia [01:18:00] from this ideology and have instead an ideology based on nationalism and restoration of Russian culture and institutions, it would be sustainable, and he could produce wealth out of Russia with all the natural resources that they have. So, I think he always had the plan of being a strongman leader and of restoring Russian power and greatness.

In the early days, he didn't have the means to do that. Russia was a mess, and it took time to establish the mechanisms of political power that would be sustainable, took time to gain control of the economy again and then see growing wealth—took several years. So he was not in a position to act the way he began to act later in the first few years. And I think we mistook that as him searching for, “What's the right thing to do? How do I build Russia?” I think he already had a sense that, “This is the kind of Russia I'm wanna build.”

MILES: So, if that's the case, was there really anything that the United States could have done to have come out from the end of eight years with a relationship on a more positive footing, or would that have been basically to just abandon having an

American foreign policy with interests in Europe and on Russia's periphery such that no nation would accept?

VOLKER: Yeah, again, it's an unknowable. We can't test the hypothesis that wasn't tried. I would make an argument that we gave Russia too much time and breathing space. And if we had put [01:20:00] counterpressure, serious counterpressure, on Russia for its bad behavior immediately and more forcefully—with sanctions, with military presence—really pushed harder, we had a time when Russia needed us more, and we could have had more of an impact. But the more and more Putin established autonomy in terms of resources and military and so forth, the less and less influence we would have without having to escalate even higher. So, I think we may have missed a window early on where we could have been more influential.

BEHRINGER: And as a last question, you mentioned that you served in a volunteer capacity as the U.S. special representative for Ukraine from 2017 and 2019. And as such, I think you're one of our rare participants who has served in administrations later than the Bush administration coming back into government again. I was wondering if you could reflect on how the U.S.-Russian relationship changed between 2009 and when you left in 2019 and maybe compare the Bush administration to Obama, Trump, and now the Biden administration's approaches.

VOLKER: Yeah. First thing is Russian behavior became dramatically worse over that period of time. Not even marginally, but extraordinarily worse. Poisoning

dissidents abroad—Litvinenko, Skripal, the one in Germany, whose name I forget.⁹ Attacking Ukraine, [01:22:00] annexing Crimea, engaging in ongoing low-grade warfare in Eastern Ukraine that has now killed 13,000-plus people, strong-arming Belarus, disinformation campaigns—RT and Sputnik weren't around in the same way that they are now back in the early Bush days—so, the massive disinformation campaigns, cyber-attacks, election interference, buzzing our militaries, challenging our airspace, violating the air-sea space of NATO allies and neutral countries alike. So Russian behavior is vastly worse than it was in the early time.

Secondly, the Obama administration—I went through the Bush administration arguing for a more robust policy and living with a strategic engagement that eventually even the senior leaders of the Bush administration concluded was not working. The reset from the Obama administration lasted over six years—inexplicably, in my view. There was nothing that we got out of this and no improvement in Russian behavior. And it went right up until Russia invaded Crimea. And even with Crimea, the reaction from the U.S. and the West was tepid, until they tried it again in Donbass. So, it's really incredible that the Obama administration went that far.

I remember arguing with Mike McFaul¹⁰ once, when Putin and Medvedev did their job switch and Putin was president, Medvedev was prime minister, and

⁹ Russian opposition leader Alexey Navalny.

¹⁰ Dr. Michael McFaul, a political scientist at Stanford who became U.S. ambassador to Russia during the Obama administration.

then they switched and Medvedev becomes president, and Putin prime minister, and Mike McFaul was arguing, “Oh, we got to engage Medvedev. He's the best chance. He's a real modernizer. He understands [01:24:00] tech. He understands young people. We need to work with him.”

And, I'm like, “Mike, what are you talking about? He's not in charge.”

He said, “Oh, he's the president. The president has all kinds of power in Russia.”

“Mike, Putin went through three prime ministers as president. He fired them and hired new people. Do you think that Medvedev can fire Putin? [Mimes a response indicating no.] Guess who's in charge here.” [Laughs.] And then, of course, they switch jobs again after four years, and Putin's back for a few more terms of office. And so, I think the Obama administration was naive when it comes to this, until the last couple of years, and then they started to put some sanctions in place.

The Trump administration, in my mind, doesn't get credit because Trump distracted everybody from what the administration was doing. He did not want to criticize Putin in any way at all, did not want to personalize it, didn't want to say things, challenged all of the intelligence community and other assessments about Russian behavior. So, he was always pushing back on this. However, he did not stop the administration from ramping up a tougher policy on Russia. And so, during the Trump administration—and he approved this, as well, too, let's not

forget—we added sanctions on Russia. We closed down their diplomatic presence in San Francisco and shut down other missions. We added sanctions for a whole variety of reasons—chemical weapons, Skripal, Crimea, Donbass, Nord Stream, you name it. We added a lot of sanctions.

We lifted the Obama administration's ban on lethal defensive arms for Ukraine. We sent anti-tank missiles to Ukraine so that they could better deter further Russian incursions into their territory. We were quite [01:26:00] vocal about calling out Russia for its invasion of Eastern Ukraine—not any of this mealy-mouth words. I remember—yeah, the map. The first map I was shown as a special envoy had a little gray area in the east shaded in, and it was labeled “NGCA” and I said, “What's that?”

“That's non-government-controlled area.”

And I said, “No, you can't—you have to call it a Russian-occupied area. Don't use this euphemism. Say Russian aggression, Russian occupation, not ‘NGCA’ on a map. That's doing Russia's job for them.” So, all kinds of things like that that we did. We issued a formal declaration—Pompeo did—of non-recognition of Russia's claimed annexation of Crimea. This was deliberately modeled on the Welles Declaration of 1940, in which the U.S. did not recognize the incorporation of the Baltic states into the Soviet Union. So we were sending a very strong and permanent signal, “We're not going to accept this.” Especially after

there had been questions about, “Will Trump, won't Trump?” And so, we got it out in a formal declaration that, “We're not going to accept this.”

So, the Trump administration had a very tough policy on Russia, which lasted right until the administration left office, despite Trump's behavior. And that I think is not widely understood because people just get so distracted by Trump's personality. And I think you can see the evidence of that because Russia basically didn't start a lot of the new malign activity that we've seen in the Biden administration until Biden took office. [01:28:00] And then we saw a whole new series of cyber-attacks and intelligence activities and massive military buildup around Ukraine, including in Crimea, just any series of things that they've done since then to test the Biden administration, which has then not really reacted very forcefully.

BEHRINGER: If I could follow up with just one more quick thing. The narrative you laid out for the Trump administration sounds—in some ways, we might say, it could have been similar under the Bush administration in that Bush and Putin have a very good personal rapport. Bush wants to work with Putin. But in the bureaucratic relations and the state-to-state relations side of it, the Bush administration could have been harder on Russia. Do you think that was a more workable policy—that Bush could have kept his rapport with Putin, they could have had these summits to work together, but that that they should have been more forceful under the hood?

VOLKER: Yes, absolutely. Putin respects strength and people who are strong and tough and clear, and he wants to beat them. But someone who is not tough or willing to use force, he doesn't even take seriously.

BEHRINGER: Well, Ambassador Volker, I want to thank you for your participation in our project. And it was a pleasure speaking with you today.

VOLKER: It was my pleasure. I hope I lived up to the task, and I wish you well.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]