

## **U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin**

### **Interviewee: Fiona Hill**

National Intelligence Council Officer for Russia and Eurasia, 2006-2009

### **Interviewers:**

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**[Transcription Begins]**

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

FEINSTEIN: My name is Ben Feinstein. I'm a research assistant at the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University.

HILL: And I'm Fiona Hill. I'm a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C.

BEHRINGER: Thank you very much for joining us, Dr. Hill. Would you mind beginning by just describing your background on U.S.-Russian relations and then your role in the George W. Bush administration?

HILL: Yes. I started out as a student of Russian history. I did my undergraduate and my master's degree at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, studying Russian language and literature and modern history. I got a scholarship in 1989 to come to Harvard to initially do a master's degree in Soviet studies. The Soviet Union disappeared a few months after I received my master's degree—consigned that to history—so I then embarked on a Ph.D. in history focusing on Russia, and my specialization for my dissertation was actually on Russia's obsession with being a great power. And much of the work that I was doing in my Ph.D. work, which spanned the period of the 1990s, was looking at the debates under the Yeltsin government about what Russia's role in the world was and the search for a new Russian identity. And, in a way, I traced a lot of the nationalist Russian debates that eventually fed into what was later the

presidency of Vladimir Putin, who came in about a year or so after I'd finished my Ph.D.

From finishing up at Harvard—where I also worked at the Kennedy School of Government with Professor Graham Allison and groups of other people on technical assistance and research projects related to the transition in Russia and many [00:02:00] of the other former Soviet republics—I initially went to work at the Eurasia Foundation in Washington, D.C. as director of strategic planning, looking at how a grassroots-focused, grant-making institution could really have an impact on the ground in helping to spur change in the economic and political fields in Russia and the Caucasus and Central Asia. And from there, I went to the Brookings Institution, initially as a fellow, later as a senior fellow, and continued some of the work, writing books about Russia, its long-term prospects, working very closely with economists and others on what we were still calling “the transition” in Russia and also continuing work on the Caucasus and Central Asia on Russian energy and other strategic issues.

And then in 2005, towards the end of that year, I was approached while I was at the Brookings Institution to see if I would be willing to apply for the position of national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia at the National Intelligence Council, which was by then part of the newly formed Office of the Director of National Intelligence [ODNI]. That was an innovation in response to the debacle of our intelligence pertaining to Iraq and basically one of the mechanisms that was intended to look back over mistakes in the analysis of key

intelligence, try to see how we could do things better. ODNI was also a response to 9/11 and to the lack of coordination among the intelligence community about the various information that they had.

So, there was a twofold purpose of folding the National Intelligence Council [00:04:00] into the ODNI: The setting up of the ODNI to ensure better communication and sharing of intelligence across the multiple government intelligence agencies. And, in the period that I joined, there was an effort to bring people in from the outside who were subject issue experts but not necessarily intelligence experts, to shake things up, to try to figure out where we might've gone wrong in intelligence, and to give a larger context.

And I succeeded Dr. Angela Stent, a professor at Georgetown University, very well known in the field, who had taken a two-year leave from Georgetown to become the first civilian, non-intel national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia. And I came in directly after her, beginning in 2006, and I spent three and a half years as the national intelligence officer for Russia and Eurasia for the last couple of years of the Bush administration, the first year of the Obama administration doing some of the intelligence transition, before returning to Brookings again as a senior fellow to run the Center on the United States and Europe at Brookings at the very end of 2009.

FEINSTEIN: Wonderful. And as national intelligence officer, you frequently—I assume—briefed President Bush on Russia. What was it like to brief him on Russia, and what impact do you think your briefings had on his views of Putin and on Russia as a whole during this era?

HILL: President Bush obviously had daily briefs, not just those prepared by the intelligence community and presented to him in book form in the President's Daily Brief that everyone's familiar with. But he also had daily briefers who would basically go in and give him the full picture of all the intelligence issues that he needed to be made aware of. And then we were instituting, towards the [00:06:00] end of the time that he was in office, what were called "deep dives" into issues, and these were the briefings that I took part in. I was the briefer, at least posing some of the intelligence community's assessments and conclusions at meetings of the principals and the deputies and occasionally to presidential meeting[s] where President Bush would actually be there.

But it was deep dives that became the focal point for people like myself, the national intelligence officer—again, I was for Russia and Eurasia. Those that I did for President Bush, I did them in tandem with my counterpart for Europe—at that point, I didn't have Europe in my portfolio—and that was ambassador Richard Kauzlarich, who is now a professor at George Mason University. He'd been our ambassador to Bosnia-Herzegovina and also to Azerbaijan, long-term State Department official, high-ranking in the State Department, and he came for an extended term to the National Intelligence Council to take over the Europe portfolio. He also had Turkey within the European portfolio, as well as NATO, the European Union, and many of the institutional arrangements. So everything that we did was covering the seams in which the Russia and European portfolios intersected, which were considerable.

And so the main events for our briefings circled around the questions about offering a Membership Action Plan [MAP] to Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO that was going to be put on the agenda for the Bucharest summit for NATO in early April 2008. And so we were engaged in a lot of preparation of analysis that we were synthesizing from across the intelligence community, putting [00:08:00] together briefings for the president and then taking part in these deep dive sessions. At one of the particular sessions, which was determinative for the U.S. decision to actually back the Membership Action Plan bid for Ukraine and Georgia, there was myself and Ambassador Kauzlarich; there was Defense Secretary [Robert] Gates; there was Vice President Richard Cheney; there was President Bush himself; there was our boss at the time, the DNI, who was John Negroponte, Ambassador Negroponte; there was the president's daily briefer, who was always anonymous because of the fact that they were part of the CIA. And then there was the national security advisor at the time, Stephen Hadley. And so that was the format for these deep dive sessions.

And President Bush had a very interactive style. He wanted to basically converse and discuss things. He didn't want to just have a briefing. We were asked to give short opening remarks, and then he wanted a back and forth. And some of these briefings could go on for a pretty extended period of time. And this particular one that I recall most vividly—because it was the determinative meeting for President Bush and Vice President Cheney deciding that they were going to support Georgia and Ukraine's Membership Action Plan bid at NATO,

and of course it had a lot of ongoing consequences from that moment— President Bush was highly engaged in the discussion. It was a very fluid discussion. It was quite personal. He had more of a jocular style, more *bonhomie*, than most people would have, but it was really his way of learning from the process and from the questions. And I have to say that it was actually, apart from the political weight of all of it, quite an enjoyable experience because [00:10:00] it was much more of a kind of thing that we're having, kind of a back-and-forth discussion, than one might expect from the more formalized encounters with the president or the principles that one would normally be engaged in.

BEHRINGER: That's really interesting. And we're going to return to Bucharest and Georgia and all that in a little bit, but first I wanted to cover a couple issues that predated your time in the administration. One was missile defense—if you could talk a little bit about what your own view on missile defense was at the time and the role that it played in the U.S.-Russian relationship during the Bush administration, and then how important was it from the Russian perspective?

HILL: Missile defense became a massive flashpoint in the Russian and U.S. relationship and, from Russia's perspective, was extremely important because it basically, for them, was a hark-back to the Reagan era and the Strategic Defense Initiative. They thought this was a rerun of all of the arms control engagements or the kind of—let's just say the precursors to what was then a positive set of arms control engagements. It was rather, for them, a return to confrontation

because, for them, it came out of also the United States pulling out of the ABM Treaty—the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty—and they saw those two things as tied together. Certainly, Putin saw these as tied together and used every opportunity to make that emphasis.

There was a conviction, certainly on the part of many of the security people around Putin who had emerged, like him, from out of the Cold War, being steeped in that confrontation over the stationing of missiles in Europe, the Euromissile Crisis that extended from 1977 to 1987, and their thinking that we were back to those days again and that this was [00:12:00] a sign of the strategic balance being changed. So, quite a lot of hostility on the part of the Russians.

Now, obviously, from the U.S. perspective, the focus was on Iran, North Korea—rogue states—and the interception of missiles that might be targeted at Europe or the United States more broadly, from places that were not covered by the existing arms control and arms regulation treaties. So, it wasn't intended to be against Russia—although, maybe in the minds of some people within the government, there was still that Cold War element.

I think the problem that we had was communication. We did not do a very good job of explaining to the Russians and engaging with the Russians on these issues and allowed many of the misconceptions, which were pretty deeply entrenched in Russian strategic thinking, to fester. And obviously, the Russian reaction was very much also predicated by the choice of the stationing of some of the missile systems—places like Romania, for example, this whole Aegis



Ashore debate, the land-based radar, and various systems— because to them, it seemed like, again, an extension of equipment inside of the Eastern Bloc countries that had joined NATO. And they saw this as—again, people like Putin, the people around him, who'd grown up in that Cold War era, maybe being shaped by the perceptions even of what they call the Caribbean and we call the Cuban Missile Crisis and then the Euromissile Crisis, where they're coming into their professional lives—they saw this just as a replay. And because of the way that our own politics works, of course, there was not a great deal of desire to be looking like appeasing or placating the Russians, [00:14:00] offering them assurances that might look as if we were compromising on our own strategic and defense initiatives by addressing some of their concerns.

And so it was obviously lots of debates about telemetry—trying to explain to the Russians about what [the missiles'] range could possibly be—and missing the point that, for Russia, any capability, even if it's defensive, is potentially offensive, because the whole Russian idea of security is encompassed in the Russian word for security, which is *bezopasnost'*—without risk, without danger. And they saw inherent dangers even in us having a defensive capability. They were always convinced that it could be used for offensive purposes because these are similar missiles and they could be fired, from their perspective, without trying to intercept another missile. They could be retargeted. They wanted to know exactly how the radar would be used. We basically found ourselves back in the old Cold War debates about stationing of radars and equipment and men and the deployment and rotation of forces and

Russia's ongoing fears that anything that was done in that eastern part of Europe, in countries that had formerly been part of the Warsaw Treaty Organization, was an affront to Russian security, even though technically it wasn't really that, the capability of doing what the Russians feared was not there, but they always suspected and thought that we would make some adjustments.

And I remember being part of those debates in a Track II context before I ended up in the government. It was very clear that we weren't doing sufficient engagement to create assurance. Now, one could argue that some of them would never be assured—and I think that's the case—and therefore we should have also been factoring in what we were going to do [00:16:00] if Russia remained implacably hostile to the stationing of the various components of missile defense in Eastern Europe. It was inevitable, then, that they were going to put pressure on those countries and try to take methods—perhaps even to sabotage with covert action, be that on the political side, stirring up trouble, inside of the recipient countries, for example, which of course they did.

BEHRINGER: And another issue that played into Russian fears, which I think we might get into later, was the whole issue of NATO expansion. But the question I wanted to ask you was, early on in the Bush administration, there was some talk about Russia actually joining NATO, and I think that there was actually talk going back to the nineties as well. But were the Russians serious about this? And what did you think of its prospects?

HILL: I think the Russians would have been serious about joining NATO if they could have got a special veto. Their whole view was, they didn't want to join anything as just an ordinary member. They want France. And although they might have had very similar attitudes, the French, in terms of France never being fully part of NATO and also wanting an exceptional role there—and, as we know, that France has pulled in and out of the various NATO structures at different points—Russia wanted something more than that. They didn't want the opportunity to just pull in or out. They wanted the opportunity to halt in its tracks any kind of activity that they would find threatening.

So, if they could have joined NATO to be able to put on the brakes on activity like this—for example, having a veto on missile defense or a veto on something else that NATO was doing—I think they actually would have considered in all seriousness joining. But, of course, we also wouldn't have wanted to have that eventuality because, of course, NATO is a consensus-driven organization. And we still see, in the contemporary period, countries like Hungary, which are part of [00:18:00] NATO, managing to effectively block various initiatives because it runs counter to their interests or their own perceptions of their regional role. Turkey, very similarly France, obviously wanting to push more towards—for example, in their counterterrorism activities at one point they were trying to push for more NATO activity in certain areas in the Sahel, Mali, or at least having NATO fund activities that they were engaged in.

And Russia would, of course, have wanted something even more than that. They would have really wanted to constrain and contain NATO's activities as well as NATO enlargement. But I think that they would have seriously considered it if they thought that, just like they've managed to do in the United Nations or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe or the G20 or other things that they've managed to gain a great deal of leverage from it.

FEINSTEIN: So, jumping back, we're starting with NATO and Russian prospects of joining that. But obviously, when we're talking about early events in the U.S.-Russian relationship during this time, Bush and Putin meet in Slovenia in June of 2001, and in less than three months, the September 11th terror attacks happen. What was the Russian reaction to that? How did 9/11 change the dynamic between the U.S. and Russia after that point?

HILL: There was an interesting opportunity there for changing the trajectory of the relationship, but it would also have required some changes on the part of U.S. attitudes. Because just prior to 9/11 and to those Bush and Putin meetings, war had broken out again in Chechnya, the southern region of Russia and the North Caucasus that had tried to separate from the Russian Federation after the collapse of the Soviet Union and had become the scene of a really bitter domestic war—the largest military operation, at that point, [00:20:00] in Europe since World War II—after the Russian military tried to make a pretty quick policing operation in December 1994 into Chechnya to try to topple the opposition separatist movement and government, and failed miserably and ended up in a massive ongoing military operation, which had been briefly

ended in 1997 by the Khasavyurt Accord. I actually personally, along with a team of other people from Harvard, participated in those negotiations, but it was very clear that the Russians were engaging under duress. At least that's how we learned later. They had no real desire to put aside their goals of subjugating and reincorporating Chechnya on their terms. But they were forced into a stalemate or military pause because of just the whole debacle of the military effort and massive damage to the Russian military at the time, and they needed to regroup and reassess.

And when Putin comes into power in 1999, just out of the incidents that we're wanting to talk about, the FSB, that Putin had previously been in charge of,<sup>1</sup> was put in charge of Chechnya and the cleanup operations, which also went on in a pretty nasty and brutal fashion. And Putin himself basically threatened the Chechens, saying he was going to wipe up the separatists in the outhouse and other very crude commentary. And there were a whole host of incidents that many people would think were "false flag" incidents to bring Russia back into the war in 1999 and to open it all up again.

So that actually becomes an important backdrop to what's happening with the Bush administration coming in and 9/11. Because the Russians have their own what they've now termed instead of an ethno-political separatist movement, now a "terrorist conflict," on their soil. And they would describe it in similar terms to what they later did with ISIS in Syria and Iraq, for example, [00:22:00] because also it becomes true that the longer the war goes on in

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<sup>1</sup> *Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti* or the Federal Security Service, the successor agency of the domestic arm of the KGB. Former Russian President Boris Yeltsin elevated Putin to FSB director in July 1998.

Chechnya, the more—as it is a traditionally Muslim area—it gets infiltrated by Islamist extremists, including [Ayman al-] Zawahiri and elements of al-Qaeda. They get foreign fighters coming to fight on the part of the Chechens, including Jordanian [Ibn al-] Khattab, who the Russians later assassinate by poisoning in a pattern that's become a familiar tool on the part of the Russian intelligence services. And, of course, there's a whole host of horrible hostage taking and all kinds of activities and atrocities on both sides.

So, when Putin is surveying the scene in advance of the 9/11 attacks, obviously Russia is taking also a pretty vested interest still in Afghanistan. And although Russia has pulled out—the Soviet Union pulled out in 1989, one of the precipitating factors towards the collapse of the Soviet Union—they're watching very closely what's happening because of the vulnerabilities of Central Asia, the crossover of various Central Asian peoples—Tajiks, Uzbeks, et cetera—and the leader of the northern part of Afghanistan, the opposition to the Taliban, Ahmed Shah Massoud, has a lot of ties into Russia, an ethnic Tajik—and the Russians have been keeping tabs on a lot of the chatter that's going on that something's going to happen. And when Massoud was assassinated, let's just say the Russian intelligence knew that there was a larger plot going on. They didn't have all of the elements either, but they did try to flag this, actually, to give them credit, behind the scenes, just that they didn't have all the dots joined either. And it appears that Putin actually, he said, and it seemed somewhat genuine at the time, that he had regret that he hadn't

warned any further of being able to put more of the pieces [00:24:00] together in the kind of warnings that they gave to the United States.

And, of course, it's pretty quickly after Massoud's assassination that the whole plot of 9/11 unfolds. And it was a huge shock in Russia as well because they knew this was not a false flag operation as our conspiracy theories [allege]. There knew that this was rooted in Afghanistan, and Putin actually does offer to George W. Bush some assistance. But with the offer, there is the *quid pro quo*. This is why I've talked so much about Chechnya, because there is this idea, while this is a huge terrorist attack on your soil, we've had—there's terrorist attacks in Russian cities just on the eve of resumption of hostilities in Chechnya, although many people think that those were actually false flags by the Russian intelligence services to reengage again. But Putin and others around him were making that equivalency here: “We want to help you push back. We've had our own Afghan experiences. We saw this coming with Massoud. We knew that things were unfolding, but we didn't know the full picture. We want to help.” And the Russians did basically facilitate initial U.S. entry into Central Asia—although, of course, this is Central Asian countries' decisions as well, but they couldn't have done that without a green light from Russia for use of bases and others for then later prosecuting those initial phases of the war in Afghanistan.

But there was an expectation that the U.S. would step back from criticism of Russia over the atrocities that were underway in Chechnya and might even assist Russia with intelligence sharing on what the U.S. knew about

Chechen rebels and various linkages into other extremist groups or what the Chechens were up to in Istanbul, for example, where there's a lot of Chechens in exile, or that the United States would help with a roll-up [00:26:00] of the Chechen opposition movement as well. And, of course, there was a big distinction on our part between the ethno-political opposition, more secular opposition, that had started out in the Chechen conflict and then the elements that were coming in as well. And we didn't want to be part of the repression of the Chechens, we, the United States writ large, which was, from all vantage points, pretty atrocious about how the Russians were dealing with this. And in fact, there was a lot of assessment and analysis in government and outside of government that the Russians had actually exacerbated, as they often do—and as often we do too, when you clamp down really hard—the situation that they were dealing with and that they had actually provoked a lot of anti-Russian backlash and a lot of terrorism by their mistreatment of ordinary Chechens and their families by pretty brutal, repressive tactics. And we didn't want to be part of all of that.

BEHRINGER: Of course, there are terrorist attacks playing out in Russia—2001,<sup>2</sup> the Dubrovka Theater massacre, and then the big one in Beslan—

HILL: Beslan, in 2004, yes—

BEHRINGER: And if I—

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<sup>2</sup> Behringer mistakenly places the Dubrovka hostage attack in 2001, when in fact it occurred in October 2002.



HILL: And also a maternity hospital in Budyonnovsk, all kinds of towns and cities finding themselves under siege. Yeah, it's a pretty brutal period. We had Fred Cuny, the former Carnegie Endowment analyst who was involved in various committees and associations to try to help Chechens and refugees and was trying to go negotiate there, was killed. And we had many Western refugee and aid workers and journalists and technicians taken hostage. Yeah, there was a lot happening in that period.

BEHRINGER: I think I read [00:28:00] this in your memoir, or maybe it was in the coverage at the time, but Putin actually met with you and other analysts as the Beslan terrorist attack was unfolding?

HILL: That's correct. In 2004, exactly as it was unfolding, there was a session of the Valdai Discussion Group [Club] that the Russians used obviously for propaganda purposes, quite blatant, but that was the first session of this group, the first thing that they'd pulled together, and it literally unfolded as the hostage-taking in Beslan began and all the way through.

BEHRINGER: Can you describe that meeting a little bit more, what insights into Putin you came away with, and what was the impact of Beslan on the broader relationship?

HILL: Well, Putin came into the meeting. The siege had already ended with the horrible, brutal scenes that we all saw—fire breaking out, bombs going off in the school. And we know more about that now—that a very heavy-handed military operation had probably triggered all of this off. And, in fact, there's all kinds of suspicions behind the scenes that even some of the Chechens—they'd

been deeply infiltrated by the Russian security services, and there might've actually been some instigation there as a way of breaking the back of sympathy for the Chechen rebels because this was such an appalling thing to take a school with thousands of kids and their families on the first day of school. And, of course, hundreds of people died, and it was utterly disastrous. It's all unfolding on television in a way that, around the world, we're seeing today with the war in Ukraine. But that was one of those first episodes where everybody's watching it in real time.

And so, people were stunned by the whole thing, and it showed a lot of the deficiencies in the Russian system, the command and control of this kind of operation. We saw that in *Nord-Ost*,<sup>3</sup> in the theater, where the Russians used a gas to incapacitate theatergoers and the [00:30:00] rebels, the terrorist forces, and then didn't have the antidote on hand, and so many people died from the gas rather than from terrorist activities. And so all of these things were very messy. And also, the decision-making up and down the chain—this is when we really saw the vertical of power that Putin had created at work, because nobody wanted to do anything without some kind of instruction from the top. So on the bottom, in and around Beslan, in the North Caucasus, local authorities were basically frozen. And then everybody tried to blame everybody else for whose services was at fault over this. We had a meeting during the discussion group with [Defense Minister] Sergei Ivanov, who at that point was the defense

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<sup>3</sup> *Nord-Ost* was the musical on tour in the Dubrovka Theater during the 2002 siege and is commonly used as an alternate name for the terrorist attack.

minister, and he said, “It wasn't us. It wasn't our operation.” It was trying to shift guilt onto the security services. It was rather remarkable to see that in real time.

But we also start, then, to see the hints of blaming others and blaming the West for this, which, again, fits into a long pattern of Russia not seeing responsibility for their own actions of things that they might have done to trigger something off, or this might've been an operation gone wrong, as Sergei Ivanov seemed to be suggesting in real time when we were paying attention. I have lots of notes from that period. It was astounding to hear all of this unfolding and to watch it. It was also heart-wrenching, just to be very clear. A lot of us felt very emotional about the whole thing because we'd been watching this tragedy unfold in real time and watching the callous nature in which a lot of our Russian senior official interlocutors reacted—not, I would say, uniformly—but the people at the top that we were meeting were quite dismissive about the whole thing.

And Sergei Ivanov even had tried to say that there had been some American soldier or operative found and said he was African American, and we were like, what is he trying to say here? I mean, in some of the charred bodies of the terrorists, and we thought, “This is unbelievable.” Everybody's [00:32:00] looking to each other, thinking, “What is he trying to say, trying to stir things up here, playing into U.S. racial tensions”—which is a classic that the Russian security services have been doing—or Soviet—since going right the way back to the twenties and thirties—or again, suggesting that this is a special op of the

United States, blaming the terrorist activities on the U.S., which became a pattern actually through the Bush years and into subsequent administrations, going all the way up to the present day when Russia tends to blame a lot of terrorist activities on the United States. Not just the blunders that we've made in terms of our military interventions and our own heavy-handed approach but actually saying that we are directly running terrorist operations. They've accused us of that in Afghanistan and Syria and ISIS, et cetera, et cetera. But that was one of those early origins of this.

And then Putin, when he meets with the group after the horrors of the supposed rescue, where instead hundreds of children and their parents are killed, and there's the fire and an explosion inside of the school, he infers it's the West, but he doesn't say it because he says, "outside forces," "they"—it's always obliquely put—"were trying to tear away a juicy morsel from Russia," which is, again, a code that's well-steeped even into the Russian imperial period and Soviet period of, there's always an outside force—read CIA, United States, or going back earlier into imperial periods, the British Empire, or this empire—trying to take away a portion of Russia's vast territory by stirring up trouble, that the Great Game is back. And there was quite a shocked reaction from many of the people [00:34:00] out there at the meeting—I'm not even sure myself if I fully processed in real time what he was saying. It was only afterwards, looking back on all of this, that it became apparent that that's when Putin decides that"—and he seems to believe it as well—but is espousing that

narrative that all of these domestic issues inside of Russia are the faults of the West and that the United States is getting involved in this.

And I, at the time, wrote an op-ed in *The New York Times*—the title wasn't one that I chose, which was something like “Stop Criticizing Putin, Start Helping Him,” but trying to think about how we could use this tragedy to reengage on the counterterrorism. It was obvious at this point that things were really getting out of hand and that there was also evidence that the whole movement inside of Chechnya, the separatist movement and opposition, was getting infiltrated and was getting exploited—although it could easily have been getting exploited internally by the Russian security forces, as became apparent over time as well. But that this might be a time to reengage and try to use this to try to work with the Russians on finding some modus operandi on counterterrorism.

That did not pan out because, again, there was so much atrocious behavior on the part of Russian security forces inside of Chechnya and just too much of a difference of opinion about how to tackle terrorism and now also intelligence sharing—the Russians were much more operational in trying to figure out our methods of collection of information to get more information from us than they were prepared to be giving. And so, that relationship, even going back then—it was very difficult to put it on a different footing. I mean, it could have been an opportunity, but then there proved to be far too many differences within all of that. And again, because Putin himself was an operative, somebody who would instrumentalize children, [00:36:00] their

parents in a school, terrorist organizations—for him, this was all about how he could maximize the state's position. He wasn't in the same place as where we were, where we were trying to get rid of these movements and trying to find out—more of a “how do you build societies back up again?” His was more about control and actually, on many occasions, those terrorist organizations and individual terrorists became instruments of control as well. And the FSB had often infiltrated them and were actually using them for purposes because they wanted to discredit the leaders of Chechnya that had been installed and wanted to make it impossible for anybody from the West to push them into a compromise with those leaders that would lead to power sharing. They wanted to impose, as we saw, their own person there, even if they had to instrumentalize horrors like this. We weren't on the same page at all. We were looking at conflict resolution, and they were looking at conflict, let's just say, management, but not in a way that we would think of it.

BEHRINGER: And also, in 2004, while that's going on in, and in late 2003, you have the color revolutions start to break out—so Georgia, the Rose Revolution in 2003, and then the Orange Revolution, 2004 in Ukraine. And then I think Ben is going to ask about the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in a moment, but particularly on Georgia and Ukraine, what role did the Bush administration play in supporting those revolutions, and what did you think of the way that the Bush administration handled them?

HILL: First of all, just like in the case of the Arab Spring and many of these uprisings, people didn't necessarily see it coming. And I think there was a tendency

afterwards for people to take credit for things that they hadn't been part of, and that really played into all of the Russian fears, so if people had been much more attentive [00:38:00] to the way it was being perceived: Of course, Russia immediately thought that this was a rerun of all of the—again, going back to the imperial past, something they would have done, the Brits would have done, and that, in their belief, United States did all the time, the CIA, back in the [19]70s and 1980s in Latin America and Africa and elsewhere. So the Russians immediately saw—and feeding into what I said about Beslan—the not-so-hidden hand, in their view, of the West in stirring all of this up. So they believed that all of these were instigated by the United States and the West and pretty much promoted by funding.

And this is when there were a lot of think tanks and there were a lot of foundations who had been funding programs on transparency and on political participation and democratization, just as there were in the Balkans in this timeframe, and we all are very much aware, there was a lot of self-organization and looking at issues related to non-violent protest and political change going on at the think tank and other levels. And of course, I was watching all of this very closely, given the fact that I was at the Brookings Institution in this period and knew a lot of the—and I'd worked previously in the Eurasia Foundation, which has not been involved in things like this but with a lot of these other technical assistance groups.

So I was really very well aware of what was going on, but it wasn't directed by the government by any stretch. But I remember much later being

[at] a meeting where one of the State Department officials, who later had gone on to work at the UN, basically said, “Well, we should take credit for this because it's our funding that's gone,”—some of the State Department and other development funding—“that's gone to some of these think tanks, or other people from there have been involved in this. This is impact.” And a lot of us were saying, “No! We didn't have anything to do with it.” And that really fed into the Russian narrative. Again, it's this lack of attention, and a lot of people would say, “Well, they'd have this narrative anyway,” but [00:40:00] no, don't feed it. We basically fed a Russian narrative that we were somehow responsible for this.

And the Tulip Revolution is a classic example. Nobody had any clue what was going on there, and there was no real organization. It didn't fit in in the same way that the others—the Rose Revolution in Georgia and the Orange Revolution in Ukraine—did, where there was real major civil society actors. This was, in Kyrgyzstan, much more a whole populist, leaderless reaction with some organized crime elements and street youth and others getting out with a bit of an overlay of some of the same things that you'd seen in Georgia and Ukraine—around elections or pivotal points of instability in the political system. But it wasn't the same as the others.

This is a real example of how people should be very careful about what they try to insert themselves into and take credit for. Because, again, the United States didn't instigate any of these, but Putin becomes convinced after this—especially against the backdrop of his own narrative about Beslan because you



can't take responsibility for things you might have triggered off yourself—that the United States is in the process, then, of regime change. And so, when you fast forward to the Arab Spring, he's convinced of it by then.

And of course, this is also against the backdrop, which I think of as the original sin of everything, which is the invasion—and you have to say it like that—of Iraq by the United States in 2003. Very different from the intervention, which was done in a United Nations framework, which the Russians might have supported anywhere, into Iraq after Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990 and 1991. And I went to Moscow with Jim Steinberg, who was the director then of Foreign Policy, the vice president of [the] Brookings Foreign Policy [Studies Program], having just left the [00:42:00] Clinton administration. And we went to Moscow in 2003 before the U.S. invasion. And it was very clear—we met with very high-ranking people in the Kremlin, and they knew that Saddam Hussein did not have weapons of mass destruction. And they kept telling us, “He's bluffing. And he's bluffing because he's frightened of you. He's bluffing because he's frightened of his own people. He's bluffing because he's frightened of Iran. He does not have weapons of mass destruction.”

And so, when the U.S. moved in, because they do it, they thought this was another false flag operation, that we'd made it all up deliberately because we had every intention—and of course it was a lot of narratives that we're all familiar with: that for some people it was unfinished business, that they did want to see the end of Saddam Hussein—a calculation not dissimilar from Russia's miscalculation of going into Ukraine—that it would be a very quick

toppling of Hussein and the Ba'athist regime, and then there would be a reordering. What we did in Iraq in 2003 is what Russia thought it was going to do in Ukraine initially in 2022. And the Russians took from this, Putin in particular and all the people around him—I know this at firsthand, not just at secondhand—that the United States was well and truly in the business of regime change and that they were probably in the crosshairs as well. So they put together Beslan and this whole narrative that emerges out of what's going on in Chechnya because we do have American committees for the protection of Chechnya with people like Zbigniew Brzezinski and Alexander Haig, bipartisan. They're out of government, but they're seen as still being representatives of the U.S. A lot of scrutiny on Chechnya by people like myself and others at prestigious think tanks and universities and former military people and others looking very closely at what's happening in Chechnya. And then they see [00:44:00] Georgia. They see Ukraine; they see Iraq, which is right in the middle of all of this; and Kyrgyzstan and everywhere else. And they put all of this together, and they become convinced that the United States has moved into the phase that they recognize from the Cold War, with [Prime Minister Mohammed] Mossadegh and Iran, and this and that and the other in Latin America, or things we might've been doing in Africa when they were standing up against us in Angola and Mozambique, or in Vietnam and Korea. And it all becomes, in their mind, a framing. They conclude that that's what we're doing. And we don't do much to change that conclusion that they've made. And we're not maybe attempting to do it, either.

FEINSTEIN: So, in terms of the response that you just gave, I feel it's important to ask a question to solidify the timeline of when exactly the sentiment against the United States is developing, what sectors of the Russian government or what actors within the government are turning when, because we have Beslan in 2004, and, as you just explained, that's obviously a huge turning point in terms of shifting the blame outward. And then Iraq happens in 2003.

HILL: Yeah, so that's before that even—.

FEINSTEIN: Of course.

HILL: Yeah.

FEINSTEIN: Iraq happens in '03. The ABM Treaty—we withdraw from that in December of 2001. We signed SORT<sup>4</sup> later, but the missile defense issue isn't until later. But then, as you just alluded to, some of these fears go back into the Cold War, and it seems as if they're resurfacing. So, I guess I have two questions. I think my first question is, in terms of when exactly the Russian sentiment is turning and when the buildup is, do you think there was a window in between 2001 and call it March 2003, before the Iraq War begins, to avoid some of this paranoia developing? [00:46:00] And then, I guess, for my second question—forgive me, just go ahead with the first.

HILL: Yeah. I've got my sequencing off here as well.

FEINSTEIN: You're okay.

HILL: As I was listening to you, I think the real turning point is in 1999. So it's even before Bush comes in. And it's the bombing of Serbia, of Belgrade specifically,

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<sup>4</sup> Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty.

by the United States and NATO. So it's under Clinton. It's the last phase of the Clinton administration. And why that's important is because it comes under a NATO rubric. So this sets the stage later for deep suspicion about NATO, because what else is happening around the time that we're discussing this and thinking along this timeline—so let's just think. It's really sort of a timeline from 1999 to 2011 and the Arab Spring. And it's that whole sequence of events, but they all blur together because, for Russia, they're blurring together as well. But the real pivotal point is 1999 because, when NATO becomes the umbrella for the operation of bombing Belgrade to stop the atrocities in Kosovo, from the Russian point of view, there wasn't an Article 5 trigger. Now in 2001, there is a trigger with the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and NATO comes in to help the United States. So what we do next in Afghanistan under a NATO rubric fits with what they think are the old rules.

This is why the Russians think that we've thrown the rule book out the window. It's 1999. What did Serbia do to you? And I happened to be in St. Petersburg at the very moment that this all happened in 1999. I obviously didn't know we were going to bomb Belgrade. And I was at a conference with the whole spectrum of Russian actors, both representing the Kremlin at that point—you know, it's still Boris Yeltsin—but others who are much more sympathetic to the West, heavily involved in [00:48:00] the various transformational activities in the economy as well as in politics. And every Russian is totally shocked. They can't believe it. Why would NATO bomb Belgrade? Why would the United States bomb Belgrade? What did they do to

you? And, of course, this is against the backdrop of Chechnya. So they immediately say, “Well, wouldn't you bomb us as well because of Chechnya?” And, of course, we explain, “No, they wouldn't.” And the obvious answer is because, I mean, partly, they're a nuclear power, and we've been trying very hard never to engage with Russia, as we continue to be, because of that context. But also, we've turned a blind eye to many atrocities inside of Russia and the Soviet Union for years. And this was a lot of pressure from Europe to do something because of the consequences of the Yugoslav succession wars to Europe refugee flows. And, obviously, there was a lot of European intervention there as well.

And yes, it's true: Chechnya had very similar impacts—a lot of Chechens fleeing Chechnya, getting out of Russia, ending up in Europe, Russia carrying out assassination attempts of Chechens outside, lots of tensions. The Chechens took hostages in Istanbul on a ferry and also in one of the hotels. I happened to be in Istanbul at the time when they took the Swissotel hostage, and some of the people I was at a conference with were in the hotel, taken hostage briefly.

So there's a lot of this playing out, but it was hard to articulate, and I didn't do a very good job of it because yes, they were kind of right—there was a lot of parallels here. Why wouldn't we do the same thing to Moscow, apart from stating the obvious of the power discrepancy and the nuclear weapons and the fears of getting into a war with Russia. And there was not an Article 5 trigger. We used NATO because it was convenient, because [00:50:00] it was an umbrella, so it would be a shared operation with the Europeans. And so that

also helps to set the stage for that conviction on the part of Putin and others that that's where we're all heading—regime change, using NATO outside of the frames in which we had said we would use NATO in the Cold War period. And then there's just a succession of uprisings, color revolutions—color revolutions just the same way of insurgencies and things that we've had in the past all the way through the Soviet period, in which we'd often intervened and things had happened. So this was not looking any different.

And I think the juncture where we could have done something is that 9/11 period, I mean immediately afterwards. But again, it would have required basically swallowing hard on Chechnya and giving them a pass on something that was already pretty brutal. So we would have had to do something—we do it often, unfortunately. And that's part of our problem. We're never consistent in our positions. We often do things for expediency or for great power considerations. And that's what Putin was expecting—our great power considerations to override the human rights and the values bases. He thought that we would come around to his view of the world, which is where Islamist terrorism, or Islamist-inspired terrorism—I'm getting all the terminology wrong these days now—was basically the dominant force and that we would maybe even be in a shared endeavor. He thought of himself—and still does, to some degree—as Nicholas I, the gendarme of Europe back in the 1840s, of helping to suppress all of the popular uprising against the monarchies. And he thought that we would make common cause, and we didn't.

And then, as I said after Beslan, I had thought, perhaps more ineptly, there might be an opportunity to reengage on this because of the extremist movements that were so obviously taking advantage of this [00:52:00] conflict and try to help the Russians. This fed into our endeavors to work with them on Khasavyurt. But I learned from that that they didn't want "help." They didn't want compromise. They wanted to do it on their own terms. And that leads us to a set of problems for what we're trying to do now with Ukraine. The Russians are not in a compromising mood when it comes to these kind of conflicts. They want it resolved on their own terms, unless they just can't do what they want to do by other means. And that's what I learned from my involvement in Khasavyurt, and also, those efforts, from 2004 after Beslan, otherwise, to try to see if, "Could we reengage?" It was only on their terms, not on something that will lead to some kind of compromise with us, trying to get something out of this in the humanitarian values or human rights spaces.

BEHRINGER: I wanted to make sure we have enough time, so I'm going to skip ahead a little bit, but we can circle back to some of the other questions if we need to. But I wanted to go next to this 2006 report you coauthored with the Council on Foreign Relations in which you called for the U.S. to stop considering Russia a strategic partner and instead to engage the Kremlin more selectively. Do you think that the Bush administration took this advice, and, if not, what would it have looked like in practice?

HILL: Look, I think every administration has ultimately tried to do that because of all of these differences that I talked about. Structure is pretty key as well. We're

not structured like Russia is, and we're kind of messy. We don't have discipline of message. We have lots of different competing entities in the United States at all different levels, in Congress—not just political party, but elsewhere, of competing interests, institutional and agency rivalries that all play out. And we know ourselves that an American president doesn't always [00:54:00] have the luxury of speaking on behalf of the nation—often, it's so divided. Whereas in Russia, they've got this very strict vertical of power that had really emerged by the time of Beslan in 2004, and I spent a lot of time in my research trying to explain that, where you couldn't talk to somebody else at the same kind of level and expect them to be able to engage or actually speak on behalf of anyone. And they were always stuck on their notes. And so a larger strategic partnership could only have been framed in reciprocity structurally so that you would have had national security advisors and secretaries of state and defense and people at my working level all able to engage with each other as we do with the Brits or the Germans or the French, even with all the difficulties that we might have in some of those relationships, and that wasn't really possible.

And we didn't see the world in the same way. Even on issues like terrorism, where we did have some similar concerns in similar settings, the Russians had different skin in the game. For example, they had a very large Muslim population, obviously. And although they were very careful in the way that they framed it—they called it terrorism writ large. They wouldn't have used, as we were already using, this “Islamist-inspired terrorist activity.” They wouldn't have had the anti-Islam movement that actually emerged in some



circles in the United States. I mean, President Bush was always very careful about that after 9/11, but let's just say other people in the system were much less so.

But the Russians actually had to be careful because Putin was really concerned about keeping the Russian Federation together. He didn't want the further dissolution of the Russian imperial empire or of the Soviet space. The territory of Russia—and, I mean, as he said, greatest catastrophe of the 20th century, the loss of the Soviet Union—and also, he would have said, the beginning of the 20th century, the loss of the Russian Empire. He was still thinking in imperial terms, and that meant that multiplicity of Russians. And he was still, [00:56:00] early on in his presidency, using the word for Russians as *rossianie*, with a “ros,” instead of a “rus,” which is more the narrow ethnic definition, because he needed to keep Muslims and Jews and shamans and basically their other indigenous religions—there's Buddhists also in Russia that are indigenous to Russia—and all the different peoples together. And so he couldn't afford to have that kind of division. He didn't want to pit Muslims against Orthodox Christians or Jews, and he didn't want to return to pogroms and the kinds of things that had blown up the Russian Empire and maybe the tensions in the Soviet state. I mean, he's obviously changed somewhat in more recent time because he felt more confident he'd bound it back together again, but he didn't want to be stuck in our definitions of this. He was tackling the Chechens, but it's also very useful for them to blame the outside, because then you weren't necessarily making it domestic in the conflict.

And they were courting around at the same time, which we obviously weren't in the business of courting, because the Shi'a Islam—it was a very small number of observant Shi'a inside of the Russian Federation. The larger population is Sunni. And they wanted to have counterweights. They needed to play their own game. And, really, what they wanted us to do was leave them alone. And a strategic partnership couldn't have possibly been the frame for that. Strategic partnership with China is fine because China does its thing and Russia does its thing and then they band together where they want to, but anything with us wasn't likely to be that. And so, we needed to deal with them where we could, but bearing in mind the complexities and the dangers and difficulties of getting too close to Russia on certain fronts.

BEHRINGER: And that dovetails nicely—your talking about Putin's anxieties [00:58:00] and worries about destabilizing Russia dovetails nicely with the 2007 Munich [Security] Conference speech, in which he criticizes the United States as a destabilizing power with a disdain for the basic principles of international law and so on and so forth. Do you remember what your reaction was to the speech when it came out? Were you surprised by it? And how did other people in the administration react to the speech?

HILL: I think after listening to him at Beslan and reading all these other things, I was less surprised by it. I remember having a fairly mild reaction to it in real time, whereas later—obviously, it's clear that it's a turning point for many others—but for me, it just seemed like a culmination of things that already were starting

to percolate based on all of my interactions. But yes, it becomes a turning point, a jolt for everyone else, even if it isn't for long-term analysts of Russia.

And it is, of course, a very significant moment because it's a period when Putin thinks that he's stabilized the domestic front. It's not just the end of the war in Chechnya—which, of course, never really ended, the brutal imposition of their guy and then the Kadyrov family in Chechnya—but it's also the period when they've paid off all their debts, and they're starting to build the military up again. And Putin is clearly feeling more confident. And it is a refutation of the idea that Russia was weak or had made some kind of strategic decision not to do things that it had done in the past. It becomes evident, no, and even if there might still be some weaknesses, he's feeling sufficient strength to redeploy assets and forces into foreign policy rather than domestic renewal and rebuilding. And there's no strategic decision being made to engage with Europe or the West or anything, certainly not by Vladimir Putin. He still sees things in this old Cold War [01:00:00] context.

So, I think it's a moment of clarity and clarification, and it's also coming against the backdrop, as you and Ben have already laid out here, all of these other things that have been happening. And it's Putin basically saying, “Look, we've taken notice of all this. When we haven't reacted, it doesn't mean that we like any of this. We haven't acquiesced in anything. We've just been biding our time, and the time has come when we're going to start taking action.”

FEINSTEIN: And in terms of when that action takes place, I feel a very significant instance of Russia doing, as you described, deploying assets and forces

outwards to influence foreign policy rather than inwards to influence domestic policy would be the war in Georgia, which breaks out in August of 2008. But you had been publicly warning the Bush administration about potential conflict in Georgia since at least 2006. What concerned you about the region and Russo-Georgian tensions at the time? And do you think the rest of the Bush administration took your warning seriously? Or do you think something else occurred that allowed that conflict to break out?

HILL: Yeah, so by this point, I'm inside of the administration, so to speak, as national intelligence officer. And so, a lot of those warnings are taking place behind closed doors with the rest of the intelligence community. There wasn't a complete consensus on this. There was certainly a bit of a split as to whether Georgia was goading Russia, some people thinking—because there was quite some reckless behavior on the parts of Mikheil Saakashvili and the Georgian government at the time in actually fanning the flames of tensions because they were wanting themselves to reassert their authority in their own territory. We were trying to caution [01:02:00]—we, writ large, the U.S. government—to be a bit more careful on what they were doing in Abkhazia and South Ossetia themselves in trying to bring those secessionist regions back in.

But also on the political level, inside of the United States, Georgia had become the poster child for the Freedom Agenda. And we haven't really mentioned this, but coming out of the U.S. moving into Afghanistan after 9/11, the invasion of Iraq—and we remember, after the military operations didn't go in the directions that we thought, we start to try to build up, engage in nation-

building. We put this into the rubric of the Freedom Agenda. And things are just not going well in Afghanistan or Iraq, and freedom is not emerging, peace is not breaking out all over the place. And Ukraine had also been part of that because, after the Orange Revolution, there's sort of a feeling that Ukraine was also on a different pathway, but, of course, it degenerated into political infighting among various aspirants for the Ukrainian presidency or prime ministership and oligarchs, and there's lots of corruption and constant changes of government.

But Georgia, under Saakashvili, seemed to be moving in all kinds of directions—curbing the police, curbing corruption, reorienting the military. Ukraine was also trying to go into military reform, but Georgia looked like they were on that track certainly better than most. And they became selected under the Bush administration policy as the poster child. Remember, George Bush goes to Georgia during the campaign, the presidential election campaign that brings him into the second term—well, early on it was with John McCain, running later as well. There's this whole idea of, we're all Georgians—people like Sarah Palin espousing the whole idea of Georgia.

And then also, because of the nature of Saakashvili himself—that he's been educated [01:04:00] in the United States. He's Europeanized as well. He's married to a Dutch woman. He's got fantastic English. But everybody feels affinity with him. People joke about this “bromance” between Saakashvili and many of the other younger guys in the Bush administration and elsewhere, and you could see all of that. And there becomes a looseness in the way that we deal

with Georgia. It's not disciplined at all. People are hanging out with Saakashvili in saunas and going to parties with him and drinking with him in discotheques. And this whole thing is getting out of control, I have to say.

And the efforts to curb that fraternization with Georgia—and that's purely what it was in some in some cases. We can't curb it. People blurring the distinction between policy and trying to deal with the security issue and feelings of friendship and fellow-feeling and sometimes even more of a feeling of really close kinship with Saakashvili and the bright, young English-speaking Georgians around him and being a bit blind to some of the things that they were doing. And there was a reaction inside some of the intelligence community and security officials to this, pushing back against it and saying, “Look, they're in a dangerous environment, dangerous neighborhood, and Saakashvili's being very willful.” And remember, at this time, he also alienates [German President] Angela Merkel. I mean, he's a pretty sexist guy, and he really rubs up the wrong way, many of the female leaders in Europe and elsewhere become frustrated and angry with him as well on a personal level.

And so, the whole thing gets personalized, and trying to warn against this becomes very difficult. And it was very clear that, after a certain point, the Russians put Saakashvili in their crosshairs. It's not just about NATO, but it's that he's refuting all of their efforts to constrain Georgia. He arrests a number of GRU,<sup>5</sup> of military intelligence [01:06:00] people, in a pretty public display in

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<sup>5</sup> The Russian military's foreign intelligence arm, still commonly called by its Soviet-era acronym GRU (Glavnoe razvedyvatel'noe upravlenie, or Main Intelligence Directorate), which was renamed in 1992.

Georgia. He's trying to reclaim, understandably, the secessionist areas, regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and he makes these dashes in to regain bits of territory. And again, the Russians watch all of this, and they don't necessarily do something, but then they're clearly laying a trap for him, a series of traps. And we were trying to warn the Georgians about this as well, not to—it's not provoke Russia—but not to step into the traps. And Saakashvili does.

And it's all a mess because there's this chaotic set of relations around him with far too many players in the picture. And we don't have any coherence of policy toward Georgia at that time too because you've got all kinds of people who are working as advisors to Saakashvili, and Saakashvili has become a celebrity cultural figure all over the place. And he's tearing around—I remember him once visiting the U.S., and reports of him in bars with some of our interns in D.C. The stories about his lack of presidential behavior are manifold, and lots of people see him in many different settings and become frustrated and angry. And so, there is a misreading in some circles of what happens, seeing it as highly personalized, rather than seeing it as really linked into a pattern of Putin just deciding to basically entrap him because of larger issues of wanting to make sure that Georgia and Ukraine don't end up in NATO, but also wanting to teach Georgia and everybody else in the neighborhood a lesson—that you can't stray too far away from Russia and Moscow.

And Putin tells senior Georgians after the [01:08:00] invasion of Georgia in 2008—which, again, was to point to the fact that Georgia wasn't going to go

into NATO, absolutely not, that door was not going to be opened. And we'd assessed that that was going to happen, by the way—that there would be some military action against Georgia, and also against Ukraine, in response to their bid to join NATO. It was very obvious, and it was being signaled at all times. It wasn't like this was the result of clandestine information. They were openly telling everybody, and Putin basically tells senior Georgians, "Your Western partners promised a lot. They didn't deliver. I threatened, I delivered."

And it was a message that was taken in in the whole region, and everybody understood it wasn't just about Saakashvili and his personal behavior and irritation with him or the fact that he was all embedded in U.S. politics. He thought that he could play the Russians at their own game. He thought he could actually leverage the United States and other relationships against Russia. But Russia was trying to show us, and the rest of the neighborhood, that these were countries that were in its domain, and we shouldn't mess with them. And if we did, or if others in their domain forgot the fact that they were in Moscow's domain, they would teach them all a lesson—a very nasty lesson.

FEINSTEIN: So, in terms of the buildup to the Georgian War, there was obviously a lot of fraternization. There's a lot of divides within the administration as to what to do. And there's a sense that Putin is essentially setting a trap for Saakashvili to step in. When the war actually breaks out—I think it's August 7 or 8—

HILL: Yes. It's during the Olympics in China. There's a pattern here. A real pattern as well of Olympics and conflicts.



FEINSTEIN: Yes, unfortunately. So when the war breaks out in August of 2008, can you describe the particular trap that Putin sets for Saakashvili at that particular moment, the spark that ignites it. And then do you remember [01:10:00] personally where you were when the war broke out, where you were as the five-day war plays out and, in terms of how the Bush administration handled the crisis—and whether you want to interpret that question in the sense of the day-by-day as Russian troops are advancing into Georgia or in the weeks and months following the war as to what the Bush administration does about Russia or does to Russia in response, or rather does not do—how do you think the Bush administration handled it?

HILL: Look, I think this was an unbelievably dangerous moment, and, as I said, we could see it coming, but we weren't really sure about how it would occur. And one of the problems that we had from the intelligence community perspective was that there were many scenarios that could unfold, and our best bet for some period of time was Abkhazia, that the conflict would break out—that that's where that would have been the *casus belli*—because Saakashvili was actually planning on trying to retake more territory in Abkhazia. And we knew that he had basically put his own military incursion plan to try to push back. And, of course, the Russians knew about that too. And they moved troops down the railways—they're actually technically railway troops, railway forces, but they moved all the way down the railways in Abkhazia to essentially go to reassert control in Abkhazia. They were already there in presence, but they beefed up their presence, and they did it in a way by using railway troops. It

was a way of getting around the use of different kinds of forces, and it was securing lines of communication, but it was really cutting Saakashvili off at the pass.

So then the focus shifts, because this is where around May, spring of 2008, but it's immediately after the Bucharest summit. And that is, for Putin—that is where he famously tells Bush that, [01:12:00] “Ukraine’s not a country. Part of it's in Eastern Europe, and the other part belongs to us.” But also, he's just infuriated about Georgia. And Saakashvili thinks he's been promised a Membership Action Plan, and there's a big blow-up behind the scenes with him in Bucharest as well. And the deep dive that I'd referenced before that myself and Ambassador Richard Kauzlarich took part in—we were conveying the assessment of the intel community, and this was an assessment shared by the Brits, by the way, over at the Joint Intelligence Committee as well—that there was so much opposition to Georgia and Ukraine having a Membership Action Plan at NATO among the other member states, and also not solid support inside of Ukraine itself—only about 30 or so percent of the population then were in favor, where Georgia was much more of a majority. But also, because the Russians were so angst-ridden about this at that time, that this was not going to work. Everybody else's assessment was that Russia would take some action and that it was better not to put it on the agenda because, if we fail to get somewhere, that would be also a sign of weakness and might then encourage the Russians, rather than provoke them, but encourage them to take some action—further action than they'd already taken about putting pressure

on Georgia and Ukraine. And so the likelihood of military action—we did have Crimea there as one scenario that they might take.

So there was all these kinds of assessments all the way around in this time that the Russians were looking for a reason to teach Georgia a lesson and embark on some kind of military operation. And it was just a question of where and whether Georgia would spring the trap itself or that Russia would lay it and Georgia would blunder into it. So, I mean, had the Georgians moved into Abkhazia, it was obvious that that would result in something really nasty. And in this case, it happened in Tskhinvali, in South Ossetia, where Russian peacekeepers were ostensibly manning the border there [01:14:00]—but they're not really peacekeepers. They're actually Russian forces because there's not really a distinction between peacekeepers and forces. It's just an armband they put on. There's not really any different, special training.

And there was shelling from over the border, from South Ossetia. We were pretty convinced it was the South Ossetian authorities themselves who were all part of this because the leader of South Ossetia at the time, [Eduard] Kokoity, was renowned for being very close to the Russian military intelligence. And he was also incredibly corrupt, and he'd been robbing the Russian state of a lot of the assistance money. And he was in trouble with the authorities in Moscow because he'd been “robbing the kitty,” and they knew about it, and they were trying to rein him in. He had every incentive of triggering something off for his own purposes as well.

And so South Ossetia becomes the focal point. Basically, Saakashvili's entourage—a lot of people were tied into South Ossetia. At that point, there'd been reasonably good relations between South Ossetia and Georgia, insofar as there was a lot of cross-border trade and movement and people going backwards and forwards. And it wasn't the obvious place for this initially to happen. Tensions had been, at different points, much lower than they had been in Abkhazia. But then tensions start to mount. Some of the people in Saakashvili's entourage make comments about South Ossetia, the defense minister, going out there and provocatively—from the Russians' perspective—having a barbeque somewhere in the vicinity and saying that he was a visit on vacation, but he was going to be “back in Tskhinvali before you knew it” because he had family ties there, and all of this gets played out. And so the Russians set the trap there, shelling over the border. The Georgians respond, and then Saakashvili mobilizing forces and [01:16:00] sending them in without a lot of planning.

Now, the U.S. government, and President Bush himself, had been warning against this—[Secretary of State] Condoleezza Rice and others had engaged with Saakashvili, saying, “Don't rise to the bait here.” Bush himself later would say, “I told the guy 30,000 times not to rise to a provocation because something would happen.” But I think Saakashvili was gambling, based on all of his interactions with everybody, that people would come to his assistance. And at this point, Georgia was, of course, massively invested in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, in the international coalitions, and had provided

the largest number of troops per capita. And there'd been a lot of casualties and serious injuries. And our military was very much supportive of Georgia because their troops were fabulous as coalition members. And they were right there in the forefront. They weren't sitting back in the rear, and they'd had people killed and severely injured, and their *esprit de corps* was very good. They were really well trained, and they were getting equipped.

I think the Russians actually were also watching this very closely and initially anticipated that there might be a response from the United States, just as Saakashvili did. And so, the pretext was that the Georgians attacked Russian peacekeepers—and people still say that—but it was a setup. And then the Georgians move in, and the Russians had been holding these exercises—we'd all been watching this as well, in the North Caucasus—it's not dissimilar from what we've just seen with Ukraine as well in exercises in Belarus and then sudden movement into Ukraine. But a lot of the forces there, we could see, were going back to base.

So, it wasn't entirely clear then whether this was all completely formulated, and Putin is in Beijing and President Bush [01:18:00] is on his way to Beijing for the opening ceremonies of the Beijing Summer Olympics at this particular juncture. And we end up in this strange split screen of the opening ceremonies and the invasion of Georgia by Russia. But in the run-up to this, Bush was pretty convinced that somebody had got through to Saakashvili to tell him to stop, but Saakashvili was dodging people's phone calls. And so Saakashvili was bent himself on doing something, thinking that we would then

be triggered to come in. And so when Bush sees Putin in Beijing, Bush thinks he's warned Saakashvili off through all the channels, and he hasn't yet learned because of time difference and some lags in giving him his daily brief and his update—total, big time difference snafu there—he hasn't learned that something has happened, and Putin says something to him, and Bush obviously reacts as a person would. For a moment, he's caught off guard. And Putin takes that as a sign—Bush is clearly trying to figure out, “Uh oh, hang on. Did that—hang on. Something happened here. That was not where I thought it was a few hours ago.” And Putin takes that as a sign that it's okay to hit back, that the United States won't necessarily go in, which of course wasn't necessarily the case, but he gambles that he's caught us off-guard. And that's when they go in full force against the Georgians.

Now, they didn't, obviously, go all the way to Tbilisi. They turned back there. They didn't do what we've seen them do in Ukraine in 2022. But it's a 10-day shock to the system. And the United States doesn't necessarily know how to react to this here. Now, we had an undertaking to the Georgians that we would bring them back from their foreign assignments—the military—in the event [01:20:00] of a war for defensive purposes—not that we would basically fight on their behalf, but that we would bring them back, which of course we did. And what was critical there was the relationship that had been established between Admiral [Michael] Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and his counterpart, General [Nikolai] Makarov. And they called each other multiple times and smoothed things over, bringing the Georgians back. But

there's a whole period there where it's clear that the Russians thought that we might militarily fight alongside the Georgians, that we might do what we're now doing in Ukraine, and we didn't. And the Russians take a lesson away from that. And in fact, we pull back from communications—getting to your point of handling it—and instead, we have President [Nicolas] Sarkozy of France leaping into action to stop the war. And we're all, in the meantime, then deliberating all of these things internally.

Now you asked where I was, and there's an irony to all of this because we could see things were unfolding, and I was due for annual leave. I was actually supposed to be going to my great aunt's hundredth birthday party. I never made it. On the way there, I was at a garden party with a whole lot of analysts on the Caucasus—people that I knew and had known for years—and before I got onto the train, I flew into London and went to this garden party of a whole host of people working on the Caucasus. Lots of people had just been there—various journalists—and they were preparing to go back again. Everybody's debating what was going to happen. And I'm about to go to get the train to go to my great aunt's hundredth birthday party. And the war's broken out, and I then spend the next days not going there, but figuring out how to get back to D.C. My deputy, though, who was there, who was handling this, was from the Defense Intelligence Agency—a former military officer. He was actually the best person to be handling that phase.

But all of our warnings had been going off. [01:22:00] We just didn't know exactly what timing would entail. I think there was so many times where

we just misread, writ large, the situation. We had plenty of warnings. And then, afterwards, we were raked over the coals by [those] saying, “Why didn't we specifically know it was on this day and in this kind of format?” But we'd warned of the same structural set-up, provocation on the part of the Russians, drawing and luring the Georgians in because then it could happen at any time. And it just happened precisely then, when—I suspected, in some respects, that Kokoity, head of South Ossetia, he was one of the trigger points because of things that were happening in his own domestic setting. And people in Moscow were on vacation. There weren't a lot of signs that it was heavily plotted. It could have been done by the GRU and people on the ground “wagging the dog” because Medvedev, who was in fact president at the time, was on vacation, and Putin's there in Beijing watching the Olympics, and it becomes pretty problematic as a result of everyone being in different places, indifferent times, and others of our principals were on vacation as well.

BEHRINGER: I just wanted to clarify one thing because you mentioned about how Saakashvili was operating under the assumption that, if he presented the United States with a *fait accompli*, that we would come in and back him. And, from your perspective, given what's unfolded in Ukraine since and everything, should the United States have done more in the moment? Could the United States have done more in the moment? What was your analysis of how the Bush administration, the actual [01:24:00] response to the invasion unfolded?

HILL: We should have done something more in the moment with everybody—in coordination with the Europeans—which we weren't doing. And look, it



might've been possible to avert that trigger because at that point, the Russians were looking for a trigger to lure Saakashvili in. And I think part of our problem was our communications and messaging ahead of this—and it hadn't just been the mess around NATO and the eventual, “You will be in some time, but not now, and you don't have a Membership Action Plan,” which was a compromise in the worst of all worlds. And we then didn't do any planning for the eventuality of a Russian military response, which we saw—we assessed it as high likelihood—and there wasn't a political response to all of that. We should have been getting ahead of all of that and then working very closely with the Georgians on getting them to avoid this. Really, that should have been avoided.

And I think it was possible to avoid it. I don't think it was, at that point, that the Russians were hellbent at that moment—they wanted to put pressure on, but they weren't necessarily hellbent on a military operation at that particular juncture or they might've been at another time, but they were very much in the business of creating a pretext. And then, as we saw this unfolding, we should have then started to have these kinds of discussions about what we were going to do and discuss it with others.

But again, there's so much of an animosity towards Saakashvili personally at this point—it was seen as personalized by some of the other Europeans because Putin had talked about hanging Saakashvili up by his balls—I mean literally, there was all this kind of crude language and imagery going back. And Saakashvili himself was clearly goading Putin and thinking that he could say things to Putin that, in normal circumstances, he would have

been more circumspect about because he felt he had all this support, certainly moral and political support. And part of it was the Freedom Agenda, but part of it was also, even though things were happening that people didn't like, they didn't want to say anything publicly about Georgia, because it felt [01:26:00] that that would exacerbate George's vulnerability vis-à-vis Russia. So even though a lot of the things, the admonitions to Saakashvili—"do things different"—were done privately, and they weren't conferred, necessarily, by people that he would listen to. And in fact, the people that he often did listen to—the people he was "friends with" in the government—would tell him, "Oh, don't listen to that. We're there for you." And some of the public declarations of support—"We stand behind you"—he would take that literally. He was testing the proposition, which wasn't a very smart move.

And so we should have, again, been preparing for this event and eventuality. And that was where I fault everything, writ large. And I feel responsibility for this, too. When you warn and you analyze, if you're not effective enough at getting those points across, that's an issue. There was [were] an awful lot of politics that, at that time, I wasn't quite sure how to navigate. And part of it was our messaging, how we communicate this as well, and then how you worked across all of the government to rein everyone in, to get onto the same page. And then, how would we work with our allies?

And it's only now, I guess, that people see, [with] the benefit of hindsight about with what's happening in Ukraine, that this was a similar phenomenon. And Ukraine didn't provoke conflict in February of 2022, but

there was a really deep feeling that Saakashvili had provoked it. And people said to him later, “Why did you do it? You set the place on fire. You were an arsonist.” And he said, “Well, it was my house.” So we should have been much more attentive, too, to how the Georgians and he and the people around him were feeling, the differences in their politics. People were aware of it, but we were playing in it without really fully appreciating where things were going there, too—the divisions and splits and Saakashvili’s own personality.

And Putin was looking for any kind of sign of weakness. He was looking for divisions between Europe and the United States over this. And he saw all the divisions laid bare in NATO, [01:28:00] and he was able to manipulate the French intervention because we weren't part of it. One of the things that came out later was the ceasefire accord that was drawn up by Sarkozy was practically written on a napkin. And there was a French version, a Georgian version, and a Russian version. There wasn't an English version. And all the versions were different because of linguistic differences and definitions of forces and positions and things. And then we jumped into that and started to try to instrumentalize that as well, particularly when the new administration came in. We **should** have left that alone. Everybody got bogged down in all of these meetings afterwards based on a very flawed ceasefire with ambiguous language, and we tried to use that language as a lever ourselves for different ends. And we got ourselves into a mess.

And one of the problems is when you transition from one administration to the next, some people—like, I remained in place there with the intel, and we

had all of our notes and all of our materials, but the NSC and the State Department elsewhere—all of those notes and records of meetings go off into the archives, and you don't always have continuity of people. And so partway through all of this, the Bush administration leaves because they're already on their way toward being out of office when this happens, although it wasn't, perhaps—of course, it was apparent. It was end of the second administration, and McCain obviously didn't get traction in the way that they hoped, and he was going to try to pick all of this up on Georgia, and that was part of the whole issue as well. And Georgia got lost in the mix, and the coherence of our approach got lost in the mix as well, because you had a Bush administration that was in its last months—you know, August, September, October and into the November elections—a McCain would-be administration that wasn't actually getting traction that had made Georgia a cause célèbre as well, and all kinds of mixed messaging. And then an Obama administration [01:30:00] that came in wanting to try to do things by the book of what you had: the ceasefire, but the ceasefire itself—we hadn't been part of it. We didn't broker it, and then trying to create an English language version of it—the Russian version said something different in terms of forces and disposition of territory, et cetera, et cetera. And it became just a mess.

BEHRINGER: Thank you so much for being so generous with your time here. I wanted to throw it to Ben for a wrap-up question, and maybe I'll have a really short follow up. But Ben, do you want to take the step-back question?

FEINSTEIN: Yeah, absolutely. Thank you again for your time. And I think you alluded to this point a little bit at the end of your last response in terms of the differences between how the Bush and Obama administration[s] were trying to handle this, but more broadly, you served under three very different presidents that all worked with the same Russian leader—under the Bush administration, in the Obama administration, and the Trump administration. How were their relationships with Vladimir Putin different from each other, and, more broadly, how does personal diplomacy affect the broader U.S.-Russian relationship, and what role should it play as we move forward?

HILL: Yeah. Actually, I want to answer that last thing first because I think we have to move away from personal diplomacy. It's a personalization of that relationship that always gets us into trouble. And that links back to where you started with the question. Now, given the nature [of] the hierarchical system on the personalization of the presidency in Russia, it becomes quite difficult, but you have to have fail-safe and institutional mechanisms to have somewhere to go if, at the top, the relationship fails, which it inevitably will.

Bush, as you alluded to at the very beginning, started off with his meeting with Putin in Slovenia, which is infamous for him looking into Putin's eyes, getting a measure of the man, the soul, and feeling that he could do [01:32:00] business with him—and, of course, getting mercilessly raked over the coals afterwards, even by people around him, saying, “Yeah, when I looked into Putin’s soul, I saw KGB, KGB, KGB.” And Putin was obviously playing Bush, and Bush knew that he was being played, but I think he was trying to play it back by

giving Putin also an opening in that context to try to move into a different relationship with the United States. But much later on, when I was in the “deep dives” with President Bush, he wanted to explain to me and Ambassador Kauzlarich why he'd said that and was obviously defensive about it and concerned that it hadn't given the right impression and feeling chagrined about the whole thing because he had got the measure of the guy later on and realized that he was not somebody who was very easy to do business with him and that you had handle him carefully.

Bush also really thought that the position of the United States would always win out. When it came to Bucharest, for example, he was convinced the United States' diplomacy could carry the day, even though we were convinced from our own assessments from inside that there was too much opposition and that we'd left it too late. Actually, Georgia and Ukraine didn't ask for U.S. support for a Membership Action Plan until, really, January-February of 2008, which didn't leave you a lot of time to do all the groundwork that you would need. And the president didn't really decide to do that groundwork until February-March. It's the beginning of April. And so there was a bit of shuttle diplomacy backwards and forwards with Secretary Gates and Secretary Rice, and they themselves were not convinced that this was a great idea either because of the difficulties of it and all the opposition and the perception of weakness if we didn't succeed. So this was a very difficult thing. And so Bush did put a lot of store into personal relationships with Putin, but with other leaders as well. But there was more of an institutional [01:34:00] frame to this.

Now, Obama—he doesn't deal with Putin initially. It's with Medvedev because he tries to reset the relationship with Dmitri Medvedev in place, 2007-2008 to 2011 and '12, when that tandem arrangement—Putin's never gone, and he's looking over Medvedev's shoulder all the time, but there is this back-and-forth in the Obama administration that I pick up on in the very early stage of the transition that you work with the president you've got. Ambassador Mike McFaul, who was then the senior director of the National Security Council, later our ambassador to Russia—he and many others were adamant, “Let's make a go of working with Medvedev.”

And Putin probably perceived, then, that they were trying to push him to one side. People like Gleb Pavlovsky, the advisor to Putin in the Kremlin at that point, later says that this perception emerges in the circle around Putin that Medvedev was trying to oust him and reject his right to return to the presidency, now that there's a “coup” being plotted against him—and also perceives the U.S. is out to get him, as always—and he becomes very convinced in 2011-2012, when he does return to the presidency and announces it. And then there's all these protests against his return, that the Obama administration had something to do with it, and specifically Hillary Clinton, who's then secretary of state, and believing—back again, as we go back to color revolutions—that the U.S., the CIA, the State Department, you name it, is trying to affect a color revolution against him, particularly when people wear white ribbons, and it becomes the “Snow Revolution” when people are out there in the middle of that winter. And so that becomes problematic as well.

And so, the personalization of Obama's relationship with Medvedev then becomes an issue, and he had a very hard time reconnecting, or connecting for the first time, with [01:36:00] Putin, and Putin treats him with deep suspicion. That's also partly because he's the first black president of the United States, and I just have to say outright, Putin and the people around him are misogynistic and racist. So, they have a very negative reaction to Hillary Clinton, and, in fact, later on, Putin tells senior officials that he thinks that the United States is always trying to somehow be disrespectful towards him because we have so many women in positions dealing with Russia, and he thinks that this is some kind of special signal to him. And then he has to deal with, basically, a black president, and this all filters back and around, and I'm sure that President Obama was well aware of all of that as well. And that fits into the picture as well. And then, as Putin moves on from his rocky return to the presidency, he becomes more and more convinced that the United States is trying to undermine him. And that then sets the tone for intervention in the elections in 2016 with also a very personal attack on Hillary Clinton, where Putin anticipates that she's going to be the next president, and he wants to weaken her as much as possible.

And then, we obviously see with Trump highly personalized—it wasn't really about Russia, the relationship, it was all about Putin. And what Trump wanted to do was personally engage with Putin, which was impossible after what had happened in 2016, the intervention and all the dark cloud that that cast over Trump himself and the accusations of collusion with Russia because



of many of the things that we all are familiar with—they unfolded over the course of the campaign. And Trump's goal, obviously, was to deal with Russia, work things out with Russia, through his personal relationship with Putin, so that he could focus on China and on other issues. And, of course, that just doesn't happen.

And the larger institutional underpinnings of the relationship with Russia just get obliterated during the Trump period for all of the domestic reasons, which, again, reinforces [01:38:00] my point—and also structural reasons with Russia as well, just the nature by this time of a highly personalized, hyper-personalized presidency in Russia and nowhere other than Putin, at this point, to go in terms of interactions. You can't, as I learned, deal with your counterparts because they can't say anything on their own behalf. And under Trump, it was also very difficult for us to say anything as well because Trump would say he was the only voice that mattered in the system.

So that whole personalization of a presidency and presidential relationships becomes a real stumbling block. And if the relationships blow up at the top, there's nowhere to anchor them. And that's essentially where we are now—the absence of institutional ties to Russia because of some of the developments in Russia itself, and then the way that various presidencies have unfolded, led us to a very dangerous and difficult position and place with Russia ahead of Russia's decision to invade Ukraine in February of 2022.

BEHRINGER: Thank you so much for your time. We could probably spend all afternoon speaking with you about even just the Bush administration, not to

mention everything that's happened since then. But this was really terrific, and thank you so much.

[END OF AUDIO/VIDEO FILE]