



U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

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[Begin Transcription]

GREK: When George W. Bush became president in January 2001, what kind of work were you doing, and how did you come to this position? Tell us about your professional path.

KARAGANOV: I am a scientist. Up until the early nineties, my career was mostly in science, including military-strategic problems. From the early nineties, when everything collapsed, I had to go into business, but I continued to do science, supported various institutions with my own money, including the creation of the Council for Foreign Defense Policy, something similar to the Council on Foreign Relations in the U.S., which is a foreign defense policy organization that played a very important role in the 1990s through the early 2000s in shaping Russian policy. I ran that institution then, which brought together a large part of Russia's current political elite—well, not only that. I was a public figure. I was still in business, but I had not yet come to the university, I came to the university much later. So I was an advisor to a great many Russian and Soviet leaders.

GREK: What schools of thought about Russian-American relations existed when Bush came to power, and what dictated the agenda for the next eight years? What internal conflicts existed in the decision-making circles in Russia?

KARAGANOV: Toward the end of the nineties there was a turning point in Russia's relations with the United States and with the West. Everything began in '95, with the beginning of NATO expansion, in general. In principle technically Russia wanted



[00:02:00]—the Russian elite wanted to integrate with the West, with Europe in the first place, of course, with the United States. And when Russia was refused, I got somewhat worried, because the offer was so advantageous to the West, that I thought the refusal meant the West was going to finish us off—it turned out that this was “dizziness from success” and idiotic. Accordingly, anti-American sentiment began to grow, a sentiment in favor of the sovereignization of our policy. The turning point was in '99, when NATO bombed Yugoslavia. At that time almost the entire elite, or the overwhelming part of it, turned away, understanding that it was impossible to come to an agreement with the West, but pro-American, pro-Western inertia existed for quite a long time. But after '99, there were almost no more chances. When Putin came in, he continued to maneuver, tried to maneuver, hoped or pretended to hope that it was still possible to agree on something. Maybe he did hope, because he basically wanted good relations with the West, but then there was the invasion of Afghanistan, Iraq, and most importantly the withdrawal from the ABM treaty. After this event—although Russia still continued to maneuver—but then, after this event it took on an irreversible character. Russia took a course of tough opposition to what it saw as the [kind of] policy which threatens the sovereignty of Russia [00:04:00].

GREK: In June 2001, Presidents Bush and Putin met for the first time in Slovenia. Some media interpreted this as a decisive positive moment, others that the personal chemistry between the presidents would not affect policy. How would you assess



this meeting? Are you aware of the administration's reaction to this meeting, and did you believe at the time that the personal relationship could make a difference?

KARAGANOV: I knew from my high-ranking friends that President Bush would look into the eyes of President Putin, and he would see a lot of good in him, and I reported that to Russia, so President Putin was ready—well, but we were ready for a good relationship. As for sincerity and chemistry, I strongly suspect that it was a kind of induced chemistry—if they want to be friends, let's be friends.

GREK: What do you think of the information about the eye contact ahead of time, was it a positive signal they sent ahead of time or was it random information?

KARAGANOV: No, I think it was a positive signal they sent in advance.

GREK: Less than three months after Putin and Bush first met, after Slovenia, 9/11 happened. What was the reaction of the Russians? Did 9/11 change Russia's attitude toward the U.S. in any way?

KARAGANOV: It interrupted a rising negative attitude toward the United States. There was a wave of sympathy, of course, although even then this negative mood was not broken, and very many commentators said that all this was intrigue, that the Americans themselves had organized it. But nevertheless the Russian leadership—Putin [00:06:00] tried—as I already said, almost to the end tried to maneuver and put Russian-American relations on a somewhat more positive track. This went on until 2002-2003.



GREK: How did the Kremlin assess the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq? Was there any scenario in which Russia would have cooperated with the U.S. instead of confronting it together with France and Germany?

KARAGANOV: There wasn't, indeed, there wasn't really because the relationship wasn't ruined yet—it was just deteriorating. As far as I know the Russian leadership—well, people like me—urged the American leadership not to do it, just as we urged the American leadership not to invade Afghanistan with ground forces. After it happened—first of all, everyone saw that this was open aggression; second, it was read as an attempt to consolidate U.S. hegemony in the world by violent means; and third, strong doubts were sown, which then turned into the belief that the American leadership was inadequate, because such mistakes must not be made.

GREK: If you put Afghanistan, NATO expansion, and missile defense on the scales, which was heavier?

KARAGANOV: It all overlapped with each other. Well, Afghanistan was not perceived as a hostile move because it was done simply—it was perceived [00:08:00] as an incredible folly, because bombing the Taliban was one thing, and an invasion of troops was totally—in the grave of empires, and even 20 years after the Soviet Union got burned there. Accordingly, I think it was precisely when the United States of America withdrew from the ABM treaty that the tipping point occurred. It was perceived by all of us as an open bid for an exit from strategic parity, the beginning of a race for strategic superiority. And although as far as I know Putin said, "Well, if



you want, if you want to, well, go ahead," because we didn't yet have the ability to resist firmly. And Bush said, "Do whatever you want," because he was sure that Russia couldn't do anything. But it was then, I believe, that instructions were given, despite Russia's relative poverty, to create new generations of weapons, which now preemptively depreciate the huge investment of the United States in building systems, all kinds of missile defense systems. And then this new generation, which was announced in 2018, which is now being deployed, makes all the investments that were made in missile defense senseless—well, future ones prohibitively expensive. If the Americans go for it, then it's "make my day"—it's an absolutely ruinous, senseless race [00:10:00].

GREK: The next important stage in relations was the beginning of the era of color revolutions—the color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. What do you think about them, about the nature of the color revolutions? How did the professional community react?

KARAGANOV: The professional community is quite clear there. It is clear that in these countries there were internal—the countries had declined, but they were also continuing to decline. Ukraine has been rolling down continuously since 1991, Kyrgyzstan there were waves, Georgia there were waves, but these are all failed states, as became apparent in the future. But then it was perceived as the direct intervention of the West, that these revolutions were allegedly made at the behest of the West. The expert community of course knew, first, the objective roots of these



revolutions, and second, that prior to these years Russia was practically not involved in any kind of serious policy in relation to these countries—we just let them go. We overlooked them, and so it was Russia's mistake. At the time, few wanted to admit it, so, of course—and besides, it was known that there really was interference, so it was very convenient to shift all the blame to the United States of America.

GREK: Bush met with Russian NGOs on Victory Day in May 2005 in Moscow. How do you think this meeting was received by most Russians? Was such a gesture constructive for U.S.-Russian relations against the backdrop of the revolutions? And, from your perspective, should the Bush administration [00:12:00] have gone further in promoting values, a la freedom of speech and so forth, and did this really affect the domestic situation in Russia?

KARAGANOV: Well, unfortunately, all American actions of this kind only worsen the situation with human rights and democracy, because the reaction is totally unequivocal—it stiffens. I took an active part in the human rights movement even before that, and in the 1980s I was a member of the Sakharov Committee. I remember meetings of this huge community where people took the floor and said, "We will defend human rights against America," because they believed, these people actually believed that with such gestures the Americans were only exacerbating the situation, and that's how it was. But it didn't have any serious effect on U.S.-Russian relations simply because the Americans had been doing it before. But after that, by the way, I think our president began to meet—or our ministers began to meet with



Western dissidents, which of course looked a little comical, but we do it much more effectively now.

GREK: Do you think the Kremlin noticed the signal, at least as U.S. colleagues claim, that Bush was ready to negotiate when he stopped criticizing Russia's domestic policy on NGOs? Was there such a signal, did you notice it?

KARAGANOV: No. So, naturally, we professionals noticed him, but he had no serious influence [00:14:00] anymore. America was written off as a potential partner, virtually written off.

GREK: President Putin made a famous speech at the Munich Security Conference in February 2007 in which he criticized the United States as a destabilizing power. Americans were surprised by this turn of rhetoric. The Bush administration acknowledged the Kremlin's disagreement on withdrawal from the ABM treaty, the invasion of Iraq, NATO enlargement, but U.S. officials still believe Putin doesn't understand the reason for these U.S. moves and they believe the disagreement either indirectly could have been resolved or could have been negotiated. How did you respond to this statement, and what do you think Putin was trying to do at the time? Do you agree with the statement that the disagreement was not that strong and that Putin overreacted?

KARAGANOV: No, from my point of view, Putin did what he had to do. He said, "Since you're going back to the Cold War, we're ready to fight"—this was first. The second thing he said—it was absolutely obvious to me—he said, "Guys, let's live amicably.



If you want, we are ready to fight—if you want a Cold War—but we are ready for constructive engagement if you change your policies dramatically, which we regard as imperial, hegemonic, as interference in domestic affairs and so on." And it was so aggressive because, by that time, there had already been two formal aggressions, and soon there would be another formal aggression in Libya. But Putin was not heard, first of all because [00:16:00] they were carried away by that victory, which by that time had already turned into a defeat—it was quite obvious, because by the mid-2000s America had already begun to lose on all fronts—but the mentality was still victorious in the West also.

Well, accordingly, the next year already formally, I think, the third Cold War began, when Bush tried—as far as it is known, behind the backs of allies—having agreed with Ukraine and Georgia to put the question to a vote of opening NATO in order to accept these two countries into NATO directly. It was supposed to happen at the Bucharest meeting. It was reported to our German and French neighbors, who became just furious. They blocked this action, but nevertheless the Americans won the question about the need for NATO expansion to these two countries. It remained on the agenda, but after that the collapse of relations began. Well, besides, then there was, as you know, the Georgian operation, the attack on semi-independent Georgian enclaves, the murders of Russian peacekeepers, and then Russia began to punch for real. One of the purposes of the tough operation in



Georgia was, of course, to show that NATO expansion into these countries is impossible [00:18:00].

GREK: Do you think the transition to the Medvedev-Obama era changed anything?

KARAGANOV: Very little changed, but Medvedev and his inner circle wanted to somehow come to an agreement, and the Americans were in a very funny intellectual state. Even America's top leaders at the time were still talking—well, the top diplomatic leaders thought that basically, Medvedev is—here are Medvedev's smiles, that this is serious. It was completely impossible to explain to them that this was not serious anymore. My American colleagues, I talked to them—particularly the official ones, they astonished me. They did not want to believe that they had lost Russia forever and that Russia was becoming their harsh adversary and then would ultimately ruin their positions.

GREK: As you said, Americans believed that the Kremlin was playing a zero-sum game. You also said that Putin was following a different logic and not playing a zero-sum game. Why do you think America was pursuing this idea of a zero-sum game? How did it affect the U.S.-Russia relationship?

KARAGANOV: Well, first of all the zero-sum game is an American concept that we totally reject, because we reject all American concepts, although we often use them. Well, it happened that, at some point, American concepts became universal—the zero-sum game is normal diplomacy, or normal international relations—but they absolutely [inaudible] did not play the zero-sum game. They played on the plus side



and only for their own interests. We did not play against America. We only played to restore [00:20:00] our sovereignty, our influence. And I know this clearly—I know that in all the discussions at that time there was no question of how to spite America, there was a question of how to protect and strengthen Russia. It might as well have been called a zero-sum game, if you consider that America wanted to still make Russia its satellite, to make it dependent, but I repeat, it was America who wanted to, and here it was a completely different situation.

GREK: Did people inside the Russian administration think that America was playing a zero-sum game?

KARAGANOV: Well that's just, again, just using this term, which makes absolutely, I repeat, absolutely no sense, because the zero-sum game is what they call tough diplomacy—you to me, I to you. It is not right, and in general it does not happen as a rule, unless we are talking about direct war, because there it is a zero-sum game, there whoever wins is right. But in international relations, as well as in relations between people, there is no such thing as zero-sum games. Most often there is a minus-minus game—here confrontation is a minus-minus game. Now we see that, yes, America has unleashed a war against China and Russia, of course it is not profitable for Russia—but the game is minus-minus. I think the U.S. is losing worse so far, by a factor of two or three, but that doesn't mean that we're winning—that's absolutely not the case. And so the whole policy of the Americans, it seems to me, has been here since they started pumping up confrontation—it has been a game of



minus-minus—America has not won it, America has lost it, but we haven't won it either.

GREK: To summarize the era [00:22:00] of Putin and Bush's relationship, a lot of people keep focusing on their personal relationship. They met often. Bush came to Russia many times, Putin went to visit him at his ranch. Could the personal relationship have changed anything potentially?

KARAGANOV: They could have had an impact—they certainly could not have changed anything, especially after Iraq and the withdrawal from ABM, but they could have nevertheless resulted in some sort of agreement. But they did not because of a number of circumstances. There was a growing distrust, and the good relations between the two presidents led to nothing, especially because I strongly suspect that Vladimir Vladimirovich did not appreciate very highly the intellectual capabilities of, and did not trust very much, his interlocutor, although he liked him a lot as a human being. I don't think he thought it would be possible to talk to him after all, especially because we saw what was already happening in the United States—the foreign and domestic political base of any president begins to erode. There were rifts, and we saw that in general it would probably not be possible to reach an agreement, but that does not mean that they did not try to come to some agreement. They still did, but there was little hope.

GREK: I will clarify one small question: one of the experts suggested that Putin wanted to be like Bush, to imitate him in some way.



KARAGANOV: Are you laughing or something?

GREK: I wanted to clarify.

KARAGANOV: Yes, yes. No, Putin is a very reserved man and very smart, and, of course, he never said anything, but I [00:24:00] have a pretty good idea—I know their conversations. He could not want to be like Bush, although of course he wanted to be the leader of the strongest power, and maybe still will be.

GREK: How would you identify the fundamental principles and interests that prevented them from reaching agreements, from coming to some kind of positive engagement, even though potentially the personal relationship between the two presidents could have made a difference?

KARAGANOV: Well, first of all we're very different countries, we're different spiritually, although they say all the time that Russia—Russians and Americans are similar. In general America is a unique country with a unique culture, like China—they and you are not Europeans, because Americans have lived in an absolutely distinct ideology on a gigantic, very rich island surrounded by oceans, so it's absolutely—it's simply very difficult to agree—we can agree with the Europeans, but with the Americans—. And secondly, the Americans truly, especially after the victory—as it seemed to them—in the Cold War, believed in their uniqueness, even more than usual. And Russia is an absolutely genetically sovereign country, and it never submitted to anybody in its history—except one small but important episode, when we were for 250 years a dominion of the Golden Horde—the Mongol Empire. After



that, it was such an inoculation, which works to this day, that we never submitted to anyone. Americans wanted to rule the whole world. These are absolutely incompatible things. Here, I don't even blame the Americans, because that's like blaming whites for being white and blacks for being black [00:26:00]—Americans are like that, but they will change. It doesn't mean they will be black or white, but I hope that now, right now we have them firmly—Russia and China, combined, of course, are superior to the United States in terms of their combined power. Well, I hope that in 10, 15, 20 years, America will not lose its uniqueness, but will get used to the fact that it is only one of equals. By the way, the time of this hegemonic giddiness of America was very short—it was only 1945 to 2007. Historically this is a very short period.

GREK: Thank you very much.

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