

U.S.-Russian Relations under Bush and Putin

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United States Ambassador to Russia, 2001-2005

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[Begin Transcription]

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

VERSHBOW: And I'm Alexander Vershbow. I'm a former U.S. ambassador to Russia, as well as to NATO and to South Korea, and ended my diplomatic career as the deputy secretary general of NATO. But I was George W. Bush's ambassador in Moscow from the summer of 2001 to the summer of 2005.

BEHRINGER: Thank you so much for being with us today, Ambassador Vershbow. I was wondering if you could begin by describing your background on U.S.-Russian relations and your various roles in the George W. Bush administration.

VERSHBOW: My background in U.S.-Russian relations goes back to my college days, or even earlier to when I started the Russian language in high school. I joined the Foreign Service in the late seventies and my career had a heavy focus on Russia all through the nearly four decades in which I worked as a professional diplomat.

I came to Moscow as the Bush administration's ambassador after completing a three-year assignment at NATO as the U.S. ambassador there. And during my time, both at NATO, and even before that, at the national security council in the mid-nineties during the Clinton administration, I worked a lot on Russia's relationship with NATO as well as other issues that involved dealing with Moscow, such as the crisis in former Yugoslavia, missile defense, and arms control, more broadly. So, I was a known quantity to the Russians when [00:02:00] I got to Moscow, but of course it was also the early

Putin administration. He'd been in office effectively about a year and a half when I arrived. And we were still not entirely sure who was Mr. Putin, as the question was often posed, and I think we got a clearer sense in the course of my four years there.

After Moscow, I served as President Bush's ambassador in South Korea, which was a change of pace for me. I think it was my background working on U.S. alliances and on nuclear arms control—that at least informed the decision to send me to South Korea—I was not an expert on Northeast Asia. After the Bush administration, I retired from the Foreign Service but continued to serve at the Pentagon as an assistant secretary of defense, and then, as I mentioned, as deputy secretary general of NATO as my last government job, ending in 2016.

BEHRINGER: And, as the Bush administration took office and throughout the first term, can you describe the various schools of thought, so to speak, on how the United States should approach Russia?

VERSHBOW: Yeah, I think there was a lot of continuity in the Bush administration's approach as compared to the Clinton administration, which I had worked for previously. I think there was a general expectation that we should continue on the same basic track of trying to develop a partnership with Russia, recognizing that, with the Cold War behind us, there were more and more issues on which we had at least an overlapping interest if not a shared interest. And, of course, Russia was still talking the talk about becoming a more open society, a democratic state, and we took to heart former president Yeltsin's assurances

[00:04:00] when he resigned and appointed Vladimir Putin that Putin was going to continue the effort to strengthen Yeltsin's legacy in turning Russia into a democratic state. As we'll probably discuss later in this interview, that hope and expectation proved to be misplaced. But I think, in the early years, there was a lot of a fertile ground for cooperation, and indeed, after 9/11, everything in the world raced into fast forward, and I think there was a hope that we could really cement a strategic partnership with Russia based on cooperation against the common threat of international terrorism.

I would add a slight caveat to what I just said because there were some people in the administration who had a slightly more jaundiced view of Russia—I would include former secretary Rumsfeld, some of the people who worked for him, like Douglas Feith, Paul Wolfowitz—as well as John Bolton at the State Department, who was undersecretary of state for international security. I think there was an attitude that Russia wasn't important anymore, it wasn't a great power anymore, we didn't need to work with Russia as a kind of sine qua non, as had been the case during the Cold War. And, in particular, we should shed a lot of the baggage, as they would call it, of the Cold War, including a reliance on arms control agreements, the argument being, if we're now partners, why do we need agreements on limiting our arms programs? We don't have arms control agreements with our allies, and if Russia's becoming an ally, it's time for them to let go of their obsession with arms control agreements. [00:06:00]

So there was a little bit of tension within the administration. I think the president shared the basic view that we should move beyond the Cold War, but I think he was a little bit more flexible in trying to address Russian concerns, including continuing to pursue arms control agreements and cooperation on security, even as we tried to shape a new agenda with threats like terrorism that once again united our countries in a way that the threat of Nazism did during World War II.

BEHRINGER: And during the first meeting between presidents Bush and Putin in Slovenia in June 2001, the two leaders established a strong rapport, and President Bush made the infamous remark about looking into Putin's eyes and seeing his soul. What was your view of Putin at this moment? And what did you think about that first meeting?

VERSHBOW: I wasn't ambassador in time to attend that first meeting. I only attended the second one, in July in Genoa during the G8 meeting. And I think, to be honest, I shared some of the skepticism in the media and among some of my colleagues in the administration about Putin's soul and whether the president really had detected something that few had detected before in Putin. And I think this is before John McCain said he looked into his eyes and saw three letters, KGB. But that was a fact, that Putin's background was very different from Boris Yeltsin's or Gorbachev's.

But there was still a hope that, even if he was not quite as committed in his heart to becoming part of the West and supporting [00:08:00] human rights and democracy, that Putin was a pragmatist, and I think that was what

impressed people at the beginning, that even if he wasn't going to be as much of a democrat, small d, as Yeltsin, he could be what we've seen in Russian history as an authoritarian modernizer who, being pragmatic, would work with us on a lot of issues of common concern.

My first glimpse of Putin in the flesh was in Genoa, as I said. I was asked to rush to post without taking my annual leave when I finished my job at NATO because they wanted me to be introduced to Putin. And he was indeed a very laid-back, very no-nonsense person in the conversation, although, when President Bush told him I was coming from NATO, Putin voiced a little skepticism saying, "Maybe there's too much NATO in this guy." But that meeting and other meetings with high-level visitors to Moscow over the next few years did impress me that Putin was both very smart, in command of just about any subject that you could talk about with him, but had a pragmatic streak on which we could build. There were issues even at the beginning, and some issues became more severe as time passed. But I think we still, in those four years that I was ambassador, were able to work with Russia even as we saw some erosion of the democratic progress that we had seen in the 1990s.

BEHRINGER: And in the answer to the second question, you mentioned the skeptics of arms control [00:10:00] in the administration. One of the purposes of that first meeting in Slovenia was to inform the Russians officially of Washington's intent to withdraw from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. Can you talk a little bit more about why the Bush administration went ahead with withdrawing

from the ABM Treaty and going ahead with missile defense, and how did the Europeans view missile defense and potential cooperation with the Russians?

VERSHBOW: The administration—and here there was no fundamental differences among the different agencies or different cabinet officials surrounding President Bush—were all in favor of increasing our reliance on missile defense. There was optimism about the developing technologies, and there was a sense that we should not base our security on the threat of mutual annihilation. This is the sentiment that Ronald Reagan expressed back in the '80s when he pursued the Strategic Defense Initiative, or Star Wars. And I think that most of the leading officials in the Bush administration still shared that sentiment, that if technology could enable us to protect ourselves against a nuclear missile attack, then we owed it to the American people to develop that. And I think there was some resonance for that position among allies but they were a bit more in line with the traditional arms control community in the United States that said that, if either one side or even if both sides were able to prevent a retaliatory strike by the other side, they might be tempted to launch a first strike, first offensive strike.

But the emphasis on the part of the Bush administration [00:12:00] was not to try to write a brand-new strategic paradigm. The focus in that period was on defending against more limited nuclear attacks that might be posed by North Korea, Iran, Iraq—countries with a ballistic missile capability, but not the kind of sophisticated delivery systems that Russia had, which could overwhelm any

defensive system that was technically feasible—then, or even today for that matter.

But I think that, in addition to trying to introduce defenses as a way of reducing vulnerability for our country and our allies, there was this sentiment I mentioned before about shedding Cold War baggage, and, in particular, there was a lot of skepticism on the part of some of the political figures in the administration, such as John Bolton, who felt that the career bureaucracy would inevitably try to revive arms control if the mold weren't completely smashed to smithereens. And so withdrawing from the ABM Treaty was a way of preventing any return to old-fashioned arms control as it had been practiced under both Republican and Democratic administrations going back to the 1970s. So this was, I think, part of President Bush's political platform, and indeed, as you mentioned, they decided to give Putin a heads-up in the Ljubljana meeting in the hopes of convincing him not to fight this but work with us to introduce a different form of strategic balance that wouldn't eliminate [00:14:00] the threat of retaliation but would introduce more defensive capabilities, particularly against the rogue states, who could be less susceptible to deterrence than responsible superpowers presumably are and will remain.

So, the Russians didn't like this. They tried to make the case that the ABM Treaty was still a cornerstone of stability, and we shouldn't cast it aside lightly. There was also suspicion that the U.S. talk about limited defenses was just talk, and that we, sooner or later, would be developing more comprehensive



defenses that would begin to jeopardize the Russians' assured second-strike capability. But I think the Russians heard directly from President Bush that he wasn't likely to change his mind on this, and, in the subsequent conversations, leading up to the final decision to withdraw from the treaty, the Russians didn't push back that hard. It was more regret than anger that we did it, and I think they understood that, at least in the next few years after the decision was made, there weren't any technologies readily available that would upset the balance in a fundamental way. So we got through that without a major crack-up in our relationship with Moscow.

BEHRINGER: And less than three months after that first meeting, 9/11 happened. How did 9/11 change the relationship, and what sorts of steps did Washington and Moscow take to cooperate on the issue of counterterrorism?

VERSHBOW: 9/11 did indeed change the relationship [00:16:00] in a serious way, and I think the Russians saw this as an opportunity to develop a much more sustainable partnership with the United States, even though they were fully aware of the asymmetry in power between the two countries.

But first I would mention as an aside that what was [the] most memorable thing after 9/11 was the outpouring of support and solidarity for the United States on the part of the Russian people in all walks of life. We saw thousands of people coming to the U.S. embassy in Moscow to lay flowers or wreaths or light candles in memory of the victims of 9/11. And the media coverage was very pro-American—"we're all Americans now, we're all New Yorkers now,"



that kind of rhetoric. And it was heartfelt. This is not something that the regime generated.

And I think we heard that kind of sympathy coming as well from government officials, even from people with hardline reputations who saw the writing on the wall that the whole international community was less safe if terrorists were able to strike in this way against our civilization. And we heard from Putin a lot of talk about how these attacks remind us that we are united by a common civilization. He was talking about common values and democracy as the best antidote to extremism and terrorist violence. So we were talking if not the same language, a similar language in those days.

And in terms of policy [00:18:00], Putin was of course very quick to call the White House, wanted to be the first to express solidarity with the United States, with President Bush, and to offer support. He met with political leaders in Moscow of all factions to get their advice, and some of them were very cautious, saying, “We shouldn't help the Americans. They're still not quite our friends yet, despite the cooperation in the 1990s.” But Putin basically overruled that and said, “This is a serious threat to all of us. This is the time that we have to reach out to the Americans.” And he put the hardliners, including the Communist Party leaders, in their place. And there were definitely tangible things that he offered to do. Those may not have amounted to all that much, but it was still symbolically important when he said that he was instructing the Russian intelligence services to share information on al-Qaeda and on Taliban networks in Afghanistan and South Asia. And there were other moves that I

think were meant to show his good faith, which weren't directly related to the 9/11 attacks, but he closed down a listening post in Cuba at a place called Lourdes and also closed down a Russian naval base in Vietnam at Cam Ranh Bay—particularly, given the history of the Vietnam War, was a symbolic gesture. They were giving up one of the spoils of our defeat in Vietnam.

So, working groups on counterterrorism were established. Intensified [00:20:00] diplomatic contacts took place. In the end, the Russians didn't share much real worthwhile intelligence with us. Their special services still didn't trust us. Some of the knowledge that they had from their time in Afghanistan proved to be very dated and didn't really help us in planning to take down al Qaeda and the Taliban towards the end of 2001. But still there was hope on both sides that we really had an opportunity to establish the kind of strategic partnership that people had only dreamed of during the 1990s. And I saw my role as ambassador was both to explain U.S. policies as they unfolded, but to talk up the idea of a genuine strategic partnership, drawing upon some of the language that President Bush had used in his first meetings with Putin about a new strategic relationship, putting completely behind us the legacy of the Cold War.

BEHRINGER: And in May, the following year, President Bush made his first visit to Moscow and signed the SORT¹ arms control agreement and also discussed a broader strategic framework. Do you remember anything specific about that summit, or can you describe how it proceeded?

¹ The Strategic Offensive Reduction Treaty.

VERSHBOW: Yeah. It was a very short meeting, mainly convened to sign the treaty and—a very interesting, still-interesting declaration on a new strategic relationship, or a joint statement on a new strategic relationship. The interesting thing about [00:22:00] the SORT treaty is that it was doggedly opposed when it was first broached six, seven months before the signature by the Russians, particularly by the Pentagon. As I was saying before this, this notion that we don't need arms control agreements anymore, the Russians need to kind of grin and bear it, we're just simply not gonna indulge them in that way—this is a case where Secretary Powell, going directly to President Bush, convinced him that Putin needed this in terms of domestic politics, that it wouldn't constrain us in any unilateral ways, but it would achieve one of the president's own goals, which is deeper cuts in offensive nuclear weapons.

So it proved to be one of the most unusual arms control agreements of all time—I sometimes call it a postmodern arms control agreement. It was only about 500 words, two pages. It had none of the hundreds of pages of annexes and definitions and verification provisions of classic arms control agreements. But it did leave in effect the START I² agreement of 1991, which did have the verification and compliance mechanism, so it was a logical way of proceeding. But this agreement was negotiated very quickly. I remember Secretary Rumsfeld flew into Moscow just for like a one-hour airport meeting with the Russian defense minister and flew off again in the run-up to the completion of

² The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty.

the treaty. And John Bolton was the main architect of the treaty itself. And it did improve on START I [00:24:00] and the never-ratified START II agreement by negotiating deeper cuts.

The administration officials at the time actually put more focus in their briefings to the press on the joint statement on the new strategic relationship, which was a fairly forward-looking document talking about how the United States and Russia were allied—didn't quite say we were allies—but did say we were allied in fighting terrorism and that we were already partners in dealing with some of the newer threats of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the like. And it did establish a standing mechanism of foreign and defense ministers to serve as the steering group for the security dimension of this new strategic relationship.

So it was a positive affair. I think there was a sense of satisfaction that we were beginning to turn the page on the Cold War, and that 9/11 had been the catalyst for a significant leap forward in U.S.-Russian cooperation. I think there was a lot of regret on the part of people like John Bolton when President Obama went back to the classic kind of arms control agreement with the New START agreement—New START treaty of 2010, but that's a topic for another day.

BEHRINGER: So then, later in 2002, you have the run-up to the Iraq War, and then the Iraq War starts in the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. How did the war affect relations between the White House and the Kremlin?

VERSHBOW: Well, it was a somewhat rocky period in the relationship because the Russians were definitely opposed to the war, opposed to [00:26:00] the toppling of one of their traditional clients, and particularly opposed to the idea that we could launch an invasion of Iraq without authorization from the United Nations Security Council. And I think, over time, some of the Russians' objections became more magnified in the Russian narrative and contributed to the real disillusionment that we saw from Putin in the famous speech to the Munich Security Conference in 2007, when he basically declared partnership with the West to have been a failure and disrespectful of Russian interests.

But that was then. At the time of the war, I think Putin saw it in his interest to kind of contain the damage from the Iraq War. He kind of lined up with the Germans and the French and sort of let them do the heavy lifting in criticizing the United States, which is convenient, if unusual, for the Russian leader. But he took more of a sorrow than anger posture himself, and it didn't lead to that much friction or disruption in the relationship. High-level meetings continued, the personal relationship between Bush and Putin, which remained very friendly right from the start, continued to be friendly. Bush came to St. Petersburg for a big party that Putin was throwing for the 300th anniversary of St. Petersburg as the Russian imperial capital, and life went on.

Now, the Russians did show their displeasure in indirect ways, for example, by basically ignoring a lot of our complaints that some Russian companies [00:28:00] were—in the early stages of the war were shipping technologies to the Saddam military that could be used to jeopardize the safety of American

pilots or coalition pilots, things like GPS jammers, which could disrupt our ability to get an accurate picture of what's going on, on the battlefield. The embassy's role, my role, was to deliver these *démarches*, scold the Russians for allowing their companies to do these sorts of things, and the Russians nodded and said, "we'll see what we can do," and did nothing. So it wasn't all sweetness and light, but there's still a determination on both sides not to let the Iraq War derail the positive cooperation that was developing in the relationship.

And it happened around the same time as other steps to actually deepen cooperation with NATO. There was, in 2002, a summit in Rome that upgraded the dialogue between NATO and Russia by establishing a NATO-Russia Council—that was something Putin seemed personally very satisfied with. And there was continued work together on counterterrorism. So, as I said, the relationship wasn't seriously derailed.

But, at the same time, where problems began to crop up, and I think where Putin became maybe less mindful of U.S. concerns, was in some domestic developments. Remember, it was 2003 when Russian oil tycoon [00:30:00] Mikhail Khodorkovsky was arrested at the end of October. And this was just a few weeks after the summit between Bush and Putin at Camp David, where it seemed like everything was back on track, and the Russians seemed ready to allow Khodorkovsky to sell interest in his oil company to either Chevron or ExxonMobil. It looked like the economic relationship was going to start taking off, but then, just a few weeks later, Mr. Khodorkovsky was ripped off of a plane in Krasnoyarsk, and ultimately, he saw his company expropriated and himself



put in jail for nearly a decade. So the Russians paid us back indirectly without making a big stink about the Iraq War itself.

BEHRINGER: And also between 2003 and 2005, the color revolutions in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan are happening. How would you differentiate between them in terms of their significance, and in what ways did the Bush administration support the revolutions both before and after they occurred?

VERSHBOW: Yeah, this was, I think, one of the most important issues that contributed to the downturn in the relationship. I would say the color revolutions were a far more significant factor than the Iraq War or NATO expansion—at least NATO expansion up until that point, including the Baltic states joining NATO in 2004. But the color revolutions were seen as both a threat to Russian ability to dominate [the] former Soviet space, but also the [00:32:00] underlying internal conflicts that led to these color revolutions, at least initially, was seen by Moscow as a source of leverage—that they could play different actors off against each other, particularly in Georgia and Ukraine, in order to strengthen Russia's domination over these countries. But as time passed and as these revolutions led to the installation of pro-Western governments, the Russian attitude hardened significantly.

Now you asked about which were the most significant—clearly, even back in 2003, 2004, Ukraine was the most important issue, and Putin was already, I think, talking some of the talk that you hear today about Ukrainians and Russians being one people, at it being inconceivable that Ukraine could go West, could join NATO, could cease to be a junior partner of Russia.

Georgia was less important, but it became a cause célèbre because Putin became quite irritated by Georgian democratic leader Mikheil Saakashvili, who was constantly taunting the bear and ignoring warnings, and Putin suspected, I think without real evidence, that the Georgians, even before Saakashvili, but particularly under Saakashvili, were allowing Chechen fighters to train in some disputed mountain territories along the border and to infiltrate into Chechnya, undermining Russia's efforts to pacify that renegade province.

So Kyrgyzstan, less important, but I think [it was] seen as a worrisome warning sign that even countries with no [00:34:00] democratic tradition could be susceptible to Western ideas and democratization, which ultimately Putin saw as weakening Russia's ability to control these countries. The more that they had governments accountable to their own people, the less Moscow could dictate the terms.

But, as I said, Ukraine was the most serious issue for the Russians, and the Orange Revolution in 2004 actually had its origins in something which Americans now know quite well: interference in an election. The Russians were quite brazen about it, sending planeloads of political advisors and pollsters and other shady characters to try to tip the election in favor of Viktor Yanukovich. And the methods were so transparent and some of the stuffing of ballot boxes so well-documented that it led to the spontaneous rebellion by the Ukrainian people and ultimately forced Russia to agree that Ukraine would need to rerun the election. In the rerun, early in 2005, the reformer Viktor Yushchenko defeated Yanukovich.

This was seen by Putin as a betrayal by President Bush and by the U.S. of what he thought was an implicit understanding that they would help us in fighting terrorism and even facilitate military operations in Afghanistan, and we would in turn agree that Russia had a basic sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union and that we would not challenge Russian primacy there. There never was such an understanding. [00:36:00] Although I think the Bush administration wasn't actively involved in instigating the events—the Russians, as happened again in 2013-2014, actually pushed their friends in Ukraine to take steps which actually sparked the Orange Revolution in 2004 and which sparked the Maidan Revolution in 2013. But Putin doesn't see it that way. He blames it all on Western plots and the CIA and illegal payments to Ukrainian politicians who couldn't possibly understand democracy—therefore, it must be the Americans' fault.

So I remember hosting Russian parliamentarians at my residence in Moscow telling me how Putin was furious. He [says] the United States has stolen Ukraine from Russia, and there would be payback. And I think this is when Putin became much more seized with blocking any further NATO enlargement—certainly to Ukraine and Georgia, which were already actively seeking membership at that time. And I think it was the suspicions of Western intentions more generally that we were using democracy to sow anti-Russian sentiment, using democracy to create regimes that will be less malleable, less susceptible to Russian influence, and that if we succeeded in places like Ukraine, we would try it next in Russia itself.

This is about the survival of the regime, and it was therefore an existential threat from Russia's point of view. I don't think we realized the depth of feeling right away, but I think it became clear, particularly in that speech to the Munich Security Conference, [00:38:00] that Russia was going to take a much more pugnacious approach to preserving its dominance of the so-called “near abroad,” a term that in and of itself implies that these countries are not really foreign, they're Russia's property—and “hands off, America, hands off, NATO, or else.”

BEHRINGER: And soon after the Georgian Revolution, Secretary Powell visited Tbilisi, and then he came to Moscow. I was wondering if you had any recollections about that visit, but then also, in a broader sense, were there any differences between Secretary Powell's approach or interactions with the Russians compared to then-NSA and future-Secretary Condoleezza Rice's?

VERSHBOW: Yeah. I only have somewhat hazy memories of that particular visit. We saw Secretary Powell a lot, but I think this was less than a year after the Rose Revolution in Georgia, before the dramatic events in Ukraine at the end of 2004, And I think that Powell came away impressed by Saakashvili, and he was the genuine article when it came to reform and democratization—and, in the subsequent years, Saakashvili actually did carry out perhaps the most impressive set of reforms of any of the former Soviet republics, except maybe the Baltic states. So I think Powell shared his impressions of Saakashvili and urged the Russians not to overreact. And I think that, at that point, the Russians were philosophical about the change. Shevardnadze, who had been a

carryover from Soviet times and [00:40:00] ruled a little less democratically back in Georgia than he did when he was a sidekick of Mikhail Gorbachev, was seen as having outlived his usefulness.

And so I think the Russians were, at that point, ready to give Saakashvili the benefit of the doubt. But he did provoke them a lot, and he did make clear that he wanted to recover some of the territories that, even at that time, before the war in 2008, were de facto under separatist control, and Saakashvili was looking for opportunities to bring them back in unilaterally if possible, by negotiation if not.

But—and I think as I mentioned, there was the Russian concern about Georgia's complicity in allowing Chechen fighters to cross from Georgian territory into Chechnya. And I think there, the administration's message—I assume it was among Secretary Powell's talking points, though I can't remember exactly—that the U.S. was trying to help the Georgians police these borderlands that may have been exploited by Chechen fighters. And we had established the Train and Equip Program to help the Georgian armed forces more effectively control their own territory, and we were trying to convince the Russians that this was a good thing. I don't think we persuaded them because they saw training Georgian forces as inherently a hostile act. And of course, some of the training that we did with the Georgians was to send Georgian troops to Iraq, which didn't please the Russians very much either.

Now you asked about Secretary Powell and his successor—his partner as national security advisor and successor as secretary—Condoleezza Rice.

[00:42:00] I think they had similar views overall on the relationship, I think Powell recognized that Rice was the real Russian expert and deferred to her in terms of overall strategy towards Russia and even on day-to-day oversight of the bilateral relationship—so that was very much centered in the NSC and the White House rather than at the State Department. They had their differences on specific issues, such as the invasion of Iraq, where of course Powell was desperately trying to convince the president not to go through with it, with his—you know, the famous Pottery Barn rule and other arguments. But I think it's fair to say that Powell's engagement with Russia was largely on third-country issues. We had to deal with the Russians on Iraq, on Iran, on the Middle East peace process, on Afghanistan and support for the frontline states against the Taliban. So Powell sort of handled that, and Rice dealt with sort of the direct engagement with Putin.

It was during this period—I can't remember the exact time, I think it was 2003—where a Special Dialogue Group—the SDG—was set up to try to strengthen ties between the White House and NSC on our side and the Presidential Administration on the Russian side. So to make up for the somewhat perfunctory nature of diplomatic exchanges between foreign ministries—Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov was not seen as a heavyweight or a real mover and shaker in shaping Russian policy—so the hope was that by engaging directly from the White House to the Presidential Administration of Moscow, [00:44:00] particularly when Alexander Voloshin was the chief of staff, and when Steve Hadley, as deputy national security advisor, was paired



up with a guy named Oleg Chernov at the Russian security council, it was hoped that we could kind of overcome some of the suspicions and missed opportunities that were beginning to characterize the relationship as the second half of the president's term unfolded. And this SDG was continued when Rice moved to being secretary of state and Hadley took over the reins. But it fizzled out a little bit—maybe not just a little bit, fizzled out, period—when Dmitry Medvedev replaced Voloshin as the chief of staff, as the head of the presidential administration when Voloshin resigned over the arrest of Khodorkovsky, and Medvedev didn't seem particularly interested in playing this role—he was a fairly shy interlocutor in those days. And so this Special Dialogue Group kind of waned in importance at this point.

But Powell did weigh in on of key issues when he was needed and when the embassy would try to spin him up. For example, as I mentioned earlier, the SORT treaty—maybe because he was a traditionalist who, as a retired military officer, understood that arms control is good for limiting the other side, creating more predictability, which military planners crave. And so he made the case for a legally binding treaty—and I think he tried to engage the Russians on other issues that he was working on, whether it was the Iran nuclear issue, which [was] already hot back then, or North Korea's nuclear [00:46:00] programs—and achieved modest results, but he didn't prove to be a pivotal player in the relationship.

BEHRINGER: And moving to the issue of NATO expansion, what was your position and background on NATO expansion, and why did the Bush administration elect to go with the approach they did? Which people sometimes call—

VERSHBOW: The big bang.

BEHRINGER: —the big bang approach.

VERSHBOW: Yeah. Well, I was very much involved in the early stages of developing policy on NATO enlargement back in the early nineties, particularly when I moved from State over to the National Security Council in 1994. And President Clinton made clear that he wanted to move forward sooner rather than later on enlargement, that he wanted to reassure the Russians that this wasn't directed against them, but he thought he could use his close personal relationship with Yeltsin to square the circle—to be able to bring in the former Warsaw Pact countries once they proved themselves worthy of membership, but in the process overturning the results of the Yalta Conference of 1945 and these countries' consignment to living behind the Iron Curtain while at the same time creating a strategic partnership with Russia as an equally important pillar of a new security system.

So I worked very closely on the overall strategy—this idea of a two track approach, enlarging NATO but establishing this strategic partnership with Russia [00:48:00]—and I was particularly involved in the negotiation of the NATO-Russia Founding Act, the agreement that was signed in 1997 as a way of establishing a permanent NATO-Russia dialogue and a program of cooperation. And, most importantly, this document included some security

assurances—for example, that NATO would not put nuclear weapons on the territory of any new member state and an assurance that NATO would not deploy substantial combat forces anywhere where they weren't already deployed in the old member states as a way of showing the Russians that this [was] not going to pose a military threat to Russia.

So this led to the first round of enlargement in 1997, the Madrid Summit, which then brought in three new members—Poland, the Czech Republic, and Hungary—in 1999. And so the debate on what to do next was already underway before President Bush took office. But the administration, I think, basically bought the overall strategy that they had inherited from Clinton, which had been adopted by NATO quite enthusiastically. And they weighed whether to continue in an incremental way, recognizing that the remaining candidates were of varying states of readiness and varying states of stability when it came to democracy and reforms. But, at the end of the day, there was judgment that the most important reforms were more the responsibility of the European Union, [00:50:00] which was also pursuing a gradual enlargement process, and that we shouldn't be too strict, but seize the opportunity to bring in seven more countries who were all pretty much in a similar level of readiness. This was Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia, and the three Baltic states. The three Baltic states were the controversial element of this. There was a concern that the Russians would see this as a humiliation, that three countries that, even though it was involuntary, were part of the Soviet Union, that this could be seen as crossing a red line.



But, at the end of the day, the Russians took it relatively stoically. They weren't happy. They didn't praise us. But they relied on the fact that these security assurances that we had adopted in the first round would stay in effect, so that they didn't have to worry about any massive buildup of conventional forces in Lithuania or Poland or Romania. And I think they also, in their hearts, knew that the Baltic states had been absorbed by the Soviet Union as part of the Hitler-Stalin Pact, the Molotov-Ribbentrop secret protocol, and that they always were really part of the West and sort of unfairly taken hostage by the Soviet Union. So to many people's surprise, the second round of enlargement went through without much rancor, without any histrionics, on the Russians' part. The seven were invited in 2002 at the Prague Summit and joined in 2004.

Where NATO enlargement did come a cropper [00:52:00] was what happened after the big bang. As we were discussing before, the Ukrainians and Georgians made very clear that they were interested in joining NATO and, of course, NATO's position was always that the open door applies to any European [state], even Russia. So, particularly after the Orange Revolution, when the more pro-Western leaders took power in Kiev, there was increasing pressure on Washington to take the next step, at least—not necessarily to bring them into NATO, but to establish what's called a Membership Action Plan—for Ukraine, and Georgia wanted the same thing. They were arguing that they're already behaving like allies, were sending troops to Iraq, later to Afghanistan—where Georgia in particular did pay a heavy price in terms of casualties—that

they were kind of acting like allies, and we should make them real allies as soon as possible.

So allies were divided on this, even though they paid lip service to the idea that the open door is for everybody, and, when the Bush administration in the last year began to take up the idea of Membership Action Plans, this stirred up tremendous resistance, particularly on the part of Germany and France. We felt that we would be creating a needless confrontation with Russia, plus taking on responsibilities for defending countries which we were not in a position to defend unless we substantially beefed up our military forces in Europe.

But—I was already [00:54:00] in Seoul, so I wasn't a direct participant in this, but I've talked to many people who were—and I think this, unfortunately, became seen as a legacy project for the Bush administration in its final year. There was perhaps excessive optimism that we could bring the allies along. We could convince them that the Membership Action Plan isn't the same thing as membership. Therefore, don't worry about it—Russians'll get over it just like they did previous moves on NATO enlargement. But that proved not to be the case.

Putin, who was actually in attendance at the 2008 summit in Bucharest in April of that year, when Bush pushed for the Membership Action Plan decision—Putin was in attendance at the NATO-Russia Council meeting at summit level and made it very clear that he strongly objected to Ukraine and Georgian membership. This is when he started fulminating that, “Ukraine isn't even a real country, George, don't you understand that?” And, in the end, there



was a deadlock among allies. The administration had not done its homework in getting allies on board before the summit took place, which is good tradecraft—you never go into a summit, if you can avoid it, with the outcome undetermined. They hadn't done that. And then a compromise was struck, which may have made matters worse. [It] wasn't seen at the time, but Condi Rice, Angela Merkel, and Nicolas Sarkozy put their hats on as drafting officers and came up with a formula that said to the world, “We agree today that Ukraine and Georgia will be members of NATO one day.”

And, for Putin, that was as bad, if not worse, [00:56:00] than a Membership Action Plan. And within a few weeks—or a few months of the Bucharest Summit, Russian forces were invading Georgia, both to repel what they saw as a provocation by Saakashvili in trying to take back one of the occupied provinces, but really it was a move to prevent Georgia from joining NATO by putting a big chunk of its territory under Russian occupation. And then, to add insult to injury, they recognized these separatist provinces as independent states.

So the NATO enlargement question, I think is sometimes blamed for all our travails with Russia since the end of the Cold War, but I would isolate the problem on tackling the Ukraine and Georgia issue when it wasn't ripe for agreement in NATO, and, therefore, there was no way we were going to sell this to the Russians. Whether there was a better way, another two-track approach—where we would do something to upgrade the Russian relationship

as we move forward with Ukraine and Georgia—we can only speculate, but that's not the way it was played out in 2008.

BEHRINGER: Just to follow up on that real quickly, and to invite you to speculate a little bit more if you will, some people in our interviews have taken the approach that if the MAP, the Membership Action Plan, had been offered to Georgia, that would've been some type of deterrent—so in effect, the way the summit played out, it didn't go far enough, and that Putin saw kind of an opening to invade Georgia. What do you think of that assessment in general?

VERSHBOW: Yeah, I'm skeptical of that argument. [00:58:00] The bottom line is that the Membership Action Plan did not provide any additional security protection for Georgia, nor did it implicate the alliance in any additional responsibility to come to the defense of Georgia. It was largely a procedural step, but unfortunately it had the word membership in it, and that's what got Putin very excited. In practice, NATO has taken the position since that time that both Georgia and Ukraine have all the tools that they need to pursue membership. They have a council with NATO—the NATO-Georgia Commission and the NATO-Ukraine Commission. They have an Annual National Program. They've been made enhanced partners of NATO when it comes to interoperability. They're invited to attend all kinds of high-level consultations and to share certain classified information. So, there's nothing that they have now that they would only get with a MAP.

But NATO has now, because of the discord at the Bucharest Summit, said more explicitly that you can't get to membership without passing through

MAP. You may not get anything substantively, but politically it's now a precursor that you must go through. And that's why Ukraine keeps striking out in trying to get MAP. The latest example was President Zelensky, before the June NATO summit this year, he pushed hard for MAP and didn't get it. President Biden was quite gruff, saying, "They're not ready for this, and the other allies don't yet agree."

So I don't think it would have deterred Russia. I think it may not have led to exactly the same chain of events that we [01:00:00] saw as a result of the compromise formula that they will be members. Again, we can't say. But I think the bottom line was Putin saw the West as not ready to respect Russia's self-declared sphere of influence, and he showed us that he was prepared to use force to back it up. I think the bigger mistake on the West's part was not seeing this as a kind of watershed event, but instead, under President Obama, doing the Reset less than a year after the invasion of Georgia. And that may have sent a kind of at least a flashing green light to Putin that, if something similar arises in Ukraine, he can use force again with impunity, and we're stuck now trying to figure out how to develop more leverage to get the Russians to get out of Eastern Ukraine, and, of course, even more challengingly, to give back occupied Crimea.

I think that will happen someday, just as it took 40 years for the Baltic states to regain their freedom and now to cement that freedom by being members of NATO. I think it'll happen, but maybe after Putin has departed the scene, which could be 2036 at the earliest. [laughter]

BEHRINGER: And going back to the first—well, really the first Bush administration, and then continuing to the second—one of the major engagement initiatives was trying to bring Russia into the WTO, the World Trade Organization. What types of obstacles did Russia face that made it take so long for Russia to gain accession, [01:02:00] and then what types of assistance did the Bush administration offer for helping speed the process along?

VERSHBOW: Yeah, we were quite sincere, I think, in trying to bring the Russians into WTO, as part of the broader strategy of getting the Russians lashed up more with Western institutions as a way of cementing the cooperative side of the relationship. And I think we saw it as a sine quo non for expanding this—what was then still a very insubstantial trade relationship because the Russians had all kinds of protectionist policies in terms of tariffs on agricultural products, on automobiles and aircraft. They had a big problem with protection of intellectual property rights, particularly with piracy of DVDs and CDs and computer software—most Russian companies used bootleg software. So these are among the big issues.

Of course, the fundamental problem—the lack of real rule of law and a reliable court system that could help investors protect their property rights and their investments and resolve disputes based on objective factors other than what the Russians call “telephone justice,” when the judge gets a call and is told how to rule. The embassy was not at the center of this, but we did have representatives from U.S. Trade Representative’s office visit frequently, and a lot of the talks trying to get the Russians to address these obstacles took place

at very high levels. There were some programs [01:04:00] of judicial assistance trying to help them rewrite their criminal procedure codes and other legislation that could make them more prepared for meeting WTO standards.

But I think after the Yukos Affair, after the arrest of Khodorkovsky, the momentum began to flag. And so, at least during my four years, we never really got close to a breakthrough. And, of course, these fundamental issues of corruption are still with us, and I think that there's sort of a sense of disappointment that, even now that the Russians are in the WTO, that this is not a rule-based country where foreign businesses and investors can operate with tremendous confidence.

But the most direct experience I had on an issue that was a hot one in the WTO negotiations was relating to, of all things, chicken imports. American chicken had become very popular in the nineties when we sent a lot of surplus chicken supplies as aid during some of the difficult days after the fall of the Soviet Union, and these were nicknamed after President Bush 41 as "Bush legs." And it was a positive term. During my time as ambassador, the Russians started creating phony disputes over salmonella outbreaks and other alleged sanitary violations basically to protect crooked domestic food producers or other importers bringing in supplies from other markets. So, the most unusual [01:06:00] negotiation of my diplomatic career, which has included participating in the strategic arms talks and conventional arms control talks, was negotiating a protocol on chicken imports with the chief veterinary officer of Russia, who was a very feisty interlocutor. But after we reached agreement,



he had a nervous breakdown, so I don't know whether it was something I did. But we got those Bush legs back in on the market. [laughter] This prepared me for an equally challenging issue of reopening the beef market in South Korea when I was ambassador there. But that too is another story. [laughter]

BEHRINGER: Coming to the end of your tenure in Moscow—in February 2005, at their summit in Bratislava, President Bush expressed concerns over President Putin's restrictions on political and economic freedom inside Russia, and Stephen Hadley has called this moment “a low point” in U.S.-Russian relations up to that moment. Were you surprised by the rocky meeting between Bush and Putin, and, in general, do you think that the Bush administration struck the right balance between pushing back against Russia's human rights and democracy record and trying to find areas of mutual cooperation?

VERSHBOW: Yeah, I—first, let me say I wasn't actually at the Bratislava meeting, ambassadors usually didn't go to summits in third countries. But I was very pleased the president did do what he did. I had urged him—in particular, I remember having my one big chance for a one-on-one with President Bush for five minutes while we were waiting for Putin to arrive at Camp David in October 2003. [01:08:00] And I was already talking in my public remarks about the growing values gap between Russia and the United States and warning that Russian backsliding on human rights and on the rule of law was going to be both a political problem in the United States—stir up congressional opposition to cooperation, as we've seen at many times in the history of U.S.-Russian relationship—but also that it was going to be a setback for Russia's own



development as a stable, prosperous country; that without checks and balances, without accountability of leaders before their own people, without a robust and vibrant independent media, Russia would never achieve its full potential. So the Russians weren't too keen on all the speeches I gave on that, but I was very glad that President Bush, who I think saw the issue as I did—as part of his Freedom Agenda—did tackle this issue more frontally than he had in any of his previous summit meetings.

So I would say it may have been an unpleasant meeting, but I don't think it was the low point because I think it was an important effort to set the record straight and to warn the Russians of the consequences of being kind of oblivious to our concerns. But 2005 was already after the Orange Revolution and other events, which were contributing to this paranoia in Russia that the U.S. was promoting regime change, was trying to deprive Russia of its dominant position in the former Soviet space and using democracy to that end. So it was, as many would have predicted, a tough conversation. [01:10:00] But I think it did right the balance in our overall strategy, and I think that it didn't do irreparable damage. There [were] still cooperative activities that were still going on—counterterrorism, developing the NATO-Russia partnership. So it wasn't a watershed event, but I think it did, as I said, right the balance, which was a little off-kilter up until that point.

BEHRINGER: Did you sense, as the administration went into its second term, that there was any change in the U.S. approach toward Russia?

VERSHBOW: Well I think there was not a fundamental change. I think as the

Freedom Agenda became more prominent globally, these issues became more prominent in the high-level dialogue, which again I think was a good thing. It's one thing for the U.S. ambassador to raise these issues. It's another thing for the president of the United States to raise them. So that's a good thing. But I think there was still a sense of frustration that domestic issues were impinging more and more on our ability to cooperate internationally, and that one of the main problems was we weren't able to get to Putin directly enough and dispel some of the slanted information we believed he was getting from his intelligence services and his own sort of Cold War instincts, instincts to mistrust the West and to be suspicious of the influence of Western ideas on his ability to keep a lid on developments inside Russia.

So, I remember, one of the last exchanges I had with Washington as ambassador in the first half of 2005 [01:12:00] was a kind of a discussion on, how can we develop additional ways to actually get to Putin, to have more high-level visits—not summits, but visits by the secretary of state or by the national security advisor, which would invariably get an audience with Putin, maybe not an all-day audience, but enough to kind of create opportunities to introduce constructive ideas and to dispel some of the disinformation that clearly was clouding his perception of U.S. policy. So that was, I think, a lively discussion. I think that paved the way for my successor, Ambassador Bill Burns, to try to develop a renewed network of contacts on the inside with Putin advisors and to create opportunities for engaging with Putin himself.



But the basic policy didn't change dramatically, even after the Georgia War—the main exception to that, of course, was the push on Georgia and Ukraine NATO membership, but, I think, as I was leaving in 2005, that was still not yet as hot a potato as it became in 2008.

BEHRINGER: And then, as you mentioned, you became ambassador to South Korea—couldn't pass up the opportunity to ask a question about that. How did the Russians see the threat from North Korea, and can you describe their role in the Six-Party Talks and efforts to halt Pyongyang's nuclear program?

VERSHBOW: Yeah, this was one of the areas where we were fairly encouraged by the Russians' willingness to be helpful. They were always seen as being very [01:14:00] solid when it came to nuclear non-proliferation. As a nuclear power, the Russians felt the circle of nuclear powers should be kept exactly as it is. And so that was, I think, a shared position. And at the same time, they always liked to be at the table in any multilateral process, again it kind of boosted their sense of importance, as at least a former superpower, that they were—just as if we had tried to include them in the nineties in the contact groups that dealt with the crisis in Bosnia and later in Kosovo—they liked being part of the Six-Party Talks. And I think, while they didn't have that much leverage—the North Koreans are much more dependent on China than they are on Russia—it sometimes could be tactically useful to work with the Russians as a united front to get the North Koreans to agree. And indeed, in 2005, just after I transferred to my new post in Seoul, there was this breakthrough in September 2005, a joint statement of the six parties, which laid out a framework for

denuclearization, for peace on the Korean peninsula, ending the Korean War once and for all, economic development, diplomatic normalization—which still provides a template for a settlement that could happen, even now that the North, unfortunately, actually has nuclear weapons, which they didn't before 2006. But again, it was an example of the Russians playing a modest but useful role in one of these international issues, which kind of added a little bit of ballast to the overall relationship.

BEHRINGER: And I have two [01:16:00] more broad questions, and then, if we have time, I'll return to maybe a more specific question, but the first kind of broad question looking back is, did the Bush administration misjudge Putin in the beginning as a leader committed to some type of democratic reform and cooperative relationship with the West, or do you think it's a matter of that he changed over the course of his first two terms in office? And, conversely, do you think Putin misjudged Bush in some way or misjudged the Americans?

VERSHBOW: I would say that it's a little of both. I think there was an element of misjudgment on our side of just how much an extension of Yeltsin Putin was. Now, we had already had a year and a half of experience before I arrived on the scene, and we had seen steps showing that Putin was a lot more nostalgic for the Soviet past—remember, he changed the national anthem as one of, back to the Soviet national anthem—although, different words—in his first year in office. And he made certain off-color jokes about [how the] KGB detachment is back in place and things like that, which were a little creepy. But there still was a sense that Yeltsin wouldn't have chosen him as a successor if he didn't have at

least some confidence that Putin would continue the basic path that Yeltsin had charted out.

And we [believed] in part because of 9/11, but I think even without 9/11, [that] Putin was clearly in a much more pragmatic frame of mind when he first came into office. Maybe he was only paying lip service to Western values and democratization [01:18:00] and civil society, terms that he uses, even uses to this day, but doesn't probably fully understand what they mean. But I think he made very clear early on that it was in part very transactional for him, you know, he was prepared to continue to work within our basic framework and work on issues in common, including working with NATO, if Russia got something in return from this relationship. So there was a bit of disappointment on his part that we didn't reciprocate some of the early moves he made, such as closing the base in Cuba and the one in Vietnam. And there was a sense that, of course, going ahead and invading Iraq over Russia's objections—that kind of grew in importance in the Russian narrative of grievance.

But—I think I've said this before—in my four years there, I think Putin didn't give up on this goal of a pragmatic, constructive relationship with the United States. I think he saw it as important at the time, when Russia was relatively weak and still rebuilding its society after the collapse, following the collapse of the Soviet system. I think he trusted President Bush, maybe more than he trusted others in the administration, to deliver on things when he needed them—as he did on the legally binding treaty on strategic arms, and as

we tried to do on WTO. We did follow through on making them a full member of the G8 and even agreed that they could chair a meeting in St. Petersburg of the G8. So Putin may have blamed sinister forces within the deep state—he didn't use that term—but as maybe not always backing up President Bush—that's a common refrain [01:20:00] even today. But I think we may have overestimated a little bit. He may have been overly optimistic about what he was going to get from the U.S.

I think the bigger changes—I mean, Putin did change over time, clearly as his disillusionment [grew] with what he was getting out of the relationship with the West, and as developments in places like Ukraine began to unfold that he saw it as a threat to Russia itself. And, if anything, I would say it's the Orange Revolution that was the most decisive factor in turning Putin away from the West. He really believed the rhetoric that this was a Western plot to undermine Russian interests and ultimately undermine the Putin system in Russia itself. And so, by the end of President Bush's second term Putin was clearly much more skeptical. He gave that blistering speech at the Munich Security Conference accusing us of trying to dictate how the rest of the world operates. And that's been his tune ever since. The Reset achieved some results because we were dealing with a front man, with Dmitry Medvedev, even though Putin was still the power behind the throne. But that didn't unfortunately have lasting impact, of course, with the collapse of the relationship in 2014 with the invasion of Ukraine.

So things changed. Putin changed. He became much more anti-Western in his bones. And as sometimes his efforts to exert power over the former Soviet space have failed, he's become more repressive at home, fearful of [01:22:00] the contagion of Western ideas. So these tendencies may have been present early on, but maybe we didn't always focus on them as much as we should have in the early days. He was already shutting down independent media when I arrived in Moscow in 2001. And he, one by one, closed down exchange programs, the Peace Corps—anything that could be an avenue for Western influence in Russia was progressively terminated. So Russia is much more xenophobic now. The roots of this may have been present, but we chose not to see them so clearly at the beginning of the Putin administration.

BEHRINGER: And, as you've mentioned, you continued your government service in the Obama administration, I think first at the Defense Department and then as deputy secretary general of NATO. Can you reflect on the difference in how the two, or the similarities in how the two presidents approached Russia, and did your views on Russia evolve as you changed roles and as the situation developed between 2008 and 2016?

VERSHBOW: Yeah. Well, 2008—in 2009 was when I actually started my position at the Pentagon. Everybody was, at that time, gung-ho for the Reset. I think with hindsight, we should've demanded more in terms of reversing the Russian aggression against Georgia before we did that reset, but that's easy to say with hindsight. But, I think, there was a sense that we could still do business with the Russians. There was, of course, the New START Treaty, which I think was a

great achievement—and I'm pleased that [01:24:00] it was just recently extended so that we can now negotiate a more up-to-date agreement that deals with other threats, such as non-strategic weapons, Chinese systems, et cetera. And I think there was some progress made in deepening the relationship with NATO during the Reset. There was a effort, which almost succeeded, to establish a joint approach to missile defense in which we would have joint early warning centers and joint operation centers and actually cooperate in countering the threat of missiles from Iran, Syria, and other places in the European theater.

I think President Obama repeated one mistake that was made during the Bush administration, particularly I mention Rumsfeld, and maybe Cheney bears the blame for this, which was in diminishing the importance of Russia—the argument that Russia didn't matter anymore, that we could basically solve most of our problems without Russia. If they want to help us—fine, we don't have to reward them for that. If they're acting in their own interests, such as helping us topple the Taliban in Afghanistan, then why pay them any compensation? I think Obama—he didn't say that, but he did describe Russia as a regional power. I think that was almost insulting to President Putin and may have actually goaded him into ratcheting up his activity in trying to subjugate Ukraine [and] ultimately led to the invasion in 2014.

So, I think, on the one hand, you don't want [01:26:00] to reward Russia for being a spoiler. But on the other hand, Russia still, whatever its long-term prospects and demographic decline and lack of diversification of its economy,

it still wields a lot of power in today's world, still has the ability to project power as we've seen in Syria, Libya, other places. So we have to push back against the Russians when they're behaving aggressively, but also treat the leaders with a certain amount of respect in order to be able to maintain a civil dialogue with them in the hopes of managing tensions and resolving problems.

So, in that sense, I think President Bush had the right instincts. He wasn't quite as dogmatic as some of the people in his administration. But I think Putin did—as I said before—Putin did trust the president maybe more than he trusted other people in the U.S. administration to take Putin's concerns to heart. And so they ended their professional relationship, I think, on a relatively positive note, even if the relationship was heading downhill even as they smiled at one another.

BEHRINGER: Well, Ambassador Vershbow, I want to thank you very much for your time and for your insights, and we really appreciate your participation in this project.

VERSHBOW: Well, it's my pleasure. I think these kinds of oral histories are certainly useful for me in jogging my memory and trying to remember what are now long-ago events, but particularly focusing on the relationship with Russia, it has its frustrations, [01:28:00] but Russia is not going anywhere. And even as we talk about strategic competition with China emerging as the greater challenge, Russia is still the most immediate challenge, and we need to find a way to at least reestablish some of the cooperation that we had back in the day when I was ambassador, but it's not going to be easy. This concern about U.S. regime

change ambitions is deeply embedded in Putin's psyche, and it may be very difficult to overcome.

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