

The Annual Baltic Forum Conference
Global Crisis – National Responses

29 May 2009

ABSTRACTS

Robert NURICK – Senior Fellow at the James Martin Center for Non-proliferation Studies of the Monterey Institute of International Studies, USA

Well, thank you very much, Mr. Chairman. I should start by noting that what got the Baltic states in the NATO was what the Baltic states did, not what anyone else did.

I'd like to begin by thanking the conference organizers Viktor, Igor for inviting me here today; it's a great pleasure to be back and to participate in these discussions. The task that they've given me today is to provide a little bit or one aspect of the context for the broader discussion of global security issues, by talking a little about the US-Russian bilateral relationship, so that's what I will do today – trying to give some sense of the current debates in Washington, some of the issues on the agenda, the prospects for those issues and their implications for the broader bilateral relationship between Moscow and Washington.

Now, just by way of introduction it's become quite commonplace now to note that by this past winter in the wake of the war in Georgia in last August and then the energy cut-offs to Ukraine and through Ukraine to Europe that the bilateral relationship, the Russian-American relationship, had sunk to its lowest level in the post-Soviet period. And as bad as this was, the deterioration was particularly striking when one remembers the very high hopes that both sides had entertained for that relationship very earlier in the decade. We all remember the famous phone-call from then-president Putin to then-president Bush right after the 9/11 events. There was not too long after that what was probably the high-point in the relationship, which was the presidential summit in Moscow in May of 2002, at which a nuclear-arms control treaty was signed; there was a declaration of a strategic partnership between the two countries, there were series of joint statements about pledging cooperation on energy, on missile defence, on people-to-people exchanges in a variety of other areas. And then, finally, in September of 2003 a meeting of the two presidents in Camp David in the US, where the presidents instructed their respective governments to start identifying very specific tasks and timelines and schedules to implement these political commitments that they had made.

Now we know, clearly, that all the hopes of that period have not been realized; that very quickly thereafter a slow deterioration in the relationships set in. And we could certainly see the effects of this by the famous summit, the next summit, in Sochi in April 2005, which on the one hand, produced again, a US-Russian strategic framework declaration, but on the other hand the declaration was quite curious, because while it reaffirmed this idea of a strategic partnership between the two countries, essentially what that document did was summarize the issues on the bilateral political agenda, it did record some areas where progress had been made; but mostly the declaration consisted of a series of commitments to reach new agreements in the future. It was in many ways a record of unfulfilled ambitions. As I said, this was starting to become clear already by April 2005.

Now, the reasons for the deterioration over these years are, of course, complicated and diverse; I'm not going to try and summarize them now, but I would make one observation about this period, which it seems to me has some relevance to the future of the relationship; and that is that among the various reasons for the deterioration was the fact that for both sides main preoccupations and priorities lay elsewhere. For US it quickly became Iraq, then Iran; for Russia, for the government in Moscow, it was, at least from the point of view in Washington, focus very much on complicated domestic agenda. And in any case one result of the fact that the priorities and the tension lay elsewhere is that the bureaucracies, it seems to me, on both sides, in both capitals were not pressed to implement all this array of presidential commitments that had been made in the previous years. For example, as best I can tell neither in the Pentagon, nor in the Russian Ministry of Defence was there much interest in the bureaucratic level in

cooperation in missile defences. Secondly, despite a series of promises to president Putin, the American efforts to persuade Congress to graduate Russia from the Jackson-Vanik amendment were, I'd say half-hearted at best. An energy dialogue was initiated in 2002, but was quite dormant by 2005 and didn't come to very much. Again, despite all the commitments to people-to-people exchanges, on the one hand US funding for those exchanges was actually slashed and in any forthcoming budgets wasn't increased. And on the Russian side what we saw was it axed all of the Peace Corps people in Russia. So we had this array of commitments of objectives, of ambitions; most of them or many of them were ignored or fell dormant, or fell hostage to other issues.

Now given all this recent history what I'd like to do is say a few words about these revolving discussions and debates in the US and then turn to a couple of key issues in a bilateral relationship.

First of all, US perspectives and discussions about the relationship; clearly the Georgia war, and it won't surprise anyone when I say this, the Georgia war was a seminal event, and it had a major impact on everyone in Washington. There were very diverse views in the US about the origins, reasons and blame that should be assigned for this war. They're much more complicated now than they were then, but there was at least a general consensus that the assumptions behind US policy towards Russia needed to be revisited; that a new policy was needed. But it's important to know, I think, that the conflict in Georgia was not only a cause of the deterioration of the relationship, but reflected it – reflected a prior worsening in the relationship in the sense that that relationship had become so troubled, at least as it seemed in Washington, Moscow did not see many costs in jeopardizing it. It simply did not have enough of a stake in the current arrangements to worry too much about what the effects of this conflict might be, at least as compared to the implications of not acting. So one lesson that was drawn in Washington was that, given the fact that Washington seemed to have very little leverage, it needed to repair the relationship – in part to give Russia a greater stake in the health of that relationship. So that when the next crisis would come along, the state of the relationship would figure more highly in Russian thinking than it seems to have done in Georgia.

Now since then there has been a large number of groups that have been formed, reports that are starting to be issued about the relationship in general and about what US policy should do to repair it. When you look at all these reports there is of course disagreement about the details, but most have put forward a fairly common agenda and most will also begin with a fairly common list of why the US does have an interest in a more productive relationship with Russia. Now, again a common theme, not in all of these reports, but in many discussions has been to start by acknowledging that 'common values' as we used to call it are not going to be the basis for rebuilding this relationship. Instead, it's going to have to be based on common interests. And it was not difficult to identify what some of these interests in general would be: they included, certainly, Iran and North Korea, a whole other array of non-proliferation questions, economic ties, Afghanistan, etc. – I'll return to some of these in a moment. But a corollary to this notion that we needed to focus on common interest was the view that the US cannot much affect the domestic arrangements in Russia as it had sought to do before, that therefore it should focus instead on these key foreign policy and security interests; it should set priorities in those areas and should stick to them. The corollary was that the US needed to be more responsive to some of the central Russian concerns and interests, especially in the neighbourhood and the European security agenda.

Now, all this was and is, I think, widely agreed in the US, and is not controversial. The problems and the disagreements start to arise in a very common next step from this line of thinking, having to do with the particular implications that have been drawn for concrete policy issues. And typically in one line of thinking the next step following from this line of thinking, has been to say that US should making trades with Russia; trade and interest of it for Russian interest. And the most common one has been the proposal that for the sake of better Russian cooperation in dealing with the nuclear issue in Iran, that the US should radically change its policy with respect to Georgia and Ukraine. Now this is, as I said, where the controversy starts to arise. And there have been two problems: first of all that the proposal is not universally accepted as a way of dealing with Georgia and Ukraine - I'll come back to that one in a minute; but the second one has to do with a broader problem as seen in Washington in the relationship, and that is the fear that making these kinds of trades would encourage a Russian foreign policy instinct we've seen elsewhere which was to look for quid pro quos on almost every issue, including on issues

where both sides claimed at least to have common or at least congruent interests. Now to some degree this instinct to look for quid pro quos was very understandable in that the US particularly in the Bush administration had preceded, I think, by saying "look, let's cooperate with Russia where we can on the things we care about and we'll sort of ignore the rest". And so to some extent this desire for quid pro quos was a way, I think, simply to get US attention to Russian concerns, to try to change the agenda to focus on Russian interests, not just American ones. So that part's understandable, the problem is that we need to be clear about what we're doing. If we say we're building a relationship on the basis of common interest, we can't do that if everything's a deal. Because what that says is that common interests are not enough, that even where they may exist they are not enough to produce common policies. We may have to make these kinds of deals, indeed that's what foreign policy and diplomacy are often about, but we need to be clear about what they are; in that case we're not building a relationship based on common interests but on the train of diverging interests, and we need to be clear about what we're doing.

In any case, this issue has been at the core, I think, of the underlying debates and dilemmas in US policy. Not whether US should engage, not whether there are interests that can be pursued – everyone agrees that's true. The question really is what issue should be linked to others, what are the costs that should be paid for them, what do we need to do to put the relationship on a stable and a productive foundation over the longer term. To make it based on something more than a series of transactions between the two sides.

Now with this in mind, let me just say a few words very quickly about some of the current issues on the agenda. First, we're all familiar with the language of the "reset button"; both sides have expressed their determination to repair the relationship, atmospherics are certainly better, we've begun some arms-control negotiations and so on; hopes, I think, are much higher than they were before. At the same time though, both governments for, I think, understandable reasons are being fairly careful about how they describe the expectations: they recognize, I think, that the deterioration didn't come quickly and it's not a result of simple causes and by the same token it's going to take some time, it's not going to be repaired overnight either.

Very quickly on a couple of issues: first, the arms-control negotiations. As I'm sure everyone knows there's a commitment by the two presidents to try to reach a new agreement as a replacement for the start agreement by December when the start agreement expires – that's a very narrow timeline. I think that there is some prospect despite the schedule, that there is some prospect an agreement can be reached by then, but if it is, we ought to recognize it'll be quite a modest agreement. I can say something in the discussion if people are interested about what I think the agreement's going to look like, but the important political point to make here is that the arms-control negotiations which we've started clearly are going to proceed in phases. This first phase is going to be quite a modest step, and one, I think, where all the hard issues in the relationship are going to be deferred for the next phase. What that means is that the political affects of an agreement, so if Washington and Moscow reach an agreement by December, the political affects are going to be fairly modest as well and will depend greatly on how the two governments choose to characterise them. Because it's modest, because hard issues are going to be deferred, it's going to be subject to criticism in both countries; the governments are going to have to decide that they want to portray it as part of a broader process which will in time start to address some of these harder issues.

Secondly, very quickly - the question of the neighbourhood; this, it seems to me, is the hardest set of issues and the ones with the greatest potential both for an improvement and for trouble in a bilateral relationship, because it's here that interests really do diverge. And in the bilateral relationship the big issue, of course, is the treatment of Georgia and Ukraine, its relationship to their NATO ambitions and NATO enlargement. Let me simply say that here, this is something that is going to have to be very carefully managed. On the one hand, I think US administration will not and cannot explicitly abandon the commitments it's made to those countries, or to the principle that it stresses – that these countries in the region as sovereign entities have the right to choose their own security arrangements. On the other hand as a practical matter, this issue is going to be put, I think, on the backburner, simply for reasons, if no other, having to do with the domestic situations in the two countries. The issue, therefore, is, whether, given the fact that it's going to be put on the backburner, at least in NATO: can the time that this brings us

can be used profitably to diffuse the issue more generally? To me, a big part of this, the answer to this question is going to depend on the broader question of European security arrangements and how they're dealt with. Again, this is a much more complicated topic, so I would simply say that one of the reasons in my view why the US and Europeans need to engage Russia on this issue is to accept the proposal to talk about this. It's because one thing we haven't got right over the years is the answer to the question: where does Russia fit in European security arrangements? It's not healthy, it's not sustainable over the long run, and we need to address it. Now, to summarize and conclude, I think there are reasons for optimism; I'm certainly hopeful that these new initiatives will bear fruit; I have two general concerns which I will end with, one about Russia and one about the US.

My concern about Russia is that we will be too passive. And the reason I say that is because the signals we're getting from Moscow, often very explicit signals from Russian officials, are that, as far as they're concerned, the ball is in US' court. Their view is that US took advantage of Russian weakness in the 90s, the US is responsible for the deterioration in the relationship; it is therefore up to US to repair it. I think the US certainly needs to take some actions here and to take some initiatives, but Russia is going to need to do some of that as well. The danger is that if Russia does not have ideas of its own in these areas and does more than sit back and wait to wait what US proposes, US attention may go elsewhere. If nine months from now there is not a lot of progress, I don't think the relationship will collapse, but the administration, its attention will be diverted to other issues which are higher on its agenda: to Iran, to North Korea, to its economic, domestic-economic circumstances and so on. So again, it is important that Russia takes some initiatives as well, not just the US.

On the US side my main underlying concern will sound like a bureaucratic problem, but relates to a bigger issue. The bureaucratic problem is: is there going to be anybody in the administration who will have the authority to integrate Russia policy across the different ministries. One of the problems in the Bush administration was that arguably there was no integrated Russia policy; it was the product of specific policies on functional issues. If the relationship is to succeed, somebody is going to have to be able to look across this array issues and make some trade-offs among them; decide what's important, decide what can be linked to what, to make it more than the sum of its individual parts, so that it's not driven by these individual functional issues but has some kind of integrated coherence to it. At the moment there's nobody in the government yet who has this position, a position like Strobe Talbot had in the Clinton days. We'll see whether somebody has that kind of authority or not, it will make a big difference to the way the US conducts the relationship.

Thank you.