

"Global Competition and the Deterioration of U.S.-Soviet Relations, 1977-1980"

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(Excerpts)

James Blight:

My name is James Blight and I am from Brown University. I would like to welcome you to a discussion of some historical problems that we believe may have some particular historical interest and relevance to the current situation in the U.S. - Russian relations.

About three years ago a group of us got involved in a historical project to try to reconstruct what happened in the late 1970's when President Carter came to office. President Carter began as an optimist with regard to disarmament, settling third world conflicts and especially developing a real partnership with the Soviet Union, possibly even including ending the Cold War before the Carter Administration was over. We know what happened. Things fell apart, and we got instead a deterioration in East-West relations that some people viewed as the second Cold War, or a renewed Cold War. In any case, good intentions and good expectations led to very bad results. How did this happen? That was the historical problem the Carter-Brezhnev project (as we called it) set out to try to solve.

Since the December 1993 parliamentary elections in Russia, I think all of us have understood that U.S.-Russian relations are now much more complex than during the short-lived "honeymoon" of 1991-92. Russians have rediscovered that they are not only a defeated superpower, but that Russia is also a great country, a great power, with a past that has to be reckoned with. The Post-Cold War euphoria is gone that existed for the first year or two in this country, not excluding the feeling that we had somehow won the Cold War, and that our relations with the Russians would be no more difficult, then with, say, the French.

So another layer, a second layer of importance has been added to the historical reconstructions of the Carter-Brezhnev era, having to do with trying to find the connections between that time and this. History never repeats itself, not exactly, but

history is in fact all we have to go on as we try to plan for the future, especially as leaders try to make policy in the wake of the Cold War.

We have panelists here today who have been associated with the project, and who will discuss various aspects of it. I'll begin with Bob Legvold of the Harriman Institute at Columbia. Bob is one of the outstanding American scholars of the former Soviet Union and Russia. He has served as chairman of the last two conferences; one last May in Georgia, at Musgrove Plantation; on St. Simons Island, Georgia devoted to the Salt II nuclear arms control process; and the most recent of which concluded yesterday in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, on global competition between the superpowers.

Robert Legvold:

Thank you, Jim. There is something interesting about the way in which history becomes instructive if we aren't naive in our approach. We mustn't look for literal parallels. But I would very quickly identify three things that struck me as I listened to the Fort Lauderdale conference on U.S.-Soviet relations, and that continue to strike me as I look at the U.S.-Russian relationship now. (I would say one other thing parenthetically: if you were holding that conference a year ago, the stretch between the Carter period and the current period would have been much greater; it would have been much harder for me to discern from the earlier period lessons that apply to the present moment. Alas, it is easier these days than one or two years ago to connect that earlier period from 77 to 79 to the present.)

The three things then, quickly. The first is the importance of the cumulative effect of events. By 1978, only two years into the Carter-Administration, we begin to see gradual but unmistakable erosion in the relationship. It wasn't so much the question of the Horn of Africa (the Somalia-Ethiopia conflict) as such, anymore than it is so much the issue of selling nuclear power equipment to the Iranians today. It wasn't so much the human rights issue from Sakharov to Scharansky, any more

than it is entirely or primarily a question of the human rights abuses associated with the Russian intervention in Chechnya today. It wasn't so much Soviet sensitivity to Zbig Brzezinski's trip to China and the strategic implications of that, anymore than today it is so much, and overwhelmingly, so much the Russian sensitivity to NATO expansion. Rather, it was the cumulative effect of all these things that really mattered, and the extent to which the whole process turned out to be more important than the sum of the parts.

The second point is this: by 1978-79, the domestic politics of U.S.-Soviet relations turned out to be a multiplier. It reverberated these corrosive developments in the relationship and made it harder for those who were trying to manage it to do so. Again, today the impact of these factors is, if anything, more important; because both sides must contend with the effect of domestic politics.

Third and finally, I am struck most profoundly in our look at the Carter-Brezhnev years, by the capacity, maybe the natural capacity of those who were involved, and who were working so hard on the individual problems, to underestimate just how bad it could get. By the summer of 1978, the relationship was already in trouble because of the cumulative effect of many things: Africa, China, the Middle East and other issues. Yet, when we look at the documents describing the way in which leaders were thinking about the problem, on the Soviet side, what I think was being reported back from the embassy was essentially, "this is a rocky period," things have not gone well, but frankly we were right in rebuffing the Carter Administration. When they get out of line we have pressed them hard. That is having its effect. The Carter Administration has been forced to retreat because U.S. public opinion does not want to give up on détente. They believe in it, so you in the Kremlin must stay that course. It is going to be a little difficult, maybe even increasingly difficult, in the coming months because there is a presidential election in the United States and this issue is likely to get cranked into the politics of

it. But in the longer run, [these people were reporting] it is going to work out, and we will come through in good shape. That was on the Soviet side. Basically the same thing was happening on the U.S. side. The Carter Administration saw the evolution of an increasingly rocky, difficult period, but believed, like their Soviet counterparts, that if they stayed on course it would all work out. But the truth of the matter is that it didn't work out at all, it didn't at all. That is the most striking illustration, the most striking and sobering insight that I derive from our reexamination of the Carter-Brezhnev period.

James Blight

Thank you, Bob. It is a great honor to have on this podium with those of us who have worked mainly in academic circles, two of the finest foreign service officers of their generation. Ambassador Yuli Vorontsov of Russia and Ambassador Thomas Pickering of the United States each ambassadors to one another's country. As most of you know, they developed quite a successful, and quite a personal partnership of their own during their simultaneous tenure at the United Nations a few years ago during the Gulf War. Figuratively speaking, we flipped a coin at breakfast as to who goes first and, while I can't remember who won the flip, I believe Ambassador Vorontsov in any case goes first.

Ambassador Vorontsov

The Carter-Brezhnev Project is a very important effort to establish the historical truth which is directly relevant to the events of today and tomorrow. I speak for myself and I think for Tom [Pickering] as well. It was very instructive to follow the recent conference. This conference has been especially useful because it has focused on the sensitive questions of the U.S.-Soviet rivalry in the Third-World from 1977-1980, and on the lessons of that period. The particular rivalry itself is a thing of the past fortunately, for the United States and Russia and have new priorities. However, the experience of those years has not become irrelevant at all.

The discussion at the Fort Lauderdale Conference has shown that the deterioration of the United States-Soviet relations then was in many cases the result of mutual misperception. Certain actions in Washington, as well as those of Moscow, were not well thought through. The mutual irritation was sometimes provoked unnecessarily. Lack of trust in the relationship made all kinds of worst case scenarios look possible in the eyes of those policy makers of that time. Now the United States and democratic Russia have achieved a high degree of trust in their relationship. It should be properly studied, protected and enhanced. This presumes respect for the legitimate interests of your partner, and our countries are partners now. We must deepen our efforts to take account of them in our current U.S.-Russian partnership. Otherwise conditions of drifting apart are likely again, and we must do everything possible not to allow this to happen.

The core reason for the deterioration of Soviet-American relations under the Carter Administration was the unwillingness of the United States to put up with the role of the Soviet Union as a major player in world affairs. This can be understood in the context of the two countries being ideological enemies. But there is no place for such an approach in relations between partners. For example it would be unwise to try to minimize the role of Russia, in Europe. This can only restore the old and undesirable pattern of behavior.

A few words about the conference itself. Fortunately the participants -top level policy makers of that time- chose not to revisit old feuds and grudges but to come to terms with some very important facts, to make sense of the puzzles, of successes, mistakes and failures of that time. Relying on the excellent governmental release of classified documents made public through the joint efforts of the Russian and American sides, they helped all of us to understand history, so that we can face the future with more confidence. Future generations of statesmen and diplomats, both in Russia and the United States, owe a big debt to those honest and thoughtful

men who participated in the conference. Their goodwill, by the way, is another indication of how far behind we have left the enmity of the past.

Ambassador Pickering

Thank you very much Jim. It is a pleasure to be here and to have a chance to say just a few words. Following Bob Legvold's remarks, I feel a little bit like Zsa Zsa Gabor's fifth husband. I know what is expected of me, but I'm not sure how I'm going to make it interesting [laughter]. The second point to make is that while the historians are literally correct that history doesn't repeat itself, unfortunately one of the lessons of the Fort Lauderdale conference is that mistakes might repeat themselves, and therefore the reexamination of history is a very useful tool for diplomats to have in advance.

There are four areas I would like to focus on for you very briefly. One has already been mentioned by others, including Yuli [Vorontsov], that the ideological construct or framework within which the events of 1977-78 took place is now absent. That Cold War context, has, however, many lingering reminders, in the sense that there are groups of people on both sides, both public and private, who are still very much under the influence of the past 70 years. As a result, their contributions to the process of cultivating U.S.-Russian relations must be taken into account - they must be dealt with.

Secondly, it is important to mention that while ideology is no longer a major driving factor, national interests have become so. This is both healthy and difficult. It provides more work for the ambassadors, embassies and policy makers, but the new situation is strikingly close to the kind of reality that should inform and direct foreign policy in modern democratic countries. So I am not among those who lament the passage of the "honeymoon" though it made my life easier and perhaps Yuli's as well. But it is a more realistic environment in which we work today. The nature of that environment was characterized by the successful meeting which

Secretary Christopher had last week with Foreign Minister Kozyrev in Geneva, in which I had the opportunity to participate. We now have a process exemplified by that meeting last week of the closest possible consultation.

If we are here after to avoid misperceptions, and there are many that come out of the record of the Fort Lauderdale conference, we should conduct our intensive consultations by exploring not only the appropriate positions of each side, but the opportunities those positions present through dialogue. Further we must work together to find solutions - solutions not only to problems but solutions to deeper, more complex and vitally important areas of the general relationship between our two countries. In that sense today, in the absence of a global ideological conflict, we are still guided by strong adherence to fundamental principles: whether they be in the U.N. Charter, domestic democracy; or a commitment to open, economic relationships. We must therefore know something of the history of how ideas and commitments have sometimes kept us from true partnerships.

The third point I would mention is that domestic politics, perhaps even more than in the past, plays a significant role in the evolution of our relationship. Much of the past is only being revealed accurately by the documents now, particularly on the Soviet side, where we are continually astonished to discover that there were often different views. Whereas in the United States differences have been perhaps more open and public, those views were nevertheless too often informed by the single minded concerns of dealing with the Cold War. Today the situation is quite different. We are entering into a political season on both sides now, one in which both sides must take account of the domestic political situation of one another.

My fourth point may not at first seem important, but I believe it is. Costs, economic costs, now carry a different weight. During the Cold War, both sides believed that economic costs were secondary to the kind of societal survival which they wished to protect in the confrontation. Today, economic costs are much more

relevant, and they are very important. In that regard, both sides have adopted, in a very serious way, a strong sense that the domestic economy and its survival are extremely important for them and are less willing, if you like, to be profligate with their funding on foreign affairs issues. This difference is apparent to anyone who compares the record of the Fort Lauderdale conference with the record of current and present day events affecting U.S.-Russian relations, especially (but from exclusively) those dealing with military and arms control issues.

Finally, I would like to say that these kinds of meetings are extremely valuable. The opportunity to be a diplomatic fly on the wall, while the historians and the participants discuss both the mistakes and the successes of the past, is extremely valuable for diplomats like myself who are constantly condemned to deal with issues so heavily in the present moment. In fact, I recommend that all practitioner's try to study and learn not only about the past, but how it can be applied most significantly to the future. I thank the organizers for the opportunity to participate in such an interesting and useful exercise.

James Blight

Thank you for coming and thank you to the panelists and especially thanks to the two ambassadors. [Applause].