

Part IV

A Place for Russia?

Chapter 17

Bill, Boris, and NATO

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Three consecutive American presidents—Ronald Reagan, George H. W. Bush, and Bill Clinton—were a virtual tag team in dealing with the end of the Cold War and its aftermath. Reagan cultivated a productive relationship with Mikhail Gorbachev, the last leader of the USSR. He was also the first to proclaim and forge a “partnership” between the superpowers.¹ It was on Bush’s watch that the Berlin Wall collapsed, followed by the Iron Curtain, and the Warsaw Pact. That created the prospect, as he put it in 1989, of “a Europe whole and free.”

The euphoria in Western capitals was not shared in Moscow. The unification of West and East Germany, in October 1990, meant that the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) would encroach onto what had been part of the Soviet zone of domination. The Western Alliance was expanding while the Warsaw Pact was evaporating, and Lieutenant Colonel Putin was back in St. Petersburg having burned secret documents in the K.G.B. outpost in Dresden.

The Bush Administration tried to soothe Soviet anxieties by assuring Gorbachev and his team that there were no plans for NATO beyond the new eastern German border.

As for Gorbachev and his aides, they were not concentrating on the future of the USSR’s erstwhile allies; instead, they were increasingly worried about the fate of the Soviet Union itself. So was Bush. He was worried about chaos all across Eurasia.

After Bush flew to Moscow and Kyiv in the summer of 1991, he sensed that Gorbachev and the USSR might not be salvageable. The coup de grâce was a real coup against Gorbachev weeks after Bush’s trip. When Boris Yeltsin moved into the Kremlin in December 1991, Bush assured him that America would maintain the substance and spirit of “partnership” with the new Russian state and its first leader.

The Bond

When Clinton moved into the Oval Office, he picked up where Bush left off. He was prepared to do all he could to help Yeltsin's economic and political reforms. Clinton had been a student of what used to be the Soviet Union. He made his first visit there in his early twenties, in Brezhnev's "era of stagnation." He recalled that young, liberal Soviet citizens he met on that trip pined for the motherland to become "a normal, modern country." He saw Yeltsin—and Gorbachev before him—as catalysts for the evolution.

Clinton devoted more of his time, energy, and political capital to Russia and Yeltsin than any other foreign nation or leader. They met during their overlapping terms in office eighteen times, nearly as many as all their predecessors going back to Harry Truman and Joseph Stalin combined.

Even during Clinton's transition, he was fixated on the upheaval in Russia and its neighborhood. He was getting intelligence briefings in Little Rock on mounting opposition from the diehard parliamentarians. "I don't want to appear to be letting Yeltsin hang out there," he said to me late in 1992, "naked before his enemies."²

Yeltsin was so desperate to get the transition between Bush and Clinton off to a good start that he sent a letter urging the president-elect to attend a meeting in a third country before Inauguration Day. That was out of the question, but Clinton took Yeltsin's impatience seriously: "His letter reads like a cry of pain. You can just feel the guy reaching out to us, and asking us to reach out to him. I'd really, *really* like to help him. I get the feeling he's up to his ass in alligators. He especially needs friends abroad because he's got so many enemies at home. We've got to try to keep Yeltsin going."

Once Clinton was in office, he focused on Yeltsin's economic reforms. If they failed, so would his political ones. He enlisted leaders in other capitalist democracies to join him in boosting the fledgling government in Moscow.

After all, Clinton's campaign-winning slogan had been "It's the economy, stupid!" He was also the first U.S. president who would use his whole term to treat his counterpart in the Kremlin as a partner,

rather than an antagonist.³ In much of 1993, NATO as such was not high on either the U.S. or Russian president's agenda, to say nothing about its expansion.

But others, in the United States and abroad, were already seized of the matter. The Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, and other Central Europeans protested vehemently, as did their diasporas in the United States. By far the most persistent and passionate among them was Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, a Polish exile whom I knew when I was a reporter in Eastern Europe and he was at Radio Free Europe in Munich. His broadcasts made him a celebrity in his native land.

The three Baltic states were a special case. They had been illegally annexed by Stalin as part of his pact with Hitler in 1939, and the United States and other Western countries regarded them as occupied territories and never accepted them as a part of the USSR.

Clinton used his first summit with Yeltsin in April 1993 to finance repatriation of Soviet-era officers who had settled down into retirement in what were now three new independent states. A month later, I met with Lennart Meri, the president of Estonia. His tone was one-third grateful, one-third skeptical, and one-third downright sarcastic. It was, he said, welcome news that elderly pensioners were returning to Russia. Even so, he was looking down the road to when Russian troops might re-occupy his country since Yeltsin was sure to give way to a more traditional Russian leader. The only way to protect Estonia was with membership in NATO under the American nuclear umbrella. Russia, he said, was a malignancy in remission; the Yeltsin era was, at best, a fleeting opportunity to be seized before Russia relapsed into tyranny at home and conquest abroad.

That same month, Presidents Lech Wałęsa of Poland, Václav Havel of the Czech Republic, and Árpád Göncz of Hungary came to Washington and made a vigorous case to Clinton for their countries' admission to NATO. There wasn't much response from the press nor the Russian government. However, when I flew to Moscow for consultations with Yuri Mamedov—my counterpart for all eight years in government—he remarked that it would be “discriminatory to Russia's interests” if NATO included former Soviet allies, to say nothing of former Soviet republics.

Throughout Clinton's first year, he was weighing the decision that only he could make on NATO enlargement. One caveat that he insisted on was that the post-Cold War NATO needed to be part of a number of new organizations that included the former Warsaw Pact members and the former Soviet republics, notably Russia. The hope was that, over time, Russia's mistrust of NATO and the Central Europeans' mistrust of Russia would fade. The Bush administration had already laid the ground for that strategy by initiating a NATO-sponsored body called the North Atlantic Cooperation Council (NACC) in 1991.

In June 1993, I joined Secretary of State Warren Christopher for the annual meeting of the NACC in Athens. For the purpose of a photo op, it was impressive: foreign ministers of thirty-eight countries whose governments—and militaries—had spent decades glowering at each other over the Iron Curtain were now gathered around a giant U-shaped table. They were thrashing out ways to cooperate on mutual interests with limited success. There was more squabbling than brainstorming.

Christopher spent much of the two days being accosted by Central Europeans wanting to know when they could join NATO, and Andrei Kozyrev, Yeltsin's foreign minister (and contributor to this project), pleading for assurances that the U.S. was not contemplating enlargement. In all those "pull-asides," sipping strong bitter coffee, Chris could say nothing more than that the matter was under study. What he didn't say—and shouldn't have—was that Clinton was leaning toward expansion not just of NATO but also a wider security and political architecture that included Russia and the other former republics.

The Decision

The process that brought Clinton to a final decision required numerous, diverse, and some disputatious discussions. Some in the Oval Office, some in the Situation Room, some in the East Wing, some on Air Force One, some over private meals, and—my least favorite—post-midnight telephone calls that began with an operator saying, "Please hold for the President." When that happened, I prayed that Clinton was on another call so I could get myself fully awake.

The overriding rationale was that while the Cold War was over, there were—and would continue to be—threats to peace and democra-

cy in the Atlantic Community. Since that Community was expanding as former Eastern bloc states metamorphosed into capitalist democracies, so should the institutions that have undergirded it since the end of the World War II. The critical ones were the various early incarnations of the European Union, and the other was NATO. Had there not been an American-led Alliance, there would have been no integration—and, all too possibly, another catastrophic war.

There was a German-specific factor here. Helmut Kohl, the German Chancellor, along with Defense Minister Volker Rühe, was bound and determined, now that there was no Iron Curtain, to move the boundary of the “political West” eastward. Both were worried about instability on their borders and wanted reinsurance against a volatile Russia.

Clinton told me about Kohl’s view, and I had a chance to hear it from the Chancellor himself in Bonn. In addition to its internal demons, Germany had been cursed in the 20th century by political geography. Immediately to the east were Slavic lands, historically regarded more as Eurasian than truly or entirely European. As long as Germany’s border with Poland marked the dividing line between East and West, Germany would be vulnerable to the pathologies of racism and the temptations of militarism that can come with living on an embattled frontier. That frontier could disappear, he said, only if Poland entered the European Union. His country’s future depended not just on deepening its ties within the EU but on expanding the EU eastward so that Germany would be in the middle of a safe, prosperous, integrated, and democratic Europe rather than on its edge.

“That is why Germany is the strongest proponent of enlargement of the EU,” Kohl said to me, and the EU would not accept new members unless they were in NATO: “That’s why European integration is of existential importance to us. This is not just a moral issue, it’s in our self-interest to have this development now and not in the future.”

Morality, however, is important as well, as leaders in Central Europe kept pounding into our heads. Their countries had suffered a brutal 20th century: chaos during the First World War, Nazi occupation during the Second World War, the post-World War II “liberation” by the Red Army who turned them into vassal states for the Soviet Union—with the collusion of the United States and Britain at Yalta. Were they going to suffer triple jeopardy in the 21st century?

There was another, more realpolitik concern in Washington and in Europe, including among the liberal presidents of the aspiring new NATO members. If the Alliance shut them out, there would be a danger that those countries would feel left to their own devices, including in dealing with tensions with their neighbors over ethnic and territorial issues. At a minimum, they were likely to beef up their military to the detriment of their economy. Worse, if the Central Europeans were relegated to what they feared would be a “security vacuum,” they would turn inward for their salvation and resort to homegrown ethnic violence across borders of the sort that was happening in the Balkans.

And then, of course, Russians started using the phrase, not just “near abroad,” but “*our* near abroad,” which sounded like dog-whistling for revanchism.

Those were the pros in the ongoing debates in and out of government. There were, of course, cons, but the only one that Clinton really cared about was exacerbating Yeltsin’s already fierce political opposition. In a meeting in London with Yuri Mamedov in late August 1993, I gave him a heads-up that the issue of NATO expansion would be on the table in early 1994 when President Clinton made his first trip to Moscow.

Mamedov grimaced. “Only our worst enemies would wish that topic on us,” he said. “NATO is a four-letter word in Russian. Let’s concentrate merely on the difficult jobs—like Bosnia and Ukraine—and not assign ourselves Mission Impossible.”

An hour later a news bulletin announced that Boris Yeltsin had told a press conference in Warsaw that Russia had no objection to Poland’s joining NATO. “In the new Russian-Polish relationship,” Yeltsin proclaimed, “there is no place for hegemony and one state dictating to another, nor for the psychology of the ‘big brother’ and the ‘little brother.’”

He and Wałęsa signed a joint declaration affirming that Poland had the sovereign right to provide for its own security and that if Poland chose to join NATO, it would not conflict with Russia’s interests.

Mamedov was thunderstruck. Some of his colleagues claimed that their president had been expressing his “private opinion,” not government policy. Others suspected that the Poles plied Yeltsin with his

favorite beverage. They denied it—their president used logic. If Poland was snubbed by NATO, it would have no choice but to enter a bilateral alliance with Ukraine. He would much prefer to join NATO and the European Union. Both were committed to cooperating with Russia. Why not make a deal before the issue blows up and politicians are screaming?

Apparently, Yeltsin bought it: Poland was indeed a free country now—it had broken out of the Soviet empire, just as Russia itself had done. Yes, NATO was anti-Soviet in its origin, but Yeltsin was anti-Soviet himself. They shook hands and announced their agreement to the world.

Poor Kozyrev and Defense Minister Grachev. They had to double-team their boss and convince him that he was committing political suicide unless he rescinded the agreement with Wałęsa.⁴ They succeeded in getting him to sign a letter, drafted by the foreign ministry and sent to the leaders of NATO member states, suggesting that the Alliance and Russia would jointly guarantee the security of the Central Europeans. It had a strong whiff of Yalta to the Poles and their neighbors. However, Yeltsin did not reverse the essence of what he had agreed with Wałęsa; in fact, his letter reaffirmed the right of any state to choose its own methods and associations.⁵

Within weeks, Kozyrev's and Grachev's concerns were all too accurate about the fury and strength of Yeltsin's opponents. All hell broke loose in Moscow. Unreconstructed Communists, holed up in their offices, sent armed thugs into the streets who killed several militiamen and later attacked the main television center, firing rocket-propelled grenades into the lobby, setting it ablaze. Rioters attacked government buildings, chanting "All power to the Soviets!" and carrying hammer-and-sickle flags and portraits of Stalin.

Yeltsin ordered the ministry of defense to crush the uprising with tanks in the streets, shelling the parliament itself, and jailing the ring-leaders. When Yeltsin addressed his nation, it was more of a dirge and regret: "Nobody has won, nobody has scored a victory. We have all been scorched by the lethal breath of fratricidal war."

When I saw Clinton in the White House as the crisis abated, he gave me a rueful look and a remark that snapped my head back: “Boy, do I ever miss the cold war.”

He didn’t, but he was all the more concerned about “Ol’ Boris” and his unpopular policies and his treacherous politics. Now that the anti-Yeltsin forces had failed with civil war, they did much better for their revanchist cause at the polls. In parliamentary elections in December, the perversely misnamed Liberal-Democratic Party—headed by the virulent ultranationalist, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy—triumphed in a parliamentary election. The resurrected Communist Party, led by Gennady Zyuganov, also had a strong showing.

These two setbacks for Yeltsin—and for Russia—highlighted another reason for expanding NATO: the danger that Russia might break bad.

William Perry, the secretary of defense, along with General John Shalikashvili, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were uneasy about expansion unless Russia regressed to its predatory ways. They hoped that a new and expansive organization, Partnership for Peace (PfP), created in 1994, would be a way of slowing down extending NATO itself. But when their Commander-in-Chief made clear in October 1993 that he wanted to open the Alliance to the Central Europeans in his term, they saluted. Even though they were concerned about expansion, they could imagine the failure of Russian reforms. The Pentagon, somewhat reluctantly, adjusted its policy and talking points to include a “hedge” against Russian regression. That didn’t help with our diplomacy with the Russians.

Yet Chancellor Kohl made the same point—in private—with incivility and foreboding: “New waves of nationalism are mounting in Russia. Seventy years of dictatorship have left the Russians in total ignorance of the world around them. Two generations couldn’t get out into the world. Russia has a surprisingly free press, but the people have no experience in forming independent judgments. Pressures are building. The Russians are frightened. This is key to Yeltsin’s psychology, and it reflects his people’s psychology. You can make bad politics with a people’s psychology—just look at 20th century Germany.”

In conclusion, Kohl said Yeltsin might not be around too long, and we need to be wary about who might come after him.

The Hard Sell

Clinton used a tour in January 1994 to European capitals—Brussels, Prague, Kyiv, and Moscow—to go public on his decision. All he said was that NATO was creating the PfP for countries to the east all the way through Central Asia, and the Alliance would bring in new members in due course. He made those announcements in Brussels (NATO's headquarters) and Prague (an eager aspirant). That way, he had already delivered the bad news when he arrived in Moscow for a high-profile, good-news event that Yeltsin was hosting: the U.S. and Russian presidents had invited their Ukrainian colleague, Leonid Kravchuk, for the signing of the "Trilateral Statement" that removed all nuclear weapons from Ukraine in exchange for assurance of Ukrainian security and sovereignty.

Once the signing was over, Clinton had a private meeting with Yeltsin in which he went into his Boris-whispering mode: the two of them were going to work together on a new-age, capacious architecture, revolutionizing European security, emphasizing cooperation, peacekeeping, and structures that would take account of Russia's legitimate interests and aspirations. Yeltsin listened intently but saved his response for the press afterward. As we headed for the crowds, Clinton whispered to me, "Uh-oh."

Yeltsin's news for the world started out upbeat and on script: the integration of former communist countries into the structures of the West was a fine objective, and Russia looked forward to being part of that process. But then he pulled a fast one: that process, of course, would culminate with a big-bang, all-together-now "integrated together, in just one package ... That's why I support the president's initiative for Partnership for Peace."

Clinton demurred gently: the Brussels summit he had attended on this trip had made clear that NATO "plainly contemplated an expansion." That, he quickly added, was for the future, while PfP was "the real thing now."

When Yeltsin came to Washington in September of 1994, Clinton had updated his step-by-step persuasion of Yeltsin: “Boris, on NATO, I want to make sure you’ve noted that I’ve never said we shouldn’t consider Russia for membership or a special relationship with NATO. So, when we talk about NATO expanding, we’re emphasizing *inclusion*, not exclusion. My objective is to work with you and others to maximize the chances of a truly united, undivided, integrated Europe. There will be an expansion of NATO, but there’s no timetable yet. If we started tomorrow to include the countries that want to come in, it would still take several years until they qualified and others said ‘yes.’”

“The issue is about psychological security and a sense of importance to these countries. They’re afraid of being left in a gray area or a purgatory. So, we’re going to move forward on this. But I’d never spring it on you. I want to work closely with you so we get through it together. This relates to everything else. When you withdrew your troops from the Baltics, it strengthened your credibility. As I see it, NATO expansion is not anti-Russian; it’s not intended to be exclusive of Russia, and there is no imminent timetable. And we’ll work together. I don’t want you to believe that I wake up every morning thinking only about how to make the Warsaw Pact countries a part of NATO — that’s not the way I look at it. What I do think about is how to use NATO expansion to advance the broader, higher goal of European security, unity and integration—a goal I know you share.”

Yeltsin was listening intently. “I understand,” he said when Clinton was done. “I thank you for what you’ve said. If you’re asked about this at the press conference, I’d suggest you say while the U.S. is for the expansion of NATO, the process will be gradual and lengthy. If you’re asked if you’d exclude Russia from NATO, your answer should be ‘no.’ That’s all.”

Just to be sure that Yelstin understood, Clinton promised him that U.S. policy would be guided by the motto, “the three no’s”: no surprises, no rush and no exclusion.”

That evening, during a reception and dinner at the Russian embassy, Yeltsin pronounced himself delighted with the working lunch and asked Clinton, as a personal favor, to attend the annual summit of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) in early December in Budapest. Especially given how the day had gone, Clin-

ton said “if it matters to you, Boris,” and “if there’s important business to do.”

Sometimes a good deed does get punished. As promised, Clinton flew all night to Budapest for an event where he had no real role other than keeping close to his friend. Yeltsin, however, used the opportunity to throw a temper tantrum, excoriating the United States for throwing its weight around. What seemed to have sent Yeltsin into a tirade was the conflict in Bosnia. NATO’s use of force in Bosnia was its first time going into combat in its existence. The Alliance that had been created to defend Western Europe from the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact was, with the Cold War over, stopping the first genocide in Europe since the Holocaust. For many Russians, however, Western forces were killing their fellow Orthodox Slavs. The headline out of the busted summit was Yeltsin’s warning that the world was “in danger of plunging into a cold peace.”

On Air Force One heading home, bleary-eyed and after letting off some steam, Clinton turned forgiving and philosophical. “I can’t stay mad at Boris for too long,” he said. “He’s got a tough row to hoe.” Clinton mused a bit about Yeltsin’s quote of the day: “You know,” he said, “I’ve been thinking about that ‘cold peace’ line of his. If that’s what we end up with, it ain’t great, but it sure beats the alternative.”

Those of us on the Russia beat read into Yeltsin’s outburst an omen: his heroic efforts to maintain Russia’s partnership with the United States and its Allies might get increasingly difficult as long as NATO was at war in the Balkans.

Fortunately, that didn’t happen in 1995. U.S. and Russian diplomats were collaborating in the Dayton Talks on peace in Bosnia that would produce an agreement at the end of the year.

Clinton, in Moscow for V-E Day in May, persuaded Yeltsin to begin a NATO-Russia dialogue and join the Partnership for Peace. That was an important step for developing a NATO-Russia relationship in parallel with NATO enlargement. In the fall, the two presidents met at Hyde Park, New York, and agreed on the terms of Russia’s participation alongside NATO for keeping the peace in Bosnia. Secretary Perry and Minister Grachev worked out an agreement that a Russian unit would operate under U.S. command, not the four-letter word.

The Endgame

A partial hiatus settled in 1996 so that Yeltsin could get himself re-elected without too much ruction and criticism over the four-letter word. (It was also the year that Yeltsin underwent quintuple bypass heart surgery while Clinton was winning his own second term.) With that stressful year behind them, they returned in 1997 to important, delicate, and—for Yeltsin, painful— issues.

The knottiest was the eligibility of the Baltic states for NATO membership. Lennart Meri was unmerciful and passionate on that issue. When it was clear that Estonia, along with Latvia and Lithuania, were not going to be in the first tranche of inductees, he went after me with vengeance. When dealing with him—which meant reiterating our commitment to the Baltics and being pelted with skepticism—he made me think of an Old Testament prophet who, unlike Moses, was determined to not just see the Promised Land in the distance but settle there for the rest of his life. He showed up in numerous cities where the negotiations were going on, stalking me just so I knew that there would be hell to pay if, as he put it, “my country is Yalta-ed.”

Exactly the opposite happened. Rather than being sacrificed to Moscow and Stalin like Central Europeans were at Yalta, the Baltics were Helsinki-ed by Clinton and Yeltsin. The venue of one of their most suspenseful and consequential meetings was in the Finnish capital, hosted by President Martti Ahtisaari in March 1997. (By appropriate chance, the Finns and Estonians are relatives, with similar languages.)

Clinton was in a cast and on crutches from a knee injury several days before. “Still,” he said, “I’m going into this meeting with a lot more mobility than ol’ Boris. We’ve got to use this thing to get him comfortable with what he’s got to do on NATO.”

Clinton was armed with good news about a target date for Russian accession to the World Trade Organization and using the Denver summit in June to “look and feel more like a G-8 than a G-7.” He told the team in a huddle on the plane, “It’s real simple. As we push ol’ Boris to do the right but hard thing on NATO, I want him to feel the warm, beckoning glow of doors that are opening other institutions where he’s welcome. Got it, people?”

The welcome dinner was ominous. Yeltsin was distracted, and polished off four glasses of wine and a glass of champagne. Afterward, Clinton said “It’s no good.” “Every time I see him I get the feeling that it’s part of my job to remind him that the world really is counting on him and he can’t go into the tank on us.”

During a strategy session with Clinton, Madeleine Albright, who became Secretary of State in 1997, and Sandy Berger, the national security advisor, I started to suggest some talking points about the Baltic states, but Clinton didn’t need either a script or a rehearsal.

The next morning, in a private meeting, Yeltsin seized the initiative: “The Helsinki Summit has got strategic significance not only for our two countries but for Europe and the world. It’s important so that in the future we won’t look back and say we returned to the cold war. Sliding backward is simply not acceptable... We were both voted into office for second terms, until the year 2000; neither of us will have a third term. We want to move into the 21st century with stability and tranquility... Our position has not changed. It remains a mistake for NATO to move eastward. But I need to take steps to alleviate the negative consequences of this for Russia. I am prepared to enter into an agreement with NATO, not because I want to but because it’s a step I’m compelled to take. There is no other solution for today.”

He had only one condition: Clinton had to promise that NATO would not “embrace” the Baltics. He proposed that they reach “an oral agreement—we won’t write it down. This would be a gentlemen’s agreement that won’t be made public.”

Clinton, looking relaxed, passed over the bizarre suggestion. Instead, he painted a rosy picture of a grand signing ceremony for the NATO-Russia charter: “You and I will be there to say to the world that there really is a new NATO and there really is a new Russia.”

“I agree,” said Yeltsin.

“Good,” said Clinton. “But I want you to imagine something else. If we were to agree that no members of the former Soviet Union could enter NATO, that would be a bad thing for our attempt to build a new NATO. It would also be a bad thing for your attempt to build a new Russia. I am not naïve. I understand you have an interest in who gets into NATO and when. We need to make sure that all these are subjects

that we can consult about as we move forward. ‘Consult’ means making sure that we’re aware of your concerns, and that you understand our decisions and our positions and our thinking. But consider what a terrible message it would send if we were to make the kind of supposedly secret deal you’re suggesting. First, there are no secrets in this world. Second, the message would be, ‘We’re still organized against Russia — but there’s a line across which we won’t go.’ In other words, instead of creating a new NATO that helps move toward an integrated, undivided Europe, we’d have a larger NATO that’s just sitting there waiting for Russia to do something bad.”

“Here’s why what you are proposing is bad for Russia. Russia would be saying, ‘We’ve still got an empire, but it just can’t reach as far West as it used to when we had the Warsaw Pact.’ Second, it would create exactly the fear among the Baltics and others that you’re trying to allay and that you’re denying is justified.”

“A third point: the deal you’re suggesting would totally undermine the Partnership for Peace. It would terrify the smaller countries that are now working well with you and with us in Bosnia and elsewhere. Consider our hosts here in Finland. President Ahtisaari told me last night that we’re doing the right thing in the attitude we’re taking toward the future of enlargement. He said that Finland hasn’t asked to be in NATO, and as long as no one tells Finland it can’t join NATO, then Finland will be able to maintain the independence of its position and work with PfP and with the U.S. and with Russia.”

“I’ve been repeating that I’d leave open the possibility of Russia in NATO and in any event of having a steadily improving partnership between NATO and Russia. I think we’ll have to continue to work this issue, but we should concentrate on practical matters. However, under no circumstances should we send a signal out of this meeting that it’s the same old European politics of the cold war and we’re just moving the lines around a bit.”

Clinton then explained that if Russia insisted on a legally binding treaty, opponents of the deal in the Senate would refuse to ratify it. Better, he said, was to settle for a political commitment of the kind the U.S. had been proposing as a charter.

“I agree,” said Yeltsin.

Then Clinton circled back to Yeltsin's proposed gentlemen's agreement. He said it "would make us both look weaker, not stronger. If we made the agreement you're describing it would be a terrible mistake. It would cause big problems for me and big problems for you. It would accentuate the diminishment of your power from Warsaw Pact times. The charter will be a much more powerful and positive message. It's without precedent, it's comprehensive, and it's forward looking, and it's hopeful. It will move us toward a situation that's good for both of us."

"Bill," said Yeltsin, "I agree with what you've said. But look at it from my standpoint. Whatever you do on your side, we intend to submit this document to the Duma for ratification. But the Duma will take two decisions. First, it will ratify the document, then it will attach a condition that if NATO takes in even one of the former republics of the Soviet Union, Russia will pull out of the agreement and consider it null and void. That will happen unless you tell me today, one-on-one — without even our closest aides present — that you won't take new republics in the near future. I need to hear that. I understand that maybe in ten years or something, the situation might change, but not now. Maybe there will be a later evolution. But I need assurances from you that it won't happen in the nearest future."

"Come on, Boris," said Clinton, "if I went into a closet with you and told you what you wanted to hear, the Congress would find out and pass a resolution invalidating the NATO-Russia charter. Frankly, I'd rather that the Duma pass a resolution conditioning its adherence on this point. I'd hate for the Duma to do that, but it would be better than what you're suggesting. I just can't do it. A private commitment would be the same as a public one. I've told you — and you have talked to Helmut [Kohl] and Jacques [Chirac], you know their thinking — that no one is talking about a massive, all-out, accelerated expansion. We've already demonstrated our ability to move deliberately, openly. But I can't make commitments on behalf of NATO, and I'm not going to be in the position myself of vetoing any country's eligibility for NATO, much less letting you or anyone else do so. I'm prepared to work with you on the consultative mechanism to make sure that we take account of Russia's concerns as we move forward."

"Another reason why I feel so strongly: look at Bosnia. That's the worst conflict in Europe since World War II. The Europeans couldn't

solve it. The U.S. was finally able to take an initiative there, and Russia came in and helped. It took me years to build support. What if, sometime in the future, another Bosnia arises? If the NATO-Russia understanding is done right, then Russia would be a key part of the solution, working with the U.S. and Europe. But if we create a smaller version of the larger standoff that existed during the cold war, there won't be the needed trust. This process of integrating Europe is going to take years. We need to build up the OSCE. It's not going to happen overnight. But if we make a statement now that narrows our options in the future, it will be harder to do the other good things we want to do."

"I know what a terrible problem this is for you, but I can't make the specific commitment you are asking for. It would violate the whole spirit of NATO. I've always tried to build you up and never undermine you. I'd feel I had dishonored my commitment to the alliance, to the states that want to join NATO, and to the vision that I think you and I share of an undivided Europe with Russia as a major part of it."

Yeltsin, looking glum, went to his second fallback: "Okay, but let's agree—one-on-one—that the former Soviet republics won't be in the first waves. Bill, please understand what I'm dealing with there: I'm flying back to Russia with a very heavy burden on my shoulders. It will be difficult for me to go home and not seem to have accepted NATO enlargement. Very difficult."

"Look, Boris, you're forcing an issue that doesn't need to drive a wedge between us here. NATO operates by consensus. If you decided to be in NATO, you'd probably want all the other countries to be eligible too. But that issue doesn't arise. We need to find a solution to a short-term problem that doesn't create a long-term problem by keeping alive old stereotypes about you and your intentions. If we do the wrong thing, it will erode our own position about the kind of Europe we want. I hear your message. But your suggestion is not the way to do it. I don't want to do anything that makes it seem like the old Russia and the old NATO."

"Well," Yeltsin said, "I tried."

That afternoon, at Clinton's gentle insistence, he and Yeltsin reviewed how they would handle the press conference. Sandy Berger played a journalist throwing nasty questions at the two presidents. One

was, “Have you made any secret deals here in Helsinki?” (That was the fear of Lennart Meri and the other Baltic presidents.)

With a rueful smile, Yeltsin said, “My answer will be: ‘We wanted one, but we were rejected.’”

Yevgeny Primakov, Kozyrev’s droll but canny successor as foreign minister, remarked, “Perhaps we should have one secret deal, and that’s to make Madeleine the next secretary general of NATO.”

As the two presidents got up to go face the press, Yeltsin grabbed Clinton by the hand, pumped it and said, “Bill, we have done powerful work.”

The way was open for a ceremony to activate the NATO-Russia Founding Act in Paris in May. The atmosphere among the sixteen Allied leaders, the president of Russia, and Javier Solana, the NATO secretary-general, was, on the surface, upbeat. But there was a touch of forced solemnity, and Yeltsin seemed strained. When he signed the document, he first took a huge breath, wrote his name with a flourish, then gave Solana a bear hug and a big kiss on both cheeks.

Clinton had already done his heavy lifting in Helsinki—and so did Yeltsin—clearing the way for a Madrid summit that would begin the process of admitting the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland as NATO allies in 1999 and holding the door open for other Central European applicants, including the Baltic states, in the years to come.

Epilogue

The 50th anniversary of NATO, in late April 1999, was held under a cloud. NATO was bombing Serbia because Slobodan Milošević was committing genocide in Kosovo. Clinton had hoped that Yeltsin would come for the event, but Yeltsin could not possibly attend under the circumstances. The theory going around Moscow was that NATO was using the conflict between Serbia and Kosovo as a trial run for a future war when the Alliance would separate Chechnya from Russia.

On the last day of the NATO summit, Yeltsin had a telephone conversation with Clinton. There were forces in the Duma and the military, he said, that were agitating to send a flotilla into the Mediterranean in a

show of support for Serbia, and to provide arms to Belgrade, including anti-aircraft systems that would endanger NATO pilots. Yeltsin told Clinton he had already fired one commander in the Far East who was trying to mount a battalion to go to Serbia.

Yeltsin had two suggestions, one of which sounded like a demand. The easy first was to make Victor Chernomyrdin the delegate in the diplomacy over Yugoslavia. Chernomyrdin was one of Yeltsin's several former prime ministers who had a productive relationship with Vice President Al Gore.

Then came Yeltsin's plea for a bombing pause. That was neither wise nor possible. The Allies at the meeting had just set firm conditions for a pause, and until Milošević met those, the bombing would continue.

Yeltsin exploded. "Don't push Russia into this war! You know what Russia is! You know what it has at its disposal! Don't push Russia into this!"

When Clinton heard the translation, he pursed his lips and furrowed his brow. He decided not to respond to what had come close to being a warning of the danger of nuclear war between the United States and Russia. Instead, Clinton chose to reiterate, in as positive a fashion as possible, the conditions for what Yeltsin wanted. The call, he said, had been helpful because it had "clarified" what would have to happen to bring about the pause. Clinton promised that Gore would call Chernomyrdin right away, and he would send me to Moscow to serve as a point of initial contact for the new U.S.-Russian initiative.

Suddenly soothed, Yeltsin pronounced himself satisfied: "I think our discussion was candid, constructive and balanced. We didn't let our emotions get in the way, even if I was a little more talkative than you."

"Goodbye, friend," said Clinton, relieved to be able to end the conversation on that note. "I'll see you."

Of all Clinton's conversations—face-to-face, or over the phone—this was the most dramatic of all. In a matter of minutes, the Russian president was warning the American president that they were at the brink of war, then agreeing to a U.S.-Russian diplomatic channel to deal with Milošević.

Chernomyrdin teamed up with President Martti Ahtisaari of Finland, representing the European Union, and myself, representing NATO. In the ensuing weeks, Chernomyrdin and Ahtisaari pounded Milošević into submission. Neither Ahtisaari nor Chernomyrdin were citizens of NATO countries, but both of them hewed the NATO line. Milošević hoped that Russia would protect him in the international community, but Chernomyrdin convinced him otherwise. The two envoys had brought a document of capitulation, and Milošević finally accepted it.

The bombing stopped. An international force, including NATO and Russian units, moved into Kosovo. Milošević, guilty of crimes against humanity, died in a prison cell in The Hague.

The bottom line: NATO had gone nearly 50 years never firing a shot or dropping a bomb in combat. Those munitions had been saved for the Soviet Army and its Warsaw Pact allies during the bad old days. NATO saw combat for the first time in the Balkans. Its presence there elided into a peacekeeping mission when and how it did because of the crucial and courageous role of Yeltsin.

There was irony in tragedy. His opponents used the episode to help advance their campaign to ruin his vision for Russia, and their champion would be Yeltsin's handpicked successor.

Notes

1. Gorbachev first used the word *partnerstvo* to an American official in a meeting with Reagan's Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff, Admiral William Crowe, on June 21, 1989. See Michael R. Beschloss's and my book *At the Highest Levels: The Inside of the End of the Cold War* (Boston: Little Brown, 1993), p. 83.

2. Most of the quotations from Clinton, Yeltsin, and others in this chapter are taken from my research and notes from my eight years at the State Department and from my book, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002).

3. Ronald Reagan came into office with Leonid Brezhnev on the other side of the hot line. George H. W. Bush in his early months in the Oval Office was cautious about embracing Gorbachev. Bush ordered what came to be known as the "pause" to make sure Reagan hadn't leaned too far toward trust rather than verification. A factor was skepticism from Bush's secretary of defense, Dick Cheney. During that time, Gorbachev was in despair that he had lost a friend in the White House. Bush was known in Moscow for attending funerals for Gorbachev's predecessors—Brezhnev, Yuli Andropov, and Konstantin Chernenko. An intimate of Gorbachev told me on a visit to Moscow that Gorbachev mordantly suggested that Bush's *pauza* was a signal that he was waiting for yet another funeral, "either physical or political." Fortunately, Bush threw himself into efforts to help Gorbachev.

4. See Andrei Kozyrev's chapter for more on this episode.

5. The right of any country to choose its security arrangements was a principle to which Russia had already subscribed in several international covenants, such as the 1975 Helsinki Final Act of the CSCE charter, which allows each state "to define and conduct as it wishes its relations with other States in accordance with international law." Gorbachev had used the same formulation in May 1990 when he agreed that a unified Germany should be allowed to choose its own alliances, opening the door for its membership in NATO. See also Ronald Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), pp. 37-40.