

THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

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PER E.O. 13526

2017-0222-M (1.09)
3/7/2019 KBH

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

SUBJECT: Meeting with Russian Prime Minister Putin (8)

PARTICIPANTS: U.S.
President Clinton
Secretary Albright
National Security Advisor Berger
Deputy National Security Advisor Steinberg
Counselor to the President Sosnik
Carlos Pascual (notetaker)
State Department DAS John Beyrle

Russia
Prime Minister Putin
Foreign Minister Ivanov
Russian Ambassador to Norway Kvitsinskiy
Chief of Secretariat Sechin
MFA Chkhikvishvili (notetaker)

Interpreter: Peter Afanasenko

DATE, TIME November 2, 1999, 3:00-3:50 p.m.
AND PLACE: Oslo, Norway

The President: Glad to see you again. Would you like to begin the discussion or would like me to? (U)

Prime Minister Putin: Why don't you start. (U)

The President: Let me first say how pleased I am that you came. It would not have been the same if you had not. I think your remarks were very good. And it makes a difference that you are here. With all that you have going on it would have been easy for you not to come. (C)

I want to offer some observations on Chechnya. I have now heard you talk about this, and I think about it a lot. I believe it is important to protect your sovereignty and territorial

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Classified by: Robert A. Bradtke
Reason: 1.5 (d)
Declassify On: 11/10/09

integrity and to stand against terrorism. But if the price is to incur major civilian casualties, that's too high a price to pay, and it will draw international criticism. Beyond that, I don't know if such a strategy will work because it could turn ordinary people in Chechnya against you. (S)

People often make comparisons that are not always appropriate, but I know as an American that the price of conflict can be so high that it's not worth it and that it can't be sustained. It's not because people love the Chechens that you get tough questions from the international community. There's no broad-based movement in support of Chechen independence. But you need to combine a political strategy with a military strategy. (S)

I'm worried about all those people who are affected by the conflict -- the ones who are displaced and who can't get to safety. I urge you to open the borders for these people. I'm worried about the civilian casualties and their humanitarian toll. But I'm also worried about Russia losing support from the international community. I hope you find someone to talk to or perhaps look to an intermediary like OSCE. (S)

At Istanbul, I had assumed an item we would achieve is signing a modified CFE Treaty. You've been straightforward about being over the CFE levels. It's all been above board, and there have been no denials, and I want you to know I appreciate that. But you need to decide if you want to get this Treaty done. And if so, then you need to do something on Georgia and Moldova. (S)

Back on Chechnya, I urge you to decide if there is something you can do. I've tried to avoid talking publicly about Chechnya, and I've tried to support you on your fight against terrorism. But you need a parallel political strategy where you say: "here is what we're doing in addition to our military actions." I'm concerned about the civilian casualties and the humanitarian implications. But without a political strategy you'll get the worst of both worlds -- people will die, and you will not succeed in ending the conflict. (S)

Prime Minister Putin: I appreciate what you said and I value our relations. We discussed these issues in New Zealand. Dagestan was evolving then. Let me take 30 seconds to remind you of the history. (S)

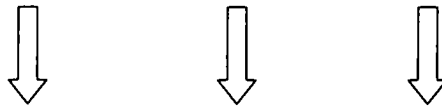
In 1996, Russia de facto recognized Chechen independence. Chechnya de facto became an independent state. Mr. Ivanov has explained internationally that this independence is legally

deferred until a referendum in 2001. But in 1996 Chechnya chose its own president. We removed all of Russia's troops and it had all its own soldiers. It developed all its own power structures. (S)

Chechnya did not set up a functional government. It broke up into internal factions. It printed counterfeit dollars. It spread drugs. There were widespread kidnappings. In effect, a criminal economy was created on the border of Russia. People were leaving their belongings and running away. (S)

But chaos was not enough. The bandits decided to carry out an armed attack on another Russian republic, Dagestan, and on another Muslim republic at that. These are Muslim extremists like you had in Iran. (S)

(Putin draws the following on a sheet of paper and shows it to the President.)



(Pointing to the right arrow he says) First they attacked us in Dagestan, and we knocked them out. (Pointing to the middle arrow) A week later they hit us again in Dagestan, and we knocked them out. (Pointing to the left arrow) Then they hit again in Dagestan and the population of Dagestan knocked them out. After that these terrorists undertook four different bomb attacks against apartments in Dagestan and in Moscow. All told 1,500 people were killed from these acts. (S)

Let me tell you in the confines of this room about a message that we intercepted from a Jordanian operating in Chechnya, Khattab, back to his backers in the Middle East. "Everyday Russia weakens. In September we hit Russia at its very core. The last time explosions like this were seen in Moscow was in World War II. The whole world, as a result, is now on the Russian side." I think you would agree with me that it is not in the United States' interest to have an extremist state between the Black Sea and the Caspian. I hope I can count on U.S. support. (S)

The humanitarian situation bothers us, too. But for you to understand, dear Mr. President, you need to know that we have taken in 700,000 people from Chechnya since the end of the last

conflict -- 200,000 Russians and 500,000 Chechens. They all left Chechnya and we accepted them. (S)

Again I will tell you in the confidentiality of this room that we have the family of Chechen President Maskhadov under our protection. No one knows this. They are in one of the refugee camps and are directly under us. A little while ago Maskhadov asked for our help to eliminate the bands of terrorists in Chechnya. Now he is saying something different. The situation is very complicated, but we will deal with it. If we can do this together [unclear if together with the United States or Maskhadov], there will be fewer losses. (S)

The extremists made a very big mistake. If they had not attacked Russia, things would have continued in their previous state. I have gone now into the freed areas of northern Chechnya and met with the Chechen elders there. For three years they did not get paid, they did not get their pensions. For two and a half years the schools did not open. The first thing they asked me was, "you won't leave us, will you?" (S)

Of course we want Chechnya to stay in the Russian Federation. That is good counsel on your part to start a dialogue. We will try to provide local autonomy, give them control over their schools, and hold elections in the future. But we have to eliminate the terrorists at their bases. (S)

Foreign journalists have reported sympathetically toward the rebels, but they are at risk. They recently took a French journalist. They are torturing him every day and took a video of this; now they want a ransom. Chechnya has reached a condition of full anarchy; this causes damage to the population. We understand the humanitarian issue. We want to work with the international community. Part of the U.S. food aid goes to Dagestan and to Chechnya. [Note: U.S. food deliveries to Dagestan and Chechnya took place in the spring of 1999, before the conflict began.] (S)

The President: How do you see resolving this conflict? (S)

Prime Minister Putin: Our strategy has three parts. Knock out the terrorists, create viable local governments and hold elections. This is what I'd like to see. In two weeks our troops can go from one end of Chechnya to another, but I have been holding them back. I don't think they should attack large cities. (S)

In the security zone we are already opening schools, paying pensions, restarting the electricity and slowly bringing things back to normal conditions. But let me tell you how dire things are. A teacher told me that even if they get paid there will be no school because the kids don't have clothes to wear. This is how extreme the poverty has become. The humanitarian issues are in the security zone as well, not just in the refugee areas. (S)

But I think what we are dealing with here is Muslim extremists. In Dagestan they created a women's Muslim battalion. Imagine that; it's amazing. Their whole lives they have believed in Allah. Now they are taking up arms in the name of Allah. It is impossible for us to do anything else now. But we will try to find someone to have a dialogue with. (S)

Yesterday Ivanov met with Ahtisaari's representative and proposed that the OSCE send a team to review the refugee situation. The EU has had people there. We are ready to cooperate. But you need to remember this is a danger zone. Foreigners need to be careful so that we don't have crimes and kidnappings happening again. (S)

The President: Let's go back to the CFE issues. (S)

Prime Minister Putin: This is simple because we want to sign the Treaty. We are open to finishing it. Minister Ivanov has been pushing the military and he is right to do that. Yesterday I made a statement that I am committed to this, and I am committed to bringing the language into line in the Treaty to let this happen. (S)

On Moldova, we want to get our troops out, but Smirnov heads up this separatist faction. If I can say so privately he is hooked up with criminal elements, and it is hard to say what motivates him. We have 15 units there. But whenever we look at removing them, Smirnov puts women and children on the train tracks to keep them from moving. (S)

Georgia is a more complicated situation. Georgia exists on paper as a unified state. In the north you have Abkhazia, in the south, Adjara -- neither of them listens to Shevardnadze. If the Georgians want us to leave right away, this will lead to difficult internal developments and there will be nothing left of Georgia. Someone will have to do the fighting for them. They have a second Abkhazia about to happen in Ossetia. These are complicated problems, and we can't allow there to be mistakes. (S)

We have no strong desire to stay in Georgia, but if we tie the CFE Treaty up with this issue, we won't get it solved. We are ready to take out the hardware; that is okay. But to close out the bases, that is another thing. We are ready to deal with all of this, but you and I can't make mistakes about these issues. Besides, the Treaty does not deal with bases. These are the issues that we have to deal with. (S)

I would like to give you this original letter from President Yeltsin on START and ABM issues. (S)

The President: Let's go back to the CFE issues. Georgia just had an election. They have new parliamentary representation. Even if this base issue won't derail the CFE Treaty, I think you must still talk to Georgia about the bases. (S)

Prime Minister Putin: The CFE Treaty does not deal with closing bases. We are exceeding our equipment levels due to the Chechnya operations, we notified that and we are not violating the CFE Treaty. (S)

In Armenia, the situation is very tough after the terrorist attack. The forces are sitting in their barracks terrified. We need to be careful and take a step-by-step approach. (S)

On Georgia, one week ago we gave them a proposal. (S)

The President: You gave a proposal to the Georgians? (S)

Foreign Minister Ivanov: Yes, we gave them a proposal on withdrawal. We have differences of opinion on time. We are over our ceiling in Georgia by some 240 armored combat vehicles. We have a difference of opinion on the time to withdraw these. (S)

On the bases, we proposed that within a year we can negotiate everything on the bases and their status. But the Georgians want it all now. The Georgians need this CFE Treaty no less than we do. Of course we recognize that Georgia is a sovereign state, and they can decide what they want, but we need a reasonable time period to work this out. We took our whole army out of Germany. We've showed we will act on our word, but we need time to work out all the details. What's the issue that's driving the Georgians to do all of this in the next two weeks? (S)

Secretary Albright: Look, there is a violent situation in Chechnya. There is a real danger it could infect the South

Caucasus, and it needs to be defused for the sake of the entire region. On Chechnya, there's no getting around the need to talk, perhaps with a third party as an intermediary. On Georgia, we don't think there is any ambiguity. They've made it clear that they don't want Russian troops based on their border. (S)

National Security Advisor Berger: Let me add to that. If we go to Istanbul and sign the CFE Treaty, we are going to be asked how can you sign the Treaty if Russia is out of compliance? If we say that Russia has disclosed its force levels and stated its intention to comply, people will say that is not enough. It is important to say we have a schedule with Moldova and Georgia and that we can show that the Treaty is not just about future promises. (S)

Prime Minister Putin: We can continue to negotiate, but it is not clear how quickly we can do this. (S)

Foreign Minister Ivanov: President Yeltsin called Shevardnadze and proposed that our Defense Minister go down to Georgia for negotiations. First Shevardnadze said yes, then he said no. (S)

Prime Minister Putin: There is another problem here. When our army leaves, the locals don't allow us to take our equipment. Imagine leaving these huge areas with weapons and arms caches. We don't want to arm separatists. The consequences would be disastrous. (S)

The President: Let me turn to another issue that relates to Boris' letter. I know we have differences on missile defense, but we need to keep working on this, and I have to ask you to tone down the rhetoric. If this technology becomes available, I don't want to keep it just for the United States; I will make it available to our friends and partners. Boris sent me a serious letter. Tell him I will respond personally and in detail. (S)

Prime Minister Putin: We will continue to talk. This is an important issue, and we should not undo all we have accomplished in arms control. Anyway, everything is written in the letter, so there is no need for me to repeat it. (S)

On Chechnya, the question is how we crush this base of terrorism but take minimal losses. Well, what will be done will be done. We have a solid military strategy. We will attack areas with terrorists. But how can we negotiate with terrorists. The Russian people would never accept this. We need to find those we can deal with. (S)

We need to continue our cooperation on law enforcement. The Minister of Interior was just in the United States and he met with the FBI, the CIA and others. Secretary Albright had a meeting with him. It was a constructive visit. (S)

We are working on our money-laundering legislation, and we will adopt a draft in the near future. (S)

The President: Good. That's very important. (S)

Prime Minister Putin: We plan to join the international convention against money laundering. There are more areas for us to work. (S)

We want Istanbul to be a good normal summit. (S)

The President: Me too. But we need to be careful about how it will play and how other issues on the international screen are going to affect it. (S)

Secretary Albright: We would be very upset as well if we had experienced terrorist bombings in our country. But it seems there are two separate problems here, and it may help to separate how you deal with them. One is the issue of terrorism and how you respond to that. The other is a humanitarian problem, particularly now that displaced people cannot get across the border. We cannot support you as you go deeper and deeper into Chechen territory and the humanitarian problem gets worse. You need to do something on the humanitarian issue and get a political dialogue going. (S)

Prime Minister Putin: I agree we need to find a partner, but I don't know how we are going to do this. (S)

The President: I think you have to. You can't solve this with just one arrow in your quiver. This conflict may be playing well for you at home, but not internationally. Criticism keeps mounting. In my experience, politics and reality eventually become aligned, and you need to keep this in mind. So I hope you find someone to deal with in a forthright way and that you reduce the civilian casualties. (S)

Prime Minister Putin: I agree. Can we say we have commonality in strategy? (S)

The President: You put me in a difficult position. What if there is another attack where you shell civilians? How can I say that I agree with that? We can say that we agree on the need to find a political solution and that we understand the need to fight terrorists. I like the idea of getting terrorists if you can separate them out. In the end, you need to reach an accommodation of some kind that doesn't undermine your territorial integrity. (S)

Prime Minister Putin: You understand that we cannot sit back and wait. We have to go after the terrorists where they are. (S)

Secretary Albright: But indiscriminate bombing will cause problems. (S)

Prime Minister Putin: There will be no massive bombing campaign, no carpet-bombing. We have a sound military operation going. Listen to what the CIA tells you, not what the bandits say. Yes, we've made some mistakes. Our pilots have hit our own people on our own territory. But we agree on the principle of dialogue as you propose, and we are working on it. (S)

NSA Berger: I'm afraid I have to be the bad guy and say that we are out of time. (U)

The President: Thank you. (U)

Prime Minister Putin: Our thanks go to you. You have raised our consciousness. I wanted also to tell you that President Yeltsin may go to Istanbul. (S)

The President: The last OSCE Summit where I saw Boris I flew nine hours to get there, I was six hours on the ground, and I flew nine hours back -- 18 hours in the air -- and Boris chewed me out over something; I can't remember what (laughter.) But you tell Boris that I miss him, and I would love to see him at Istanbul. (S)

-- End of Conversation --