Bill and Boris: A Window Into a Most Important Post-Cold War Relationship

James Goldgeier

Texas National Security Review: Volume 1, Issue 4 (August 2018)
Print: ISSN 2576-1021 Online: ISSN 2576-1153

Against the backdrop of an enormous power differential between their two countries, Clinton and Yeltsin established a close personal rapport. They used those positive feelings to interact effectively even when they were being frank in their disagreements, the most serious of which were over NATO enlargement — a major sore spot for Yeltsin — and the Kosovo War, the greatest test of the two leaders' personal relationship.

Editor's Note: In light of the public interest in U.S.-Russian relations, especially in the aftermath of President Donald Trump's meeting with President Vladimir Putin in Helskinki this summer, the Texas National Security Review *will be publishing a series of essays in our "Strategist" section on past U.S. presidents and their engagements with Soviet and Russian leaders.*

As many were decrying the lack of any formal record of the one-on-one meeting between President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Helsinki, the Clinton Presidential Library in July posted online nearly all of the declassified memoranda of conversation ("memcons") from the in-person meetings and telephone conversations ("telcons") between President Bill Clinton and Russian President Boris Yeltsin from Jan. 23, 1993, to Dec. 31, 1999, when Yeltsin abruptly resigned from office and made way for Putin. With 18 memcons and 56 telcons available through the library's website, it is possible to view directly the key discussions between these two leaders over time, from the early days when Clinton publicly backed Yeltsin in his bloody political standoff with the Russian parliament to their later disagreements over NATO enlargement and Kosovo, along with numerous conversations about arms control, Chechnya, Iran, and other global issues.[1]

As someone who worked in the Clinton administration and has written about U.S.-Russian relations in this period,[2] I found that the documents allow a much deeper and broader understanding of three core features of the Clinton-Yeltsin interactions. First, the two leaders established a close personal rapport and used those positive feelings to interact effectively even when they were being frank in their disagreements, the most serious of which were over NATO enlargement and the Kosovo War. Throughout, from the 1993 political turmoil in Russia through the 1998 Russian financial crisis and beyond, Clinton offered Yeltsin his full personal support.

Second, the two men used their meetings and phone calls to build trust in one another by explicitly referring to delivering on promises made in their prior conversations. This proved particularly important in their discussions of NATO enlargement. Clinton was trying to thread a needle: He sought to keep the issue from harming Yeltsin's reelection bid in the summer of 1996 while ensuring that the United States responded to Central and Eastern European desires to join the Western alliance. Because Clinton believed the issue would affect his own reelection bid, he wanted to make clear to voters of Central and Eastern European descent in the Midwest before November 1996 that he was moving forward with enlargement. From 1994 to 1996, Clinton reminded Yeltsin often of his assurances about the timing.

Third, and perhaps most important when their interactions are compared with those of other U.S. and Soviet (and later Russian) heads of state during the Cold War and after, an enormous power differential existed between the two countries

1 The documents are in two files labeled "Declassified Documents Concerning Russian President Boris Yeltsin." The first covers the period from Jan. 23, 1993, to April 21, 1996, and can be found at https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57568. The second covers the period from April 21, 1996, to Dec. 31, 1999, and can be found at https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569. The letters they sent one another have not been declassified.

2 James M. Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy Toward Russia After the Cold War* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003).

in this period and was the backdrop to their conversations. Yeltsin's Russia was extremely weak, a country in economic free-fall and strategic decline. Clinton's America was enjoying its unipolar moment.[3] In no other era before or since has the Russian president been in such a weak position when meeting with his American counterpart, and the declassified memcons and telcons from this period show how that imbalance of power permeates the discussions. The meetings largely consist of Yeltsin agreeing to Clinton's requests after some back and forth. But also clear is Yeltsin's desire for Russia to be seen as an equal to the United States, something that was important for his predecessors and successors alike and a factor in U.S.-Russian relations often underappreciated by many in the West.

Clinton's Support for Yeltsin and the Building of a Personal Rapport

In his first term, Boris Yeltsin needed Bill Clinton's support as he battled domestic Russian opposition to his policies. It was not just financial support for Russia that was critical, although that assistance was important, including when Clinton publicly endorsed what became a $10.2 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund announced in the midst of the 1996 Russian presidential campaign.[4] Clinton also offered Yeltsin complete public support when the latter used military force in a standoff with the Russian parliament in the fall of 1993. Clinton did so because he believed he needed Yeltsin — a Russian president committed to good relations with the West who could thereby enable the American president to shrink the U.S. defense budget to pay for cherished domestic programs.

One of the first big moments in their relationship came in April 1993, when Yeltsin held a referendum that asked voters whether they trusted him, approved of his socioeconomic policies, and believed new presidential and parliamentary elections should be conducted ahead of schedule. Russia experts in the U.S. government thought that Yeltsin would lose overwhelmingly, and Clinton's top Russia adviser, Strobe Talbott, wrote later that the president "followed the referendum as though it were an American election." Remarkably, given the state of the Russian economy, 58.7 percent of voters affirmed their trust in Yeltsin and 53 percent approved of his socioeconomic policies. Clinton happily threw his support behind the Russian president.[5] In a call the next day, Clinton told Yeltsin, "I'm about to issue a statement in support of your policies. I want you to know that we're in this with you for the long haul." Yeltsin closed the call by saying, "I hug you from the bottom of my heart."[6]

By September, however, parliamentary opposition to Yeltsin grew stronger. Clinton called Yeltsin early that month to convey his continued support amid the standoff in Moscow. In a follow-up call on Sept. 21, Yeltsin told him, "Bill, the Supreme Soviet [the Russian parliament] has totally gone out of control. It no longer supports the reform process. They have become communist. We can no longer put up with that." He added, "I think there will be no bloodshed,"[7] which turned out to be mistaken.

The battle between Yeltsin and the opposition legislators came to a head on Oct. 3, when Yeltsin ordered his military to shell the parliament building. A bloody clash between the executive and legislative branches was not exactly a sign of a healthy democracy, but Clinton phoned two days later to tell Yeltsin, "I wanted to call you and express my support." Yeltsin responded, "Now that these events are over, we have no more obstacles to Russia's democratic elections and our transition to democracy and market economy." Yeltsin even mused that he might hold elections for president at the same time as parliamentary elections in December and told Clinton that he "might end up in the Guinness Book of World Records for standing for election three times in three years."

3 Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990/1991), https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1991-02-01/unipolar-moment.

4 Paul Quinn-Judge, "Clinton Gives Yeltsin a Vote of Confidence; Declares Support for $9 Billion Loan," *Boston Globe*, Jan. 31, 1996. The agreed-upon loan amount ended up being $10.2 billion. See Michael Gordon, "Russia and I.M.F. Agree on a Loan for $10.2 Billion," *New York Times*, Feb. 23, 1996, https://www.nytimes.com/1996/02/23/world/russia-and-imf-agree-on-a-loan-for-10.2-billion.html. See also the Clinton-Yeltsin discussion of the loan in Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "The President's Discussion with President Yeltsin on the Russian Election, Bilateral Relations, START II Ratification and NATO," Feb. 21, 1996, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57568, 357.

5 Goldgeier and McFaul, *Power and Purpose*, 125; Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy* (New York: Random House, 2002), 70.

6 Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telcon with President Yeltsin of Russia," April 26, 1993, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57568, 51–52.

7 Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of the Russian Federation," Sept. 7, 1993, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57568, 95; Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russian Federation," Sept. 21, 1993, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57568, 107.

(He did not carry out this plan.) Yeltsin closed by telling Clinton once again, "I embrace you with all my heart."[8]

Clinton continued to emphasize his personal support for Yeltsin over the course of their terms in office. In late 1994, Russia invaded the breakaway province of Chechnya. Clinton expressed concern about the impact of this war on Yeltsin's image.

In no other era before or since has the Russian president been in such a weak position when meeting with his American counterpart.

Referring to an upcoming speech by the Russian president to parliament, Clinton told him, referring to Yeltsin's pivotal role during the August 1991 coup against Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, "It is also an opportunity to remind the world of why you are the best hope for continued reform in Russia. I want everyone to see you as the person who stood on the tank and stood up for freedom."[9]

In the run-up to the first round of the Russian presidential election in June 1996, Yeltsin was growing desperate for financial assistance. He told the U.S. president, "Bill, for my election campaign, I urgently need for Russia a loan of $2.5 billion." Yeltsin explained that he was not seeing results yet from the rescheduling of Russia's debt by the group of major creditor countries known as the Paris Club, and the bulk of the recently announced IMF loan would not arrive until later in the year. "But the problem," said Yeltsin, "is I need money to pay pensions and wages." Clinton assured him, "I'll check on this with the IMF and some of our friends and see what can be done."[10]

No matter what challenges they faced, domestically or in their relationship, they maintained a strong personal bond. In a telephone exchange in late October 1997, months after the two had met in Denver in June, Yeltsin told Clinton, "You know, I started missing your voice." Clinton replied, "I miss you too." (They had a similar exchange in February 1998 only three weeks after their previous call!)[11]

Clinton saw Yeltsin as a significant figure in Russian history, and he tried to convey that at various points. At a meeting in May 1998, Clinton said, "You know, Boris, we really are working with the stuff of history here. I'm convinced that 20 years from now, when the Russian economy is booming, people will look back and say we were right; we did the right things. I just hope you get all the credit you deserve while you're still around, because you've done a terrific job of leading your country during one of the two or three most important moments in Russian history."[12]

The greatest test of their personal relationship came during the Kosovo bombing campaign in March 1999. Clinton and his European counterparts believed that NATO needed to carry out airstrikes against Serbia to bring its leader, Slobodan Milosevic, to the bargaining table. Yeltsin was stridently opposed to any use of force, not just because of the close ties between Russia and Serbia but partly because, unlike the situation in Bosnia a few years earlier, this would mean military intervention in the internal affairs of a sovereign country. Russia's ability to wield a veto in the U.N. Security Council meant that authorization for the war from that body would not be forthcoming.[13]

In a phone conversation between the two men as NATO was about to launch airstrikes, Clinton, after rehashing all that Milosevic had done, told Yeltsin bluntly, "Basically, it will be your decision if you decide to let this bully destroy the relationship we worked hard for over six and a half years to build up." He reminded Yeltsin of all his public and private support over the years, including providing economic assistance to Russia and his multiple

8 Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russian Federation," Oct. 5, 1993, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57568, 119–21.

9 Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telephone Conversation with Russian President Yeltsin: Chechnya, START II," Feb. 13, 1995, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57568, 269.

10 Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telephone Conversation with Russian President Yeltsin on CTBT, Chechnya, Economics, CFE and Russian Election," May 7, 1996, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569, 26–27.

11 Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telephone Conversation with Russian President Yeltsin," Oct. 30, 1997, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569, 183; Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telephone Conversation with Russian President Boris Yeltsin, Feb. 23, 1998, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569, 253.

12 Memorandum of Conversation, "President Boris Yeltsin of Russia," Birmingham, England, May 17, 1998, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569, 316.

13 John Norris, *Collision Course: NATO, Russia, and Kosovo* (New York: Praeger, 2005).

visits to Moscow. "You may decide to let this get in the way of our relationship, but I'm not going to because I do not think he's that important. I'm sorry he is a Serb. I wish he were Irish or something else, but he is not." Clinton tried telling Yeltsin that maybe after a few strikes, Milosevic would seek diplomacy; after all, he had come to the table in 1995 to end the earlier Balkan war.

Yeltsin would have none of it: "[O]ur people will certainly from now have a bad attitude with regard to America and with NATO. I remember how difficult it was for me to try and turn the heads of our people, the heads of the politicians towards the West, towards the United States, but I succeeded in doing that, and now to lose all that. Well, since I failed to convince the President, that means there is in store for us a very difficult, difficult road of contacts, if they prove to be possible." He signed off with "Goodbye," with no added embrace.[14]

The latter part of the war led to quite an up-and-down in their conversations. In early May 1999, as they were coming to agreement on what needed to be done, Yeltsin told Clinton, "I owe you a bear hug." Clinton replied, "Yes, I want a bear hug."[15] Clinton called Yeltsin on June 10, after discussions between Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, and Milosevic appeared to end the conflict, and Yeltsin told him, "I would like to hug and kiss you, and I am sincerely glad that in such a difficult situation our friendship wasn't broken."[16]

Alas, in the next few days, Russian forces occupied the airport in Pristina, and it looked like NATO and Russian forces might come into conflict. Clinton and Yeltsin spoke multiple times by phone. Clinton made clear that a failure to resolve the conflict would harm the upcoming Group of Eight meeting in Germany: "We were about to have in Cologne a celebration of Russia in the peace operation," an angry Clinton remarked. "Instead, we face day after day, international embarrassment that Kosovo will be wrecked."[17]

Russia's weakness and Yeltsin's desire to be feted by his G-8 colleagues in Cologne were key factors in the ultimate resolution of the conflict but so, too, was the importance of the relationship the two presidents had built, a relationship that was tested over the years by the U.S. decision to expand NATO eastward.

Clinton's Promises on Enlargement

Perhaps no issue provides a greater window into the nature of the relationship between the two presidents than their lengthy discussions from 1994 to 1997 about NATO enlargement. An undercurrent of their exchanges involved Clinton's efforts to ensure that he did not harm Yeltsin politically while giving him a very bitter pill to swallow. Another recurrence was Yeltsin's explanation of the damage this issue was doing to him while ultimately going along with Clinton's various proposals. There was a brief moment in the fall of 1994 when Yeltsin believed that Clinton was reneging on a commitment not to rush the process and exploded at a Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) summit. The huge power imbalance between the two countries hung over the relationship and punctuated the presidents' interactions.[18]

In their meetings and phone calls, Clinton drove the agenda, as he did for nearly all of the issues they discussed over seven years. The two men genuinely got along, partly because they were similar political animals. But at the end of the day, the United States called the shots in the relationship. Clinton was always trying to make sure that Yeltsin knew he was giving him what he could, and Clinton expected Yeltsin to go along with his proposals. Generally, Yeltsin did. Throughout their conversations on enlargement, Clinton was eager for Yeltsin to know that the United States was keeping a promise Clinton made in September 1994 in one of their discussions in Washington (the declassified memcon of this exchange is not among the cache of documents recently released): namely, that he and his NATO colleagues would go slowly on expanding the alliance given Clinton's (publicly unstated but understood) desire to see Yeltsin safely reelected in 1996. Meanwhile, Yeltsin focused Clinton's attention on the domestic

14 Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telephone Conversation with Russian President Yeltsin," March 24, 1999, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569, 432–36. Note that the document is dated 1998, but given the content and the placement in the records, it is clear the call was from 1999.

15 Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telephone Conversation with Russian President Yeltsin," May 2, 1999, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569, 472.

16 Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telcon with President Yeltsin of Russia," June 10, 1999, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569, 488.

17 Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telephone Conversation with Russian President Yeltsin," June 13, 1999, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569, 535.

18 For more on the impact of NATO enlargement on their relationship, see Goldgeier and McFaul, *Power and Purpose*.

political ramifications of NATO enlargement. Interestingly, he did not raise the issue (as others later would) that the United States and its Western European allies had assured Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev during the 1990 negotiations over German unification that NATO would not expand eastward.[19]

In October 1993, when discussions first began in earnest about NATO's future, the possibility of enlargement seemed quite distant. Secretary of State Warren Christopher explained to Yeltsin at the latter's country dacha that the United States planned to pursue the "Partnership for Peace," which would include all members of the former Warsaw Pact, and NATO enlargement would be considered only as a "longer-term eventuality."[20]

Christopher told Yeltsin, "There could be no recommendation to ignore or exclude Russia from full participation in the future security of Europe. As a result of our study, a 'Partnership for Peace' would be recommended to the [January 1994] NATO summit which would be open to all members of the [North Atlantic Cooperation Council] including all European and [former Soviet] states. There would be no effort to exclude anyone and there would be no step taken at this time to push anyone ahead of others." Yeltsin was obviously relieved. "This is a brilliant idea, it is a stroke of genius," he said. "It is important that there is an idea of partnership for all and not new membership for some." Yeltsin exclaimed, "It really is a great idea, really great," adding, "Tell Bill I am thrilled by this brilliant stroke."[21]

In late December, a few weeks before Clinton was to meet Yeltsin in Moscow after the NATO summit, the two men spoke by phone. The primary purpose was to discuss the recent Russian parliamentary elections and for Clinton to remind Yeltsin of how the United States had delivered on the economic assistance announced at their first meeting, in Vancouver, the previous April. Clinton stated simply, "I will be in Brussels for the NATO summit and in Prague before I see you and will want to discuss Russian participation in NATO's Partnership for Peace proposal." Yeltsin responded that he had recently met with NATO Secretary General Manfred Woerner: "We discussed a plan of action for the countries of Eastern Europe to cooperate with NATO in a way that would not be at the expense of Russia and also a plan of action for Russia to join NATO." While Clinton did not respond to Yeltsin's comment, their discussion was quite cordial; after all, as far as Yeltsin understood, NATO enlargement was not on the table in a serious way.[22]

While the Clinton library collection does not contain the declassified memcon from the presidents' January 1994 summit in Moscow, nor the specific discussion they had regarding NATO that September in Washington, Clinton's top Russia adviser, Talbott, has written that in the latter meeting Clinton told Yeltsin that NATO was going to expand but tried to reassure him that he had no timetable yet. "We're going to move forward on this, but I'd never spring it on you." Clinton said there would be "no surprises, no rush, and no exclusion." He then added, "As I see it, NATO expansion is not anti-Russia. ... 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."[23]

Clinton knew Yeltsin was not going to be happy,

19 See Mary Elise Sarotte, "Perpetuating U.S. Preeminence: The 1990 Deals to 'Bribe the Soviets Out' and Move NATO In," *International Security* 35, no. 1 (Summer 2010): 110–37, https://doi.org/10.1162/ISEC_a_00005; Mary Elise Sarotte, "Not One Inch Eastward? Bush, Baker, Kohl, Genscher, Gorbachev, and the Origin of Russian Resentment toward NATO Enlargement in February 1990," *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 1 (January 2010): 119–40, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2009.00835.x; Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shifrinson, "Deal or No Deal? The End of the Cold War and the U.S. Offer to Limit NATO Expansion," *International Security* 40, no. 4 (Spring 2016): 7–44, https://www.mitpressjournals.org/doi/pdf/10.1162/ISEC_a_00236. For arguments that the notion of promises or assurances are mistaken, see, for example, Mark Kramer, "The Myth of a No-NATO-Enlargement Pledge to Russia," *Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2009): 39–61, https://doi.org/10.1080/01636600902773248; James M. Goldgeier, *Not Whether But When: The U.S. Decision to Enlarge NATO* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1999); Steven Pifer, "Did NATO Promise Not to Enlarge? Gorbachev Says 'No,'" Brookings Institution, Nov. 6, 2014, https://www.brookings.edu/blog/up-front/2014/11/06/did-nato-promise-not-to-enlarge-gorbachev-says-no/.

20 "Secretary Christopher's Meeting with President Yeltsin," Moscow, Oct. 22, 1993, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/dc.html?doc=4390822-Document-08-Secretary-Christopher-s-meeting-with. This document was posted by the National Security Archive at George Washington University earlier this year and was declassified through a Freedom of Information Act request I made many years ago.

21 For a discussion of this meeting's importance for future developments, see James Goldgeier, "Promises Made, Promises Broken? What Yeltsin Was Told About NATO in 1993 and Why It Matters," *War on the Rocks*, July 12, 2016, https://warontherocks.com/2016/07/promises-made-promises-broken-what-yeltsin-was-told-about-nato-in-1993-and-why-it-matters/.

22 Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of the Russian Federation," Dec. 22, 1993, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57568, 144–45. Unfortunately, the declassified memcon from their meeting in Moscow in January 1994 is not included in the cache of documents recently made available by the Clinton library.

23 Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, 136; Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 90. For an explanation of how U.S. policy developed from January to September 1994, see Goldgeier, *Not Whether But When*.

so he kept emphasizing that he was promising not to spring anything on Yeltsin and that "no exclusion" meant that Russia would be eligible to join someday. In reality, it was no exclusion in theory but not in practice. Russia was not going to become a NATO member. Even so, Clinton had reason to believe he was managing the process well; after all, Yeltsin told him in a phone call on Oct. 5, 1994, that "the Washington Summit proved a success."[24]

At their September meeting, Yeltsin asked Clinton to come to the CSCE summit in Budapest that December. The CSCE was being upgraded to the OSCE (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), and Yeltsin wanted to signal that perhaps there could be alternatives to NATO in addressing European security. Clinton agreed to go. He kept that promise even after the 1994 midterm elections resulted in a Republican takeover of both houses of Congress for the first time in four decades. His White House team scheduled a congressional reception the night of the Budapest summit precisely to try to keep the president from leaving town. But Clinton's foreign policy team said he had to go, and he did.[25] It turned out to be the most disastrous public encounter the two presidents would have.

On Dec. 1, the NATO foreign ministers announced that they would complete a study by the end of 1995 (i.e., a half-year before the 1996 Russian presidential election) on how NATO would enlarge. Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, who had gone to Brussels to sign Russia's Partnership for Peace program document and a document on a NATO-Russia dialogue, was ordered by a furious Yeltsin not to sign.

At the Budapest summit a few days later, Clinton gave what his deputy secretary of state, Talbott, described later as the "most in your face" manifestation of the U.S. position on NATO enlargement. In remarks Talbott said were drafted not in his office but within the National Security Council (where National Security Adviser Anthony Lake had been pushing NATO enlargement for more than a year), Clinton declared, "We must not allow the Iron Curtain to be replaced by a veil of indifference. We must not consign new democracies to a gray zone." He added that "no country outside will be allowed to veto expansion."[26]

Yeltsin publicly responded, "Europe, not having yet freed itself from the heritage of the Cold War, is in danger of plunging into a cold peace."[27] Clinton was stunned and angered by the tone of Yeltsin's remarks. Talbott, who was not on the trip, thought he might be fired for not having adequately prepared his boss for what would occur.[28]

Perhaps no issue provides a greater window into the nature of the relationship between the two presidents than their lengthy discussions from 1994 to 1997 about NATO enlargement.

Soon, however, Clinton had things seemingly back on track thanks in part to visits by others in his administration, including Vice President Al Gore, to see Yeltsin. In advance of his own trip to Moscow in May 1995, Clinton called Yeltsin to discuss NATO. "We recognize how sensitive this issue is for you. That is why I want to assure you that this process is proceeding along a path that is consistent with what you and I agreed upon last September and that Vice President Gore reiterated to you when he saw you in December." Yeltsin responded, "I fully agree with you on that." Clinton added, "For the future stability of Europe, it is important that Russia is a vital part of the new security structures that are emerging. That means OSCE, the post-COCOM [the Coordinating Committee for Multilateral Export Controls established by the West after World War II] regime, the new NATO — all of them. None of this can develop

24 Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telephone Conversation with Russian President Yeltsin," Oct. 5, 1994, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57568, 227. Note that the document itself is dated 1993, but the content and the date on the transmittal memorandum make clear that it is from 1994.

25 Goldgeier and McFaul, *Power and Purpose*, 189–90.

26 Talbott, *The Russia Hand*, 141; "Remarks by the President at Plenary Session of 1994 Summit of the Council on Security and Cooperation in Europe," White House Office of the Press Secretary, Dec. 5, 1994, https://clintonwhitehouse6.archives.gov/1994/12/1994-12-05-president-remarks-at-csce-summit-in-budapest.html.

27 Daniel Williams, "Yeltsin, Clinton Clash over NATO's Role," *Washington Post*, Dec. 6, 1994, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1994/12/06/yeltsin-clinton-clash-over-natos-role/19b7b3a1-abd1-4b1e-b4b2-362f1a236ce9/.

28 Goldgeier and McFaul, *Power and Purpose*, 192.

normally unless Russia is involved in the process." Yeltsin stated, "We'll both have difficult discussions with regards to NATO, but I'm confident we'll be able to find an acceptable solution for this issue." Clinton then reported that Secretary of State Christopher and Russian Foreign Minister Kozyrev had just described to him a proposal for the upcoming NATO foreign ministers' meeting that would again affirm that there would be no acceleration of the enlargement process, announce a strengthening of the Partnership for Peace, and begin discussions about a NATO-Russia special relationship.[29]

Nevertheless, the issue remained an enormous sore spot for Yeltsin and a domestic political problem. In a three-hour meeting at the Kremlin on May 10, 1995, Yeltsin asked for a better understanding of what Clinton was doing on NATO enlargement "because now I see nothing but humiliation for Russia if you proceed. How do you think it looks to us if one bloc continues to exist while the Warsaw Pact has been abolished?" He called it a "new form of encirclement" and repeated his plea to develop a new pan-European security architecture.

"You and I are heading for elections," Yeltsin said. "The extremists and hardliners are exploiting this issue for their own purposes — on both sides. I am being attacked from both the right and the left on this. We need a common European space that provides for overall security. So let's postpone any change in NATO until 1999 or 2000. … But for me to agree to the borders of NATO expanding toward those of Russia — that would constitute a betrayal on my part of the Russian people." Instead, Yeltsin said in desperation, "Let's say that Russia will give every state that wants to join NATO a guarantee that we won't infringe on its security."

When Clinton asked rhetorically whether the United States still needed to maintain a security relationship with Europe, Yeltsin fired back, "I'm not so sure you do." Clinton tied his approach to the Victory Day ceremony for which he had come to Moscow and the lessons of history. "Our goal is for the U.S. to stay in Europe and promote a unified, integrated Europe." He was doing that, he said, by trying to make the Partnership for Peace important, keeping open the door to Russian NATO membership, creating a special NATO-Russia relationship, and ensuring that the NATO membership review process was a deliberate one. Clinton reminded Yeltsin of how this process had unfolded, that he had told Yeltsin in January 1994 that NATO was open to taking in new members, and that in December NATO had agreed to study how to do it. Responding to that study would take the first half of 1996, said Clinton. For Yeltsin, this time frame was vital because, the Russian leader noted, "my position heading into the 1996 elections is not exactly brilliant."

Clinton, however, had his own political concerns. He explained to Yeltsin that the Republicans were using NATO expansion in their effort to win over voters of Central European descent in Wisconsin, Illinois, and Ohio. He suggested to Yeltsin that they accept what each other needed to do politically. Yeltsin would not have to embrace expansion. Clinton would not say he was slowing down the process. And meanwhile Yeltsin should sign the documents for Russia to join the Partnership for Peace and to establish a NATO-Russian dialogue:

> So here is what I want to do. I've made it clear I'll do nothing to accelerate NATO. I'm trying to give you now, in this conversation, the reassurance you need. But we need to be careful that neither of us appears to capitulate. For you, that means you're not going to embrace expansion; for me, it means no talk about slowing the process down or putting it on hold or anything like that.

Then Clinton told Yeltsin to sign the two documents. Yeltsin asked again that NATO move forward only *after* his election. Clinton reiterated the timetable, trying to reassure Yeltsin that nothing concrete would happen until after the summer of 1996. Yeltsin said they should publicly say they discussed the issue, understood each other, and would discuss the issue further at their next meeting. Clinton responded, "Good. So join PFP." Yeltsin agreed.[30]

A few months before the NATO leaders' 1997 announcement in Madrid that the alliance was inviting Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic to join, Yeltsin made one last effort to shape the future at a small meeting with Clinton in Helsinki on March 21. He opened by acknowledging the inevitable. "Our position has not changed," Yeltsin said. "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

29 Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Presidential Telephone Call," April 27, 1995, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57568, 281–82.

30 "Summary report on One-On-One Meeting Between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin," St. Catherine's Hall, The Kremlin, May 10, 1995, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57568, 290–96.

agreement with NATO not because I want to but because it is a forced step. There is no other solution for today."

Yeltsin sought a legally binding accord, signed by all 16 NATO members, that would make clear that NATO decisions would not be made "without taking into account the concerns or opinions of Russia." He also wanted assurance that no nuclear or conventional arms would move into the new members' territory, "thus creating a new cordon sanitaire aimed at Russia."

Then he put on the table what he most wanted. "[O]ne thing is very important: enlargement should also not embrace the former Soviet republics. I cannot sign any agreement without such language. Especially Ukraine." Recognizing he was unlikely to receive this, he changed tack slightly,

> I propose that in the statement we could accept the fact that Russia has no claims on other countries. In fact, regarding the countries of the former Soviet Union, let us have a verbal, gentlemen's agreement — we would not write it down in the statement — that no former Soviet republics would enter NATO. This gentlemen's agreement would not be made public.

Clinton responded that he was "trying to change NATO." He had language in the proposed agreement between NATO and Russia on nuclear and conventional forces. And he wanted to make sure they signed something before the NATO summit "so we can say to the world that there is a new NATO and a new Russia and that's the right spirit," to which Yeltsin agreed. But Clinton added that he couldn't make an agreement on former Soviet republics: "it would be a bad thing for our attempt to build a new NATO, but it would also be a bad thing for your attempt to build a new Russia." NATO was assisting the process of building an "integrated, undivided Europe." Clinton argued what Yeltsin was proposing would mean "Russia would be saying, 'we have still got an empire, but it just can't reach as far West.'" Clinton didn't want to come out of the meeting having discussed new lines being drawn in Europe, and he wouldn't be able to go forward with a treaty because of Senate opposition.

Yeltsin tried again, saying that the Duma would likely make this a condition of its ratification of a NATO-Russia charter. He asked Clinton to tell him what he wanted to hear "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." Clinton shot back,

> If I went into a closet with you and told you that, the Congress would find out and pass a resolution invalidating the NATO-

> Russia charter. I'd rather frankly that the Duma pass a resolution conditioning its adherence on this point. I just can't do it. A private commitment would be the same as a public one. … 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.

Yeltsin tried one last time to get what he wanted, but to no avail, and so they moved on to other items.[31]

At their last meeting, in Istanbul in November 1999, Yeltsin said to Clinton, "I ask you one thing. Just give Europe to Russia. The U.S. is not in Europe. Europe should be the business of Europeans. Russia is half European and half Asian. … Bill, I'm serious. Give Europe to Europe itself. We have the power in Russia to protect all of Europe, including those with missiles."[32] This was, of course, not a statement the United States would take seriously, and it was hard enough for Russia to be taken seriously by the United States as an equal.

The Imbalance of Power and Russia's Drive for Equal Status

Yeltsin's desire to be seen as an equal, and Clinton's efforts to provide window dressing to help with appearances, permeated their conversations throughout the two presidents' time in office, and not only during their conversations over NATO enlargement. During the September 1994 Washington summit, Yeltsin said, "[T]here are some people in the White House and Congress who believe that Russia has lost its superpower status. Of course, not you personally, Bill." Clinton responded, "I have tried in every way to relate to Russia and to you as a great power and to enhance your role, whether in the G-7 or bilaterally."[33]

Still, neither could escape the fact that the two countries occupied completely different status levels in the international system. At their May 1995 meeting in Moscow, Clinton said to Yeltsin, "You have to walk through the doors that we open for you."[34] The Russians wanted to be treated as equals, and the idea of walking through doors the United States was opening for them made clear that they were not.

The dynamic was such, however, that when Yeltsin got spun up on these issues, Clinton would soothe him. In a one-on-one meeting (with Talbott and Yeltsin's assistant Dmitry Ryurikov as notetakers) in Moscow in April 1996, Yeltsin came into the meeting clearly angry because Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov had told him that the United States was trying to sideline Russia in the Middle East. Clinton said, "That's not correct. No one's sidelining anybody." When Yeltsin said he was not convinced, Clinton reminded him of all they had done together since their first meeting three years earlier: "We've done a remarkable job in getting a lot done and also in being honest about our differences. My objectives are first, an integrated, undivided Europe; and second, a cooperative equal partnership with a democratic, economically successful Russia which is influential in the world." He added, "I want historians fifty years from now to look back on this period and say you and I took full advantage of the opportunity we had. We made maximum use of the extraordinary moment that came with the end of the Cold War."

Yeltsin zeroed in on the one word that mattered to him: "The key word you just used was 'equal' partnership. This will restore trust and confidence." Clinton explained how Russia could play an important role in the Middle East due to its influence with Syria and Hezbollah. Yeltsin appeared mollified.[35]

One of the major issues in their relationship was Russia's ascension to the group of advanced industrialized democracies. The G-7 was to become the G-8. Clinton faced significant opposition to this move from his own Treasury Department, which was concerned about diluting a body of the world's leading market economies with membership for a country that did not yet have a market economy and whose gross domestic product was quite small.[36] At a larger meeting of the two leaders and

31 Memorandum of Conversation, "Morning Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, START, ABM/TMD," Helsinki, March 21, 1997, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569, 106–10.

32 Memorandum of Conversation, "Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin," Istanbul, Nov. 19, 1999, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569, 562–63.

33 Memorandum of Conversation, "Meeting with President Boris Yeltsin," Sept. 27, 1994, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57568, 214–15.

34 "Summary report on One-On-One Meeting Between Presidents Clinton and Yeltsin," St. Catherine's Hall, The Kremlin, May 10, 1995, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57568, 293.

35 "POTUS-Yeltsin One-on-One," Presidential Ceremonial Office, The Kremlin, April 21, 1996, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57568, 381–85.

36 Goldgeier and McFaul, *Power and Purpose*, 207.

their teams in April 1996 at the Kremlin, Clinton explained that the G-7's work coordinating fiscal policy "among the world's richest countries" was important and that if Russia were included, countries such as Mexico, South Korea, and Brazil would ask to join as well.

Yeltsin argued, "Russia will be on the rise. I cannot agree to the '7 plus 1' formula; I also understand that we cannot reach the level of a full G-8. You have to keep in mind that we are a great power, which affects how people think about this."[37]

A year later, at their March 1997 meeting in Helsinki, Clinton publicly stated:

> We will work with Russia to advance its membership in key international economic institutions like the W.T.O., the Paris Club, and the O.E.C.D. And I am pleased to announce, with the approval of the other G-7 nations, that we will substantially increase Russia's role in our annual meeting, now to be called the Summit of the Eight, in Denver this June.[38]

At a bilateral meeting of the two presidents and a small group of advisers in Paris in advance of the "Summit of the Eight," Yeltsin raised the issue of how Russia's economy was labeled. National Security Adviser Samuel R. Berger explained that by law, Russia would be far worse off in terms of trade preferences being labeled a market economy than if it were designated a non-market economy or a transition economy. Yeltsin did not care for the designation, seeing it as an insult: "Russia is not a transition economy. We have transformed. It is a market economy." Labels mattered to him; Yeltsin wanted Russia to be seen as a great power on par with the other leading world powers.[39]

[N]otes of presidential meetings and phone calls are not simply documents for scholars trying to make sense of history. They are critical in real time for officials who need to follow up on what their bosses have discussed.

Conclusion

These records are an important reminder that notes of presidential meetings and phone calls are not simply documents for scholars trying to make sense of history. They are critical in real time for officials who need to follow up on what their bosses have discussed. The recently released Clinton White House records show the distribution of these conversations, typically to the secretary of state, Deputy Secretary of State Talbott (who often was with the president for the meetings and phone calls), and the U.S. ambassador to Moscow. The role these documents play in developing policy is a major reason why there was so much concern when Donald Trump met with Vladimir Putin one-on-one for more than two hours in Helsinki in July 2018 with no notetakers present.[40]

Reading these memcons and telcons as a narrative record of the seven years of interactions between Clinton and Yeltsin left me feeling rather sad. The two leaders certainly accomplished a great deal: Yeltsin ensured that Russian troops left the Baltic countries, worked to keep Russian entities from transferring missile technologies to Iran, and participated in the Implementation Force in Bosnia alongside NATO and under American command. The two presidents worked with their counterparts in Belarus, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine to transfer to Russia the strategic nuclear weapons those countries inherited upon the collapse of the Soviet Union.

It is notable that many of their accomplishments occurred during their first terms and were largely issues related to the collapse of the Soviet Union such as the removal of Russian troops from the Baltics and the stationing of strategic nuclear weapons. They had big plans throughout their two terms for new arms-control agreements, but domestic political constraints got in the way.

37 Memorandum of Conversation, "Luncheon Meeting with Russian President Boris Yeltsin," The Kremlin, April 21, 1996, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569, 11–12.

38 "The President's News Conference with President Boris Yeltsin of Russia in Helsinki," March 21, 1997, http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=53904.

39 Memorandum of Conversation, "Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin: NATO-Russia, Arms Control, Economics, Denver Summit of the Eight, Afghanistan, Iran," Paris, May 27, 1997, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569, 148–49.

40 James Goldgeier, "Trump and Putin one-on-one is not a good idea. Here's why." *Monkey Cage* blog, July 19, 2017 (revised and republished July 13, 2018), https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/07/19/there-are-no-notes-on-trumps-meeting-with-putin-thats-a-big-deal/.

Ultimately, neither the United States nor Russia found a place for Russia in the basic architecture of European security. Meanwhile, Georgia, Moldova, and Ukraine ended up in a zone of insecurity, not able to join NATO and each with Russian military forces on its territory.

A conversation at the end of their time together regarding Yeltsin's successor was more hopeful than was warranted. In September 1999, Yeltsin informed Clinton by phone,

> It took me a lot of time to think who might be the next Russian president in the year 2000. Unfortunately, at that time, I could not find any sitting candidate. Finally, I came across him, that is, Putin, and I explored his bio, his interests, his acquaintances, and so on and so forth. I found out he is a solid man who is kept well abreast of various subjects under his purview. At the same time, he is thorough and strong, very sociable. And he can easily have good relations and contact with people who are his partners. I am sure you will find him to be a highly qualified partner. I am very much convinced that he will be supported as a candidate in the year 2000.[41]

In their in-person conversation in Istanbul in November 1999, Clinton asked who was going to win the Russian presidential election the next year, and Yeltsin did not hesitate: "Putin, of course. He will be the successor to Boris Yeltsin. He's a democrat, and he knows the West." He added, "He's tough. He has an internal ramrod. He's tough internally, and I will do everything possible for him to win — legally, of course. And he will win. You'll do business together. He will continue the Yeltsin line on democracy and economics and widen Russia's contacts. He has the energy and the brains to succeed."[42]

On Dec. 31, 1999, Clinton called Yeltsin just after Yeltsin's announcement that he was stepping down in favor of Putin, who of course went on to win the presidential election a few months later. In that final call, Clinton said, "You have guided your country through a historic time and you are leaving a legacy that will leave Russians better off for years to come. ... Boris, I believe that historians will say you were the father of Russian democracy..."

After telling Clinton once again that Putin would win and that he was a strong, intelligent democrat, Yeltsin ended their call as he had done so often over the previous seven years: "I would like from the bottom of my heart to embrace you."[43]

James Goldgeier *is a professor of international relations at American University, visiting senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, and the 2018-19 Library of Congress chair in U.S.-Russia relations at the John W. Kluge Center. You can follow him on Twitter: @JimGoldgeier.*

41 Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telephone Conversation with Russian President Yeltsin," Sept. 8, 1999, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569, 548.

42 Memorandum of Conversation, "Meeting with Russian President Yeltsin," Istanbul, Nov. 19, 1999, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569, 565–66.

43 Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, "Telcon with Russian President Boris Yeltsin," Dec. 31, 1999, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/57569, 582–84.