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# Reset or Relapse?

## U.S.-Russia Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

A CONVERSATION WITH  
AMBASSADOR THOMAS PICKERING

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**FLETCHER FORUM:** *Ambassador Pickering, thank you so much for joining us here.*

**THOMAS PICKERING:** It is nice to be with you.

**FORUM:** *The end of the Cold War promised a new era in United States-Russia relations. However, thirty years on, these relations are strained, to say the least. In short, what happened? What or who is to blame? What factors caused this?*

**PICKERING:** It's a very long story. In most enterprises of this sort, I think there is blame enough to go around. Russia under Putin hardened up their policies and saw the extension of the [North Atlantic Treaty Organization], the abrogation of the [Anti-Ballistic Missile] Treaty, among other things, as issues they objected to. They were particularly concerned about our role in Libya. I think our role in Iraq was also something they took umbrage about. The United States clearly was deeply disturbed by Putin's actions in Crimea and in Ukraine, and less so but clearly felt quite deeply opposed to Syria. So

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**Thomas Pickering** has served as Vice Chairman of Hills and Company since 2016. He previously served as the U.S. Ambassador and Representative to the United Nations in New York under President George H. W. Bush and as the U.S. Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs under President Bill Clinton. In a diplomatic career spanning five decades, he was U.S. ambassador to the Russian Federation, India, Israel, El Salvador, Nigeria, and the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. He received the Distinguished Presidential Award and the Department of State's highest award, the Distinguished Service Award. Pickering holds a Bachelor of Arts from Bowdoin College and a Master of Arts from The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University.

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those things—as products of how each side wanted to conduct its domestic politics and its international activities—became contentions rather than areas of cooperation. It meant that over time and, on both sides, leadership

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took advantage of what the other side had done, was doing, or was presumed to be engaged in to create opposition. It supported them in their domestic political activities: Putin in popularity, Americans in elections. And so we went from a situation where we had, at the beginning of the century, conducted diplomacy—many people will say not very successfully, but that's an arguable point—to a situation where we engaged in demonology and that seems

to be a preeminent part of the relationship. It's complicated. There are areas where we still cooperate, there are areas where we don't, and there are areas where we could, but now don't seem to be interested in doing so.

**FORUM:** *The current national defense strategy of the U.S. emphasizes a return to Great Power competition, including with Russia. Do you agree that the United States faces a Great Power competition with Russia and is this “Cold War 2.0” inevitable?*

**PICKERING:** I think that many people will find comparisons with the Cold War which are apt and approaches to dealing with the problem which are germane. I think, though, that this is a different time and a different set of relationships. The original Cold War dimensions were such that we never thought there were any possibilities of negotiated solutions or redeeming virtues. It went from the 1940s, when we attempted to negotiate and we felt we were rebuffed by the Soviets, into a period in the 1950s where it became clear that avoiding that most horrific of all circumstances—a nuclear conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union—was all that really mattered. This marked a clear difference over time. Now, we appear to have forgotten some of those lessons, be headed down some of the same roads, be headed toward the direction of doing two things, while tearing up the agreements that helped us build stability in our nuclear relationship. It was far from perfect, but it was better than a zero-sum game. Opening the door to what clearly is pending as another nuclear arms race would not exactly repeat what we had in the Cold War. In the Cold

War, we jointly held 70,000 nuclear weapons at the peak. They provided no more assurance—to put it another way—of survival or stability than 10,000 weapons or 1,000 weapons. And so, it was a huge drain on the economies of both countries. Eventually, it was one of the things that contributed to the collapse of the Soviet Union. It was, in many ways, an indication of no more security at jointly holding 70,000 roughly evenly divided than to holding 12,000 today, or 1,550 deliverable weapons as the most “accurate” number. So in many ways, we need to guard against committing the fallacies of the past and engaging in an arms race to believe that it produces some substantial security and foreign policy advantage for us rather than working on the possibility, as hard as this is to see now, of a set of relationships between the two of us which guard against things like accident miscalculation and misjudgment which could lead to a conflict. I’ve been very impressed by the fact that many of the experts can tell us how we might slip into nuclear war but there isn’t anyone who knows how to stop it once you get going. We are not configured to do that very well.

**FORUM:** *Shifting slightly to the Russian domestic front, Vladimir Putin has ruled Russia for nearly twenty years now through this near-two-decade consolidation of power. He seems to have all but ensured his permanence in Russia leadership. Is there any path, however unlikely, that you see him leaving power in the near to mid-future?*

**PICKERING:** No, I don’t. I think that to be best counsel based on the history of the past, when it seemed to me that the Putin party may have been in danger of losing its ascendancy in the Russian lower house—the Duma—in 2011 when Putin was about to come back as president after his short term as prime minister. Putin himself, I think, had a real bath of cold water when it came to his continuing capacity to stay in power. There were street demonstrations and several indications besides that he might have to high jump his next obstacle. I think he quickly moved in and turned that around, in part, through clever emphasis on Russian nationalism and foreign security policy in constant pressure to rebuild Russia as a great power. An emphasis on that as well as some efforts to criticize and attack the United States on things that he considered aggressive American activities and mistakes made toward Russia. Some effort to drive wedges between the U.S., the European Union, and NATO wherever he could. He was not totally successful in this, but he did manage to reinvigorate his popularity. We have seen in recent months that this can go up and down, but it has not tumbled so badly that one would consider he is in jeopardy.

He ends his term in 2024 and there are many theories about what he will do: become leader of a state council which he will elevate to a very high form, become prime minister and increase the roles of the prime minister (once again) while decreasing those of the president, join with Belarus and form some new, supra-national joint arrangement in which he would become (surprise, surprise) the president of that organization and allow that to amount to control of Russia as well. I do not think Lukashenko and Belarus, at the moment, are ready for that kind of step-down or step-aside, but we will see. Russia has significant power in the region and significant influence over Belarus.

**FORUM:** *Among Russian elites, there seems to be a myriad of swirling ideologies: from Russian nationalism, Eurasianism, Slavism... To what extent do you think that [President] Putin is guided by these ideologies, or are they simply tools for him?*

**PICKERING:** In many places, I think that assessing the durability of certain ideologies is impossible. Populist nationalism is perhaps a new adaptation which can selectively shift between left- and right-leaning ideas as in a way that most effectively maximizes its popularity and success.

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And so, I think we have come into a period where Russia is less ideologically motivated. Russia felt and Russians felt badly burnt by the ideological rigidity of Marxist Leninism and its attempts to proscribe all solutions from one single source of value. Russia further made some serious mistakes as a result of its rigidity, particularly in things like the organization of the economy, government spending on military equipment, and so on. This led to a situation where it had to move away from that because the government couldn't sustain it. Russia is not a capitalist society in traditional terms, but it is not a communist or even a socialist society and is perhaps growing more capitalist with the rise of its oligarchs and semi-open market. The fascinating

thing is that Putin himself does not seem to pay a lot of attention to the economy. Maybe, in believing economic reforms are costly and painful, he doesn't want to undertake those now. He's prepared to see everything he can do through the magics of his other formulas, which I've discussed, to create a situation where people are prepared to bear the burden of a status quo economy. There are statistics that laboring people haven't seen an increase in wages above inflation that have been in any way meaningful to them in some time.

**FORUM:** *One of the most worrying challenges—especially in 2020, an election year—is Russia's broad array of disinformation campaigns against the United States. What can the U.S. and other Western nations do to counter these Russian active measures?*

**PICKERING:** Well, I think that no respectable foreign intelligence agency—here or in Russia—would fail to take advantage of openings which would allow it to promote its national interests. The notion that there is now a settled policy about interference in internal affairs—despite the UN charter's requirement not to do so—is gone with the wind, at least for the moment. Countries are now in a position of having to defend themselves in many ways, and one of those is to tighten cybersecurity for interventionist purposes. That is to say that they need the means to directly combat misinformation, but this proves difficult because there is an overwhelming cascade of information coming at them from all sides. The more one uses untruth in his own system and in his own support, the more likely it is that he is going to confuse listeners and unbalance listeners in their willingness to trust a single source of information as reliable, or to stymie listeners in how they determine whether a source is true or not. That is very destructive because democracies rely on truth. Imagine, for example, what would happen if someone was able to completely dislodge the scientific method. It is essentially what the untruth propagation is an attack on. How would physics, chemistry, biology, and all their many ramifications operate successfully if everybody could choose their own laws and propagate them whether they produced repeatable, verifiable results or not? We saw in Soviet agriculture ideas that were biologically propagated which had no real meaning at all and tended to upset Soviet agriculture very badly. That also wasn't the only problem with Soviet agriculture. We've already seen experiments to manufacture independent versions of the truth in the area where it counts most—the measurable world of science—as well as what a clear mistake it is. As we all know, social science is not similarly able

to provide the stark data necessary to prove all of its truths, but it seeks to emulate the world of science because we know that reliance on established physical fact is something we can hang onto and it has no politics to it. It can produce real advantages and find progress in our country. Similarly, we can do that in politics but in economics we have a more statistical base. We don't ever reach for fiction. The unhinging of this in one of these areas is the effort to unhinge the whole system in public confidence.

**FORUM:** *Moving to another large issue in the bilateral relationship—one that is rather slower burning in recent years—is the Ukraine question. What does a future resolution to the Ukrainian crisis look like, and what is the role for U.S. diplomacy there?*

**PICKERING:** Without repeating the earlier words of my discussion here at Fletcher in excruciating detail, there's a definite role for U.S. diplomacy. What I will also say is that it may start on the economic side where Ukraine badly needs help. The country essentially needs to put together a set of arrangements funded by the outside world—Europe, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and so on—which could help to strengthen the Ukrainian economy and bring about reforms. The main reform vehicle would be to attack corruption, which is obviously an undermining aspect of what's happening in Ukraine. It could also bring more fairness into Ukrainian politics by recognizing both Russian and Ukrainian as equal languages for their people, which may in turn cause more average Ukrainians to examine the question of where and how more authority can be given to the oblasts—the local provinces—in governing their regions. This would further give greater voice to concerns which native Russian speakers in Eastern Ukraine and the Donbas have felt are important to them. It could also help to look at the question of whether Ukraine can become a bridge country—or could have a foot in both sides of economic organizations such as the European Union (EU) and Putin's Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). That would be hard but not impossible. Maybe, over time, the Ukrainian people could select which kinds of security arrangements and economic arrangements it might wish to join on a permanent basis. Something like this would be helpful if in fact it could lead early to an observation of the Minsk Agreements which might be honed and improved. The United States could join the group and participate in that. There doesn't seem to be any inclination on the U.S. side to take any of these views at the present time or to join in. This is only one set of ideas; there may be others worth looking at as well. No one would

want to give up the independence of Ukraine. One would try to solve the conflict and to do so in a way that left Ukraine whole and free—even recognizing that Ukraine should take a larger role in recognizing some of the complaints about it. This is only one set of ideas; there may be others worth looking at as well.

**FORUM:** *On the energy front, the United States seems to be fairly ineffective in stopping the construction of Russian gas pipelines to Europe. What should the U.S. do to limit Russian oil and gas leverage over the European continent? Or, given willing European cooperation in building these pipelines, should the U.S. really care or do anything at all?*

**PICKERING:** In 1994, I gave the annual speech at the Dishli meeting for the Dishli Conference and I had two paragraphs in it saying to the Europeans that they should be cautious about overreliance on Russia as a source of oil and gas for the various reasons that lie behind your question. You're still asking the question, so my two paragraphs had almost no effect, but it is a problem. And I think the way to proceed in this problem is to seek to provide the Europeans with alternative sources. Either on a competitive basis now or made readily available so that the ability to shut down the dependence they have on Russia is less and less significant in their own economic survival. And we're in a strong position to do that, in part because we've now become an exporter of oil and gas. Western Europe is also building more terminals for the absorption of things like [Liquefied Natural Gas], which require some significant industrial facilities. Over time, I suppose North African oil and gas and other sources are available. There are new provinces coming along in Guyana and Eastern Africa that could provide Europe with oil and gas. It's a fungible commodity, and it is world-wide traded. We also don't want to put the Europeans in a position where any structures they may have constructed—as useful as they will be—and as helpful as they may be in economic terms, become the sole source. And I think it's better to do that than try in one way or another to block the construction of arrangements that the Europeans themselves seem to want. But remind the Europeans, in fact that total dependence is not something that they should consider to be ideal. Or even, perhaps, useful.

**FORUM:** *Moving forward, are there any issues where you see potential cooperation between the United States and Russia?*

**PICKERING:** We have cooperated on the space station. We should and



continue to do that. We have a common interest in terrorism and fighting terrorism and that's important. We have a common interest in fighting drug and narcotic abuse and transport, and that's an important question. We have a common need to help resolve problems in the Middle East, which we each seem to be on a course where one way or another we don't meet. And that's difficult. I think that the Russians have continued to be helpful to us in having access to Afghanistan. The need has gone down, but it has not disappeared. And that's an important piece of ongoing cooperation. And I believe very strongly we should open a dialogue on a continuation of New START. And if it's possible, maybe to find ways that it could add what I would call a Trumpian initiative or a Trump initiative to New START. Perhaps by beginning to include some ideas and agenda for next steps in nuclear disarmament. My feeling there is that while President Trump wants to involve China, the way to involve China at this stage is perhaps to seek to develop an arrangement where the two negotiating partners who have to make the decisions keep the other three recognized nuclear powers—China, Britain, and France—fully au courant with the negotiations and where they're going. And maybe find times jointly to meet with them. But involving them in negotiations means putting extra fingers on the scale, so to speak, of balance. And I think that would be a mistake. But were we to do that this time, that would put them in a strong position, hopefully, to have enough knowledge and enough background to join in negotiations where the next stage comes along. And if the following stage to 1,550 deliverable weapons is around 1,000—below that it might be 600-800—and that would mean that they would have to play a role in that because we would want to begin to have concomitant reductions in other people's nuclear weapons stocks in order to provide for the international balance.

**FORUM:** *And finally, as a veteran statesman who was with the U.S. Foreign Service for over four decades, what advice would you give to President Trump or a future president to help strengthen the State Department, the Foreign Service, and American diplomacy in general?*

**PICKERING:** Well, I hesitate to provide advice because in some ways it might be misconstrued, if it ever is noticed, as something that comes from a tainted source. Which is, I think, something that the president unfortunately has adopted with respect to professional diplomats. And that is not a happy circumstance. I think the president should know that professional diplomats owe it to him to provide their best possible advice. That advice may not always coincide with what the president wants or where he is



going. They then have the obligation to carry out the president's foreign policies, and if they can't do that, they have full freedom to leave. My feeling is that our country needs a professional group of diplomats, and I think that not having them means that we lose the effectiveness of years of experience, the deep learning that comes with being involved in diplomacy on an active basis, and the ability to develop good judgment and some wisdom, knowing as many of the facts as one can know in advising about foreign policy. The disconnect that has evolved, and some cases, the contention that has evolved through fights over "political loyalty" or not, are, in many ways, I think, very damaging to the national interests of the country. And I would hope the president is seeing them as damaging to his own interest. After all, he's sworn an oath to support the constitution and follow the best interests of the country. But the president is in no way chained to a professional set of diplomats. It's a service that he should make available to himself, whether he agrees with them on everything or not. Just the way that the president should chain himself to the intelligence community to be sure that he doesn't miss vital facts, but in no way is he committed one way or another to use those facts in any other fashion. And that's the way our system is set up and the way it has worked, and it has been quite successful as a system. After all, we've been leaders of the world since 1945. And, in many ways, that hasn't been serendipity, but hard work and knowledge and a willingness, obviously, to deal with questions—and to debate them. And this is, in my view, where the State Department should be. I think pushing people out of upper levels of the State Department—everyone at the top grade, 40 percent or so at the next grade, and 20 percent at the next grade—means that you've lost years of service capability and what I would call honest advice-giving that you won't find easy to replicate in the future. This has a long-term influence on how the country performs over the years ahead, even beyond whatever the president's term might be.*f*