

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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An Overview of U.S.-Russia Relations

“Let me say that it’s nice to be home,” pronounced Mr. Ian C. Kelly, Department Spokesman and former Director of the Office of Russian Affairs at the U.S. Department of State, and an alumnus of Columbia University. “For me, the Harriman Institute was kind of a home away from home,” he expressed, recalling how he had written his Ph.D. dissertation in the basement of the library, coming up to the Institute whenever he wanted “a sense of community, and a place to unwind and have stimulating discussions.” Kelly discussed the relationship between Russia and the United States at a Harriman-sponsored lecture this Tuesday.

“I would like to break my remarks into three sections,” began Kelly. “Why it is that the Obama administration thinks that Russia matters, in what areas do we have good cooperation with Russia, and on what areas don’t we agree?” Kelly stressed Russia’s position as the largest country in the world, which, “sits on top of three regions vital to our interests: Europe, the Middle East, and Northeast Asia. Areas from which the Obama administration faces some of its biggest challenges,” he remarked.

Why Russia Matters

According to Kelly, a good relationship with Russia is crucial because it can help the United States to meet the challenges it faces. Russia has a permanent seat on the Security Council, which makes it a key player in helping to address the problems of both Iran and North Korea. Most importantly the United States needs Russia’s help on issues of non-proliferation. “Obama has made non-proliferation a signature issue for this administration, and he wants to make it the goal of not only the U.S., but also the international community, to have a world without nuclear weapons. This can’t happen without Russia’s cooperation,” Kelly affirmed, noting that together Russia and the U.S. hold 95% of the world’s nuclear weapons.

Kelly articulated the Obama administration’s decision to restructure the relationship with Russia

through engagement on certain issues. He also commented on the obstacles the two countries will face, “I don’t want to leave you with the impression that there won’t be challenges in the US-Russia relationship, we come at issues very differently. This is because in many ways we have a different world view, different geography, different history, and a different culture, but we have to cooperate,” he urged.

“From my time on the Russia desk, I know that Russia feels comfortable with a bilateral structure. It is in our interest to engage them in a sustained way on issues that are important to us,” Kelly pronounced. He commented that this tactic is a good way to “jumpstart relations” after the tension over the Georgia conflict in August 2008.

Bilateral Presidential Commission

President Obama went to Moscow for three days this July and during this visit the two governments agreed to create a bilateral presidential commission. Presidents Obama and Medvedev will be the chairs of the commission and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton (who is Mr. Kelly’s direct boss), and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov, will be the commission’s coordinators. The commission is to start in mid-October this year. The agenda will include: nuclear energy, nuclear security, arms control, counter terrorism, drug trafficking, business development, energy and the environment, science and technology, educational and cultural exchange, and “civil society,” Kelly explained that this latter term was “what the two countries have agreed to call matters of human rights.”

Areas of Good Cooperation

Afghanistan Moving to the second section of his talk—the issues on which Russia and the U.S. have good cooperation, Kelly communicated that “Afghanistan, more than any other issue, is where we really converge.” He indicated that “Russia wants the U.S. and the international community to succeed in Afghanistan,” mentioning Russia’s solid national interest to ensure that Afghanistan does not return to its former status as a safe haven for

international terrorists and religious extremists, and its determination to curb narcotics trafficking. Kelly stated that Russia and the U.S. have good programs of cooperation to counter narcotics, with a center in Domodedovo, outside of Moscow, where they have trained Afghan police. "Russians sent trainers to locations in Central Asia," Kelly noted, "not to Afghanistan though, there is still some sensitivity about Russians in uniform in Afghanistan," he laughed.

Russian Airspace Besides the announcement of the bilateral commission, "the other big announcement in July was the announcement that Russia is willing to allow the transit of lethal material through its airspace," revealed Kelly. "They hadn't allowed that before. They had allowed other types of material, but not weapons and ammunition," he recounted, saying that the first flight took place last week.

"We have real solid consensus with Russia on confronting the North Korea problem," Kelly affirmed, noting that Russia "shares our commitment to the ultimate goal of a verifiable denuclearization of North Korea." Russia has cooperated to draft and pass "one of the most robust Security Council resolutions," noted Kelly, referring to UN resolution 1874, which was adopted by the UN Security Council on June 12th. This resolution was passed in response to underground nuclear testing conducted by North Korea at the end of May. It imposes additional economic and commercial sanctions on the Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (DPRK) and asks UN member states to search North Korean cargo. "It has some real teeth in it in terms of non-proliferation," Kelly said.

Bilateral Arms Agreement Efforts towards a new bilateral arms agreement signify another area of cooperation. The Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START I), ratified by the United States and the former Soviet Union in 1991, is due to expire on December 5th. START I has been the largest nuclear reduction treaty in history, stipulating that each country could deploy no more than 6,000 nuclear warheads and 1,600 strategic delivery vehicles. The two countries reached the stipulated goals in 2001. Currently the governments have agreed on the common goal of nuclear weapon reduction far below the numbers in the START I agreement. "It will be a real challenge for us to get a treaty ratified by December 5th," Kelly said, "but there has been real impetus to do so."

Kelly praised the Cooperative Threat Reduction program (CTR), noting that this bilateral working group has stayed "under the radar." Senators Sam Nunn (D-Ga.) and Richard

Lugar (R-Ind.) initiated the CTR in response to the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. The collapse left Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, and Belarus in possession of all Soviet nuclear weapons and this program aims to help the republics dismantle or safely store the weapons in the Soviet nuclear arsenal.

Kelly related that the United States has done a lot to help Russia contain its nuclear weapons and to provide a monitoring system. "When I was working on the Russia desk last year, during that really low point in U.S.-Russian relations, a lot of bilateral cooperation stopped, but the Nunn-Lugar agreement went on," he remarked.

Missile Defense "Probably the most dramatic turnaround has been in missile defense," Kelly asserted. "It was perhaps the most contentious issue that we faced both in my time at NATO and my time on the Russia desk." He reported that "no matter how hard we tried to convince the Russians that our plans to put radar stations in Poland weren't a threat to them, the Russians never bought it." Kelly speculated that the bilateral nature of the radar stations was one of the main reasons for Russia's discomfort, "a lot of our NATO allies didn't like the bilateral aspect," he said, noting that the allies would have preferred the stations to be set up in the context of NATO. He also believes that Russia was unhappy with the "permanence" of these missile stations.

Kelly expressed his opinion that Russia "could not have really been afraid of ten interceptors, given the thousands of warheads and delivery vehicles that they had." He reasoned that the Russian government most likely felt vulnerable to the potential of a future technological breakthrough "that would undermine their strategic nuclear deterrence forces." To ease Russia's discomfort, "the President has decided on a more mobile and adaptive system that doesn't target intercontinental ballistic missiles but confronts a more real problem, the threat of medium-range missiles," remarked Kelly, explaining that the new system was designed to counter the medium-range missiles recently tested in Iran.

Kelly added that the U.S. wanted to cooperate with Russia "even under the Bush administration." He said that the United States had looked for a way the two countries can link up their systems. Kelly thinks that since "we have dealt with some of these problems of mistrust," the two countries can strengthen cooperation efforts.

Areas of Friction

Georgia "As for the areas where we encounter friction," Kelly continued, "they are for the most part legacy issues from previous administrations."

To begin with, Kelly voiced the administration's strong belief that every country should have the freedom to choose their own alliances. "No country has the right to veto security alliances of other countries," he affirmed. Kelly also stressed American support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, "We will take every opportunity to reiterate that."

An audience member asked Kelly if he would consider the military presence in Georgia an occupation. "Occupation is a loaded term and I think I will avoid it," said Kelly, adding that there is a process in place geared towards resolving the issue. "We are still very concerned about the potential for more conflict in the southern Caucasus," he went on, mentioning the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia. "We have to keep our eye on that ball, but there are a lot of balls to keep our eye on," Kelly laughed. He noted that there was a great deal of diplomatic research behind the Geneva talks this year.

Human Rights Another point of contention between Russia and the U.S. has been Russia's unfortunate human rights record. "Human rights continue to be an area where we fundamentally disagree, we're very forthright about it," Kelly said, noting Obama's statements in Moscow about the Russian administration's failure to punish violence against human rights activists and journalists. Kelly voiced the administration's disapproval at the lack of freedom in Russian electronic media, which he said is "if not censored, then very much controlled by the government." He added that the United States will engage Russia on these issues in the context of the new bilateral commission on civil society. "We will offer to help where we can," he said.

"We also have an area where our interests both converge and diverge," Kelly said, "and that area is Iran." Both countries agree that "it would be very destabilizing if Iran were to develop a nuclear weapon, our points of view diverge on how to approach that," noted Kelly. Prime Minister Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov have both criticized the economic sanctions approach, advocating instead for engagement. The Bush administration favored isolation. The Obama administration proposes a dual track; it is serious about engagement, but needs to be ready for other approaches if engagement fails.

Question and Answer

Strategic Partnership Columbia Economics Professor Padma Desai, asked Kelly if the United States was headed towards a strategic partnership with Russia, and whether he thought this partnership would survive if Putin were to become

president in 2012. Kelly responded, "The term strategic partnership has a certain meaning in diplomatic parlance, we say that we have one with India, Japan, Australia, the E.U. We're not quite there with Russia, not to say that we won't get there." Kelly elaborated, "our relationship with Russia needs some remedial work. We are trying to integrate Russia into the broader community of democracies and anchor them in rules-based organizations." As for Putin, Kelly indicated that Putin has done a lot for Russia, "he was a natural successor to Boris Yeltsin, because he recognized that Russia had perceived itself to be very weak and he performed a real service to his country." Kelly feels that Putin's choice to appoint Medvedev as his successor is an indication of his awareness that Russia needs a new kind of leader. "Whether or not he [Putin] is completely comfortable with going off into the sunset, is a different matter," Kelly concluded.

NATO Kelly mentioned Russia's perception that NATO is its antagonist, and stressed that while this was true for NATO pre-1989, "its members now see it as something very different—it is the transatlantic community where we get together to face common challenges." Kelly contends that he has "taken every opportunity to tell Russia—that it is because of NATO that you have the most secure western borders you've ever had in your history," arguing that countries which were historically Russia's opponents, and have joined NATO, "have agreed to pool their security in a multilateral context."

Kelly referred to the removal of the Bronze Soldier monument in Tallinn in April 2007, using the circumstances as an example of NATO's assistance in conflict resolution between Russia and another nation. The monument commemorated the Soviet victory in World War II, and the dislodgement of it caused mass protests in Estonia, intensifying the country's tensions with Russia. Estonia, a member of NATO, allowed NATO to handle the conflict, "I think that this really diffused the situation," Kelly said.

Latin America When asked how he felt about Russia's relationship with Latin America, Kelly answered, "At the time we saw it for what it was, a shot across our bow." He was referring to Russia's announcement, in the wake of the Georgia conflict last September, that it would hold joint military ventures with Venezuela, and to President Medvedev's meeting with Hugo Chavez last November, the first visit of any Russian leader to Venezuela. These moves were seen by the United States as an attempt by Russia to revert to cold-war era tactics.

Kelly observed that while there has recently been less military cooperation between Russia and Venezuela, he is concerned that “Venezuela is arming itself in a way that goes far beyond immediate arms needs.” Russia has extended a \$2.2 billion loan to the country in order to purchase tanks and advanced anti-aircraft missiles earlier this month.

Jackson-Vanik When asked about the Jackson-Vanik amendment, Kelly called it a “dinosaur and an albatross around our necks.” The amendment was signed into law in 1975 in response to the Soviet Union’s refusal to allow people, mostly Jews and other religious minorities, to emigrate to the United States. It forbids most favored nation status to non-market economies with restricted emigration, and still applies to Russia, among other nations, even though many consider emigration to be a dated issue. The amendment has been a point of tension between Russia and the United States, and Kelly voiced hopes to eradicate it. “It might be possible with this congress,” he conveyed, “but we need to wait a little while, we have other priorities with congress right now.”

Reset Relations Responding to an accusation that the administration has been willing to reset relations with Russia without Russia trying to reset its political system, Kelly alluded to engagement of Russia as “an across the board decision by this administration.” Kelly pronounced that the previous administration’s policies of isolation and criticism, “were leading us nowhere, not just with Russia, but with Iran and North Korea as well.” He declared that the United States will continue to speak out against policies they do not agree with, but that it can have more of an influence by engaging with Russia.

“It is not surprising to anyone that the Russian administration uses international questions to deal with internal problems, using issues such as missile

defense to convince its people that the United States is the enemy, what do you think about this?” student and Russian citizen, asked Kelly. He replied that President Obama has been trying to tackle this issue by appealing directly to the Russian people. “One of the reasons that President Obama spent so much time in Russia,” Kelly commented, “was because he wanted to speak to universities, to appear on Russian television.”

Kosovo Gordon Bardos, Assistant Director of the Harriman Institute, addressed Kelly, as “an old Balkan hand,” commenting on the United States’ decision not to cooperate with Russia about Kosovo. “I think we can agree that this was a foreign policy blunder by the United States. Two-thirds of the international community supported Moscow on this; it seems that strategically it would have been better to work out a deal with Moscow. Why did we do it?” Bardos asked. “This was a tremendously controversial decision,” replied Kelly, “it played into the Russians’ instincts that they weren’t taken seriously.” He recalled being at NATO when the decision was made, “I remember thinking that this was not going to end too well. I was also thinking we couldn’t let it fester,” he remembered, adding that the best strategy for the time-being was to encourage Belgrade “to see its future with the E.U.”

Conclusion

Kelly concluded his talk by commending Medvedev’s recent remarks, which recognized Russia’s over-reliance on extractive industries. “Russia needs to put more investment into its own people, into education and training. In order to succeed in the 20th century, you can’t rely solely on natural resources,” stated Kelly.

Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner