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**CAROL
SAIVETZ:**

Good afternoon, or morning, wherever you are. Welcome to the Starr Forum. This one is co-sponsored by the Focus on Russia Seminar Series.

We're very excited today, because we have a great crowd, and we have two absolutely wonderful speakers. And it is my privilege to welcome two old friends to our discussion today. Our first speaker will be on Andrey Kortunov, who is the Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council, and I urge you to take a look at their website and to look at many of the papers that have been written by Andrey and other members of the council.

Andrey graduated from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations and completed his postgraduate studies at the Institute for the USA and Canada Studies of the USSR Academy of Sciences. He holds a PhD in history. He has taught around the world and has completed internships around the world. And he's been the Director General of the Russian International Affairs Council since 2011.

Our second speaker is Angela Stent, who is the Director of the Center for Eurasian, Russian, and East European Studies, and Professor of Government and Foreign Service at Georgetown University. She has held a number of other positions, both inside government and at Georgetown, and she is the author most recently of a book entitled, *Putin's World: Russia Against the West and The Rest*. Again, I'm delighted to welcome everybody to this seminar, and I'm going to turn it over to Andrey to start our conversation.

**ANDREY
KORTUNOV:**

Thank you, Carol. First of all, let me say that it's great to be back to MIT even if in this online format. Of course, I would prefer to be there in person to cross the Kendall Square and to observe the renovation of MIT, which I'm sure you're having plenty. You've done a lot since my last trip to Cambridge. But it is still better to be there at least in an online fashion.

Let me also say that I noticed that we have many participants to the event, which suggests that there is no real Russia fatigue in the United States, or at least in the Boston area, which, in my opinion, is good. And, of course, I would like to renumerate all the participants to the event by saying that the US-Russian relations will be great, that a new reset is just around the corner, and that very soon we will fix all the problems that we still have between our two nations. And Mr. Putin will become a true liberal Democrat.

However, to my regret, I cannot say that. And I don't think that I can bring a lot of revelations to this discussion. But let me use my 15 minutes, or now it is 13 minutes, to offer you my reconstruction of how the Russian leadership approaches relations with the United States.

And I would like to emphasize that this is not necessarily my view on how the US-Russian relationship should be managed, but this is my sincere attempt to outline the official Russian position. So please, don't kill the messenger. Let me start with saying that looking at this relationship from the Kremlin, you base your assessment on the idea that the ball is in the US court right now. When you talk to people in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs or in the Presidential Administration, they would tell you that they tried almost everything to fix this relationship.

They offered various summit meetings, bilateral meetings, or meetings in the P5 format. They suggested that we should discuss the most sensitive issues of our relationship, including the so-called interference into domestic political affairs on both sides, including the cyber engagement, including disagreements on specific regional issues. However, the United States has not been receptive to these proposals and to these suggestions, neither under President Donald Trump nor under President Joe Biden.

Moreover, Russian officials would tell you that the US approach to Moscow is very biased. That when the United States accuses Russia of something, it fails to present credible evidence. Instead, they are talking about what is highly likely from their viewpoint. And from time to time, the United States, the United States officials, refer to ridiculous accusations, for example, during the TV debates between Donald Trump and Joe Biden.

Joe Biden alleged that Russia paid bounties to Taliban for killing American soldiers, which, of course, from the Moscow's viewpoint, is ridiculous. The Russian Federation doesn't want the United States to get out of Afghanistan. And definitely, it is not in a position to pay Taliban for killing Americans.

So expectations are for US-Russian relations under President Biden are pretty low. I think that the perception is that, generally speaking, Russia is not on top of the US priority list, and Russia is likely to be dealt with after more important foreign policy goals are met, specifically, international cooperation on COVID and, climate change, and, of course, US relations to China. So Russia is not likely to be in the center of the US attention anytime soon.

Of course, it means that we should stay patient. We should not push the United States too hard, not to create an impression on the US side that Russia needs this relationship more than the United States does. And, again, I hate to say that, but I think that the United States is neither on the top of the Russian foreign policy priority list right now. Since expectations are low, the perception is that we can put this relationship on a back burner, and we will see how the situation might change when and if the dust settles down in Washington.

And my last general observation would be that the overall perception in Moscow is that only a very strong American leader can fix relations between Washington and Moscow. You need to have strong political support inside the United States to go ahead and to deal with Russia, like, for example, FDR had during the Second World War or Ronald Reagan in the 1980s. And the general perception in the Kremlin is that Joe Biden is not likely to become a strong president, because the United States remains a divided country. And the US President has to confront a lot of opposition coming from the right, from Republican neocons on the Hill and elsewhere, but it also has to confront a challenge from the so-called progressive wing in his own party. And this fragility of the US political system creates an obstacle to any consistent and predictable foreign policy, and actually it creates very serious obstacles on the way of changing the relations between Washington and Moscow to the better.

So it doesn't mean that nothing can be done in the relationship. And, of course, we already have an important positive step in this relationship, namely the extension of the New START agreement. President Trump failed to do it in four years of his tenure. President Biden did it during the first month of his presidency.

This step has been appreciated in Moscow. However, of course, we should not to oversell it. It will not have a positive spillover effect on the rest of the relationship, and this is already clear. It will not stop the US-Russian arms race, and it will not have a significant impact on third nuclear powers. It will not mean that China will become more eager to join the bilateral US-Russian arms control mechanisms.

Still, the extension of New START is important. Not only it was a demonstration that Russia and the United States can still work together and do something practical, let me remind you that the last agreement on weapons of mass destruction was reached in the fall of 2013. That was on the elimination of Syrian chemical weapons, and the implementation of this agreement is still under question. So it's the first achievement in a very long period of time, and that's why it is important.

Moreover, the two sides were able to preserve the bilateral nuclear arms control infrastructure, including consultations between the military meetings of experts, most importantly, verification mechanisms, and also this common arms control culture, which was developed jointly since late 1960s, and which remains a major asset shared by the United States and Russia. So the New START agreement extension is important, but it does not mean that any further steps in arms control will be easy. There are still major stumbling blocks between the two sides.

On the Russian side, they will continue to raise the issue of BMD systems, and also the issue of US allies, nuclear allies, especially in view of the recent decisions made by the United Kingdom, which actually wants to increase the number of its nuclear warheads. On the US side, it's clear that Americans will keep asking Russians about their tactical systems in Europe and about a potential participation of China, which makes any progress quite difficult. I think that Russia and the United States might have consultations on technical progress in the nuclear field. There are some positive signs about two sides are working on issues of preventing militarization of space. They might also have consultations on issues, like a prompt strike, autonomous lethal weapons, maybe cyber, thought it is difficult.

And we still have five years before the New START agreement expires. I don't think the treaty will be followed by a similar treaty, but we should use these five years in order to reinvent the arms control model, which is quite a challenging task. And five years is not really a long time to meet these tasks.

Now, on the positive side, of course, we can expect more contacts between Russia and the United States on Middle East, especially if we see some kind of mini detente between Washington and Tehran. If the United States gets back to JCPOA, this step would definitely be welcomed by Russia. We might have some agreements on issues, like Yemen, and maybe some cooperation on Afghanistan. It is not something that we can take for granted, but I think that the odds are that on Afghanistan Russia and the United States can work together, at least on the political transition in this country.

There are some standards, pockets, of cooperation which are likely to stay. The Arctic region is one of them. Russia now chairs the Arctic Council, and I think that the United States does not have too many problems with Russia there. We might still have some cooperation in space, in education, and maybe in humanitarian areas as well. However, I think that's about all that we can expect from the US-Russian relations during this administration.

There are some areas where the Biden Administration is likely to take a tougher approach than their predecessors. Of course, the rhetoric is different. I don't think that Donald Trump would ever call President Putin a killer. President Biden did, and definitely, that reflects his perceptions of his Russian counterpart, which makes it very difficult to engage into a direct bilateral conversation at the top level.

I think that we will see more support to Russia's neighbors, like Ukraine, like Georgia, maybe Moldova, maybe a political opposition in Belarus. I don't imagine a US Marshall Plan for Ukraine. I think that the perception in Washington is that it is more a European than an American problem. But nevertheless, politically the US support will be the.

Maybe we will see an increase of US arms transfers to Ukraine, which will not create better conditions for a dialogue with Moscow. I think that it is easy to predict more US engagement with the Russian human rights agenda, supporting contrarian NGOs and political opposition parties, especially since Russia is approaching elections to its parliament in early fall of this year. Definitely, the United States will be accused of interference into Russian domestic affairs.

A big issue is the issue of sanctions. So far, I think we can argue that there has been more continuity than innovation in the US approach to sanctions. Essentially, the Biden Administration follows the pattern of the Trump Administration.

We are likely to see more sanctions, and the Kremlin's ready to confront these sanctions, provided that these sanctions engage mostly specific individuals and institutions. Individual sanctions are probably deplorable, but basically, they're affordable. I think that institutional sanctions, if we are talking about institutions from the Russian defense sector, do not constitute a real problem.

So in my view, the real concern in Moscow is about sanctions getting to a new level, like new sectoral sanctions against the Russian energy sector or against the Russian financial sector. My personal take is that these sanctions might follow only if there is a new major international crisis, like a direct Russian intervention in Ukraine. If there is no crisis like that, it's unlikely that the Biden Administration will go for such sanctions, because these sanctions might constitute significant risks for the stability of the global economic and financial system, which is definitely not in the US interest.

So let me just get into the end of my presentation, add that it seems that the current approach of the Biden Administration will cement further the Russian-Chinese partnership, mostly in the military and political domains, but also in the economic field. It also-- I think a lot will depend on whether the United States under Biden is capable of putting together a united Western front, not only against Beijing, but also against Moscow. If it happens, definitely the Kremlin will lose a degree of its current flexibility.

Though, we should keep in mind that these attempts are likely to take the form of a two-way street. So the United States will try to affect the position of its European allies, but the United States might be affected by European allies as well. So on certain issues, the American position might get softer compared to what it was, let's say, a year ago.

And finally, the very last point that I'd like to make is that I remain moderately optimistic about long-term prospects for the relationship. Maybe there is a degree of idealism here. But I do believe that after 2024, we can see some more real changes in this relationship, because we're likely to see a generational change in the United States and in Russia. And we'll see new people with very different views on the world, on the role of their countries in the world, and what is important in this relationship. Thank you.

**CAROL
SAIVETZ:**

Thank you very much, Andrey. I'd like to turn it over now to Angela to provide us with her perspectives on the future, I guess, of US-Russian relations.

ANGELA STENT: Thank you, Carol. Thank you for inviting me. Again, like Andrey, I wish I were there in person, but I cannot be.

And I don't disagree with a lot of what Andrey he's said. He's covered much of the ground that I was going to cover. I would certainly begin by saying that the Biden Administration believes that the ball is in Russia's court, and that the reason why the relationship with Russia is as bad as it is. And it's worse now than any time since before Gorbachev came to power.

And the reason for that is because of actions that Russia has taken. And in this country, obviously, we go back to 2016. We go back to the interference in the 2016 election and to the kind of toxic domestic politics in this country that has emerged from that.

And then we have the poisoning of the Skripals, just to say why we have all of these sanctions, and other actions that were taken. And now, of course, we have this build up-- I'll come back to that-- all the Russian troops on the Ukrainian border. We have interference in the 2020 election. The intelligence community published a declassified report on that. It was less than 2016, but it certainly happened. And then, of course, the poisoning and the imprisonment of Alexei Navalny, whose health is a very precarious position. So this is just to say that from the point of view of the United States, the reason for the deterioration in relations has been actions that Russia has taken and including very much interfering in our own domestic politics.

And so my advice to the Biden Administration would be to have very modest and realistic expectations for this relationship for the next four years. I think, in fact, that's exactly where they are now. Let me just remind you that the US-Russian relationship under Biden did not get off to an auspicious start.

Vladimir Putin was the last major world leader to congratulate Mr. Biden on his victory. That took until December the 14th. And even after the January 6 insurrection in the Capitol, Russian state media was still echoing the views of President Trump and his followers that somehow the election had been stolen.

Now, on the other side it's also true, and Andrey has alluded to that, that during the debates, then Vice President, former Vice President, now President Biden, called Vladimir Putin a thug and then made allusions to things like bounties that were paid for Afghan soldiers. And then, of course, most recently we had, in response to the interview on *ABC*, President Biden saying that he did consider President Putin a killer. And President Putin, in response to that, in saying the Russian version of, "it takes one to know one," challenging President Biden to a debate, a live debate, which, of course, never happened.

And so the rhetoric has certainly been escalating. The rhetoric has been very adversarial, and that really hasn't helped move the relationship forward. On the other hand, the secretary of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, just recently said that Russia wants to have a dialogue with the United States. He named a number of areas-- counter-terrorism, organized crime, things like that-- where we can talk to each other.

So the official position of the Biden Administration on relations with Russia-- and this is something that Secretary of State Anthony Blinken has spoken about, as well as the President himself-- he said the President is very clear-eyed about two things. He needs to hold Russia to account for any reckless or adversarial actions it takes while being open to areas in which it may be in our mutual interest to work with Russia. And the emphasis I think in the Biden Administration is predictability and stability in these relationships and working with Russia on areas that are of important national security interests to the United States as well as to Russia. And there's really an emphasis on pragmatic cooperation, and then push back where the US feels that Russia is acting against its interests.

And there certainly will be no reset of relations. After all, when Biden was Vice President in 2009, he was the one who announced the Obama era reset. That was still an era when the American leadership believed that it was possible to find a better way to interact with Russia. We're in a very different state than we were in 2009, and no one in this country is talking about a reset. So I think the expectations are really quite modest.

And the expectation is that this will remain a largely adversarial relationship for the next four years with some areas where we are working together with Russia. And the main one, of course, and Andrey has already discussed that, is arms control. So one of the first acts of the Biden Administration, of course, was to extend the New START treaty for another five years. So we now have just one remaining arms control treaty that regulates the strategic nuclear arsenal.

And, of course, between us, the US and Russia possess 90% of the world's nuclear weapons. So this is the key area. It's really only the major area in which Russia and the United States must engage.

As Andrey said, the Trump Administration came to this very late. They insisted that Chinese nuclear weapons be included in these negotiations. The Chinese demurred, and they have since demurred several times.

And I think that what you'll see going forward-- and, again, not to repeat what Andrey said-- there will be attempts to think about a follow-on treaty to this. Although, it would look very different from the original New START treaty. After all, the world has changed greatly, and you have many new classes of weapons.

And there may also be a discussion of including some of the other nuclear countries in a future arms control agreement. And I think bilateral arms control is a priority for both countries. It's one area, again, where the US and Russia interact as equals.

There are economic reasons. I mean, Russia has come through the COVID pandemic economically better than many predicted, but the Russian economy is certainly still sluggish. The US has also-- its economy has also been stressed out by the COVID pandemic, and the priority of the Biden Administration is, of course, the infrastructure bill that we're not discussing. It's COVID relief.

But neither country wants to expend huge amounts of resources on a costly new arms race. So it's in their interest not to do so. Now, we do know that President Putin in 2018 announced a new class of hypersonic weapons, all these wonder weapons. Some of them are already operational. The US is clearly also, to some extent, modernizing its own nuclear arsenal. But still, I think the process of negotiating maybe a follow-on to this will also mean that there will be limits to what either side will do in that realm.

Now, the other area where both sides have said they're committed to improving ties is the area of strategic stability, and the Biden Administration is going to resume regular strategic stability talks with Russia, which is something that atrophied during the Trump Administration. The problem is that this is a rather ambiguous concept. It means different things to different people.

If we're going to talk to Russia about strategic stability, what classes of weapons are we talking about? What issues are we talking about? Andrey already mentioned some of those. But the point is that these discussions will resume, and we do still have an in-built community of people, who have been used to talking to each other on both sides on these issues for decades, and who are now, I think, getting more involved in this process.

Now, what about other areas for US-Russian cooperation? Again, Andrey I think has mentioned most of them. Climate change is clearly a priority for this administration, but it's also much more of a priority now for Russia.

President Putin at the Valdai talked last year, talked about the dangers of climate change. It's something that he hasn't talked about explicitly before. We know that Former Secretary Kerry, now Climate Envoy Kerry, met with Foreign Minister Lavrov. They both happened to be in New Delhi together, and they talked about climate change.

We know that Russia has been invited to the climate summit that's going to happen later on this month, and I think President Putin has indicated an interest in going. So this could be and will be an area where there will be cooperation. And again, the Arctic, as Andrey said, that is, of course, linked to issues of climate change, but much more too the US and Russia compete in the Arctic militarily. But they also do cooperate. Russia has a very ambitious plan for its chairmanship of the Arctic Council, and so I think there'll be more US-Russian involvement bilaterally, but also multilaterally, going forward.

And in terms of other areas, again, Andrey has mentioned most of them. When we talk about the Middle East, I would highlight the fact that the Biden Administration is now committed to going back and revitalizing really the Israeli-Palestinian track, which, of course, the Trump Administration completely neglected. Russia has played a role there. It has played a role in the Quartet beforehand, so that might be an area where they are working together.

Iran, of course, is another one-- North Korea, the North Korean nuclear program, and the whole question of the Korean Peninsula. So these are other areas, regional issues-- Afghanistan was already mentioned-- where you could see and probably will see the US and Russia working together. So what are the major contentious issues? I would say one of the major ones is cyber.

The US has said that-- the Biden Administration, that they are responding and will respond to the Solar Wind's hack last year. We may never know what that response is, we the public, but there will be a response. How do you deal with these issues?

Russia has suggested, as Andrey mentioned, sitting down, having discussions, with the United States on a road map for cyber rules of the road going forward. So far, the US side has been very skeptical of this. How do you verify this? But it's possible that there could be some kind of engagement there, but it's also possible cyber attacks could escalate, and this will remain, I think, a very, very difficult and contentious issue.

And then the other ones I think are well-known. It has to do with the Russian-- what's happening domestically in Russia with the increasing repression there of political opponents to President Putin. And that is, of course, tied to the question of sanctions. Andrey already mentioned it.

There are a number of different pieces of legislation on the books in Congress that would impose those much tougher sanctions on Russia, both on individuals, on sectors, on Russia's sovereign debt. We don't know whether any of those measures will actually come to fruition, whether they'll be passed, but I think the likelihood of more sanctions being imposed is there. But as Andrey has said, I think the Russian side has already discounted that and the possibility of more sanctions. It doesn't expect any less.

And then I think that could also be, obviously, much more reaction to what's happening in Ukraine. It's quite a dangerous situation. You have a Russian buildup of troops there. It's unclear why.

I think most people believe it's partly in retaliation for things that President Zelensky has done domestically, and that has to do with closing down media that were deemed to be too pro-Russian, and going after certain oligarchs, and others in Ukraine that were deemed to be too pro-Russian. It's obviously one of the goals of the Kremlin not to have the Ukrainian government function properly, and so that continues. But I think it could also be the massing of troops trying to test the Biden Administration, a response to some of the rhetoric that we've heard.

There be a number of causes for it, but the actual facts on the ground, I think, do make one very concerned. And we could see an escalation there. I mean, essentially we are still confronted with the same problem that we've been confronted with even before President Putin came to power, since the Soviet collapse, and that is the Russian desire for the United States and its allies to recognize that Russia has a right to a sphere of influence, a privileged interest, in the post-Soviet space. And that countries that were part of the former Soviet Union, i.e. Ukraine particularly, should not be allowed to join either the European Union, or NATO, or either of those things on offer, which they are not on offer.

Of course, recently President Zelensky has requested a membership action plan from NATO, something that was denied Ukraine in 2008. And that's immediately prompted a Russian response, a more belligerent response. But this is the core issue, and it's something where the United States and Russia are very unlikely to agree for a very long time.

And so my final point here is also going to go back to China for a moment. There are people in the Biden Administration who believe that what they should do is try and reach out to Russia to kind of get it to distance itself, persuade it to distance itself from China. In other words, to work with Russia against China that is seen to be the main danger to the United States by this Administration. I'm very skeptical that this is possible.

You heard from Andrey that, if anything, the two countries are moving closer together. The Chinese support for what Russia does domestically is an existential issue to Russia. Obviously, there are many other issues in the Russia-Chinese relationship. But Russia has made its choice so far, and that is to be a junior partner to China as opposed to a junior partner to the United States.

So I doubt that such efforts by the Biden Administration will be successful. But nevertheless, I think that they will continue. So I would say, finally, I'm not as optimistic that a reset would be possible in 2024.

After all, Putin has now given himself the possibility of remaining president until the year 2036. And if that's true, it's very hard to see how there's a reset. Yes, he will have a younger generation of Americans and Russians clearly are coming into positions and rising up. And so possibly in the future, things could improve. But I think right now, or for the time being at least for this four years of a Biden Administration, I think you can expect really a pretty adversarial relationship, and I think the challenge will be to prevent the relationship from deteriorating any further. So I will stop there.

**ELIZABETH
WOOD:**

So I'm Elizabeth Wood, and I'm going to bring in some questions for our speakers. Thank you for a rich bouquet. We've had a huge amount of material. You've covered so many topics, and we have at least 10, 13 now, questions in the chat, so I'll be brief.

On the Ukraine issue, you've both talked about the problems of the troops on the border, the Russian troops. And for Andrey, I'm curious. You mentioned also that you think Moscow thinks that Biden is weak. I'm curious whether those two things are related to each other. Is Putin massing, as Angela suggested, that he's massing to test Ukraine?

It's possible that it's related to the NATO issue. So the question is, why is Putin massing 85,000 troops on the Ukrainian border-- to Andrey. And to both of you, do you think there's anything that will get this conflict resolved?

We've had frozen conflicts all around the edges of the Soviet Union, former Soviet Union, for quite a long time. What will it take to have the conflict begin to find a resolution? Is there an answer to make Minsk work better? Are there other approaches that could work that the two governments could work together on?

**ANDREY
KORTUNOV:**

Well, let me try to be very brief here. First of all, I think that the concern in the Kremlin is that Vladimir Zelensky would like to become a new Ilham Aliyev, that he might be tempted to try to resolve the Donbas issue through military means. So the Russian troops on the Ukrainian border, in my view-- I might be dead wrong on that-- but in my view, this is a means of deterrence rather than a preparation for an open intervention.

Because what Russia tries, or what Putin, rather, tried for all these seven years was to avoid a situation where Russia could become, at least legally, a party to the conflict. And that's why Minsk is so important. Because in the Minsk agreements, Russia is not positioned as a party to the conflict, but rather, as an observer, as a mediator, as a sovereign who can assist the resolution of the conflict, but not being engaged in the conflict. Now, what can be done to resolve the conflict?

I think there is only one issue which so far cannot be resolved to everybody's satisfaction, and this is Crimea. Frankly, I don't see how this issue can be resolved so that both Moscow and Kiev can stay happy with this decision. However, all the rest can be resolved.

But the Minsk agreements, in my view, are important, but not sufficient. Because the Ukrainian problem is linked to more general problems of European security. So the question is, how to find a model of the European security architecture where both countries will feel more or less comfortable and not threatened.

Because if the issues of European security are not properly addressed, no matter how the Donbas problem is resolved, Ukraine will always be concerned about a new Russian aggression. And in Moscow, they will remain always concerned about the NATO infrastructure getting very close to their borders. So unless we address this bigger issue, parallel to the issue of East Ukraine, I think it would be very difficult to get to a stable settlement. Thank you.

ELIZABETH Angela, do you want to--

WOOD:

ANGELA STENT: Sure. I mean, I would just say the Minsk agreements haven't worked, and they haven't worked because Russia and Ukraine have a different idea about the sequencing of the terms. But really, Russia hasn't withdrawn its troops.

They've exchanged some prisoners. They've had a ceasefire. But essentially, I think you have to move beyond the Minsk agreements.

But I think more broadly, as you yourself said, Nagorno-Karabakh was recently unfrozen. But otherwise, you've had these other states, particularly if you look at Transnistria, that have existed now for 30 years or more. So I'm afraid I don't see this issue being resolved for a very long time, because the Russians understand that there's a limit to what the US and the Europeans can do to get this resolved, and they're not going to meet Russian military force with Western military force.

And in the absence of that, this probably remains a frozen conflict for the foreseeable future, with sometimes having flare-ups, which, of course, you've had in the past few weeks. You've had quite a few casualties. So we shouldn't forget that this is still an ongoing war in which, what, more than 13,000 people have been killed.

And the idea of a new Euro-Atlantic or European security architecture is one that is occasionally approached. But I think it gets back to the fundamental question that I was talking about before, that from the Russian point of view, a country like Ukraine should remain within Russia's orbit. And so far, that's not something that at least most Western countries have officially been willing to accept.

ELIZABETH

WOOD:

So I have another question for Andrey and Angela, which is, after this little fracas over Biden responding to a question whether Putin was a killer and he said yes, Putin sensibly said he would have a debate with Joe Biden. And yet, he's never said he would have a debate with Navalny. He's never investigated his arrest, his poisoning, his being sent to Siberia, has never investigated the whole near death experience, nor has he said he would debate Ukrainian President Zelensky. And so I'm curious whether either of those could ever be in the cards, that President Putin would be willing to debate one of his own oppositionists, or be willing to talk openly with President Zelensky to resolve the Ukrainian crisis.

ANGELA STENT: Well, I'll just briefly say I think Putin offered to debate President Biden because he knew that he wouldn't take it up.

[LAUGHTER]

ANDREY

KORTUNOV:

Let me give you my interpretation of what drives Putin. First of all, I think he's deeply convinced that what happens to citizens of Russia is none of US business. So I think that the perception is that no matter what happens to Navalny, you might be unhappy about that, you might have grievances or complaints, but this is our domestic issue. And you have no right to interfere into what we are doing with our citizens. It might sound cynical, but I think that's the way it is.

And as far as Zelensky is concerned, again, the perception of the Kremlin, that Zelensky is not an independent actor, but he's a kind of puppet in the hands of the West. Ukraine is not a fully sovereign country. It's a country which is on the life support system, which gets a lot of Western support, and that's the only reason why the country still exists.

That's why I don't think that Putin believes that Zelensky is a leader at the same level of Putin. And he might look at Zelensky with a kind of condescending approach. That's why I think for Putin, it's one thing to debate with Biden, and he would be flattered probably to have such a debate, but with a person like Zelensky he doesn't take Zelensky for real. And this is one of the problems why we cannot resolve many issues in the relations between Russia and Ukraine.

**CAROL
SAIVETZ:**

Can I jump in with one question for a minute? I'd like to ask you both about Iran and where Iran fits into Russia's calculations in your estimation. Biden has announced that he wants the United States to rejoin the JCPOA.

Russia seems, at least superficially, to be supportive of that move. At the same time, Russia is talking about selling S400s and doing several other things that are bound to irritate the United States, not to mention the Israelis. So I just would love to hear both of your takes on the sort of Russian decision-making about what to do about Iran. I don't care who goes first.

ANGELA STENT: OK, I will start. I mean, I think the Russian-Iranian relationship is, needless to say, quite complicated. I mean, I think the Russians would like to have the US return to the JCPOA. And after all, they were helpful the last time around, according to President Obama, certainly in making that happen.

They are working with the Iranians, clearly, in Syria. But I think you also see increasingly questions about what's going to happen when the Syrian conflict is over. Are Russian and Iranian goals aligned there? And I'm not sure that they are.

And we do also know that Russia has now developed close ties with both Israel and Saudi Arabia, both of whom hope that Russia can use its influence to lessen what they see as Iranian aggressive actions. I'm not sure that Russia has that power. So I see that relationship, at the moment, being quite important for Russia. But I think further down the road, you're going to see more frictions in that relationship, and I'm not quite sure how aligned their interests will be.

**ELIZABETH
WOOD:**

So let's turn to some questions from the audience. Thank you both for these answers. We've got somebody asking about NATO, and this is, again, about Ukraine.

"NATO poses a threat to Russian interests sustaining mistrust between the US and Russia. I'm just quoting. "What changes to NATO could improve relations between the two countries? Are any changes likely in the near future?" Curious-- yeah.

**ANDREY
KORTUNOV:**

Well, if I might offer a very modest step, which will be, I think, nevertheless quite significant. In April of 2014, seven years ago, the NATO summit made a decision to stop all military cooperation with the Russian Federation. And I think that that was an understandable decision in view of the Ukrainian crisis and a very rapid deterioration of the relationship between Russia and the West.

However, in my opinion, the NATO bureaucrats overdid it in the sense that they stopped not only cooperation with the Russians, but all contacts with Russians at the level of military, except for SACEUR talking to the head of the Russian general staff. And I think that it was a mistake from the very beginning, and it would be important to restore mil-to-mil contacts, indeed within the NATO Russia Council, or within a special ad hoc group if the NATO Russia Council is not ready. I think that if we have more contacts between the military, if we have a functional channel of communication, that would be helpful. That would create more predictability.

Maybe we can start with some modest confidence-building measures. It can defuse the situation along the borderline between Russia and NATO. So I would suggest to start here. I understand the hesitations on the NATO side, but I think that communication should not be considered as a reward for good behavior.

ELIZABETH WOOD: We have a question about the hypersonic weapons that you mentioned. Is a hypersonic weapons development triggering a new arms race? Both countries could use their funds perhaps to develop civil society instead. Are we in danger of a new arms race? Is that going to destabilize the situation, these hypersonic weapons?

ANDREY KORTUNOV: If it's a question to me, I think, yes. I'm sure that hypersonic weapons, along with some other new futuristic systems, create a formidable challenge to arms control and to the international security. Because among other things, it shrinks the decision-making time.

If you have hypersonic weapons, you have to think and to decide very fast on whether you are going to retaliate or not. And another problem with these systems is that nobody really knows how we are going to control them, how we are going to verify agreements involving such systems. And what about third countries which might also entertain hypersonic systems? So I think it's one of the forthcoming challenges. And the sooner the two sides start paying attention to these challenges, the better it is.

ELIZABETH WOOD: Angela?

ANGELA STENT: Yeah, I agree with that.

ELIZABETH WOOD: We've got another question about, that I myself don't know anything about. But how would Russia perceive a disarmament of tactical nuclear weapons if that happened in the European umbrella states, Belgium, Germany, Italy, and the Netherlands? If there was such a disarmament of tactical nuclear weapons in those countries, would that help build up confidence? We don't know anything about that.

ANDREY KORTUNOV: Well, but let me say that, of course, there is a symmetry on tactical weapons. Russia has more, and that's why this issue is usually raised not by Russia, but by the United States. But, of course, any movement towards ultimate elimination of tactical nuclear weapons from Europe would be a good thing.

I think that Russia, I mean the Russian leadership, would look for, where is the catch? I think that they would suspect a NATO of some hidden motivations or hidden plans. But in my personal opinion, if we are thinking about future arms control agreements, we should eliminate these border lines between tactical, intermediate range, and strategic weapons, because what might look tactical for you appears to be strategic for me. So I think that both sides should be allowed to have a certain number of warheads and delivery vehicles without necessarily drawing lines between different types of delivery vehicles.

ELIZABETH WOOD: And I think we have time for maybe one or two more quick questions. Gordon Humphrey, Former US Senator, asks, what should be the role of public diplomacy and messaging the citizens of Russia, China, Iran, et. al? And what is your assessment of the effectiveness of US public diplomacy at present?

ANGELA STENT: Well, I think public diplomacy is very important. And I think when we talk about US-Russian relations, we focus on the governments, but there's a vast civil society in Russia, as there is in the United States. And the Kremlin doesn't speak for all Russian people.

So I think it's very important to have an active public diplomacy program, reaching out to different groups of Russians. I think there are a number of ways, regrettably, where interactions between Russians and Americans have obviously atrophied. That's partly because of the pandemic, but it's more than that. So I think that's very important, and I think it's important to have a united message.

I think in the previous administration, we didn't really have much of a united message. So I think it's a very important challenge for the Biden Administration to be more effective there.

ELIZABETH WOOD: Carol, did you want one more question? We've got a minute left.

CAROL SAIVETZ: I was just looking at the Q&A as well. There were any number of questions about Navalny and what the United States could possibly do to help save him, basically. And what are the implications for the Putin regime if Navalny dies while he's in prison? It's clear who the culprits are, if you want to put it that way. But then the question becomes, does it hurt or help Putin internationally or even domestically?

ANDREY KORTUNOV: Well, let me say that, first of all, the problem with US support is that any US support to Navalny will be used by the authorities to demonstrate that Navalny is an American puppet, that he basically serves his American masters. That's why I think that the United States should be very cautious in choosing the forms of its support to Navalny and the political opposition, in general. However, I think that Navalny will now become a permanent factor in the relations between Russia and the West, and it will be a permanent embarrassment for the Kremlin, because questions about Navalny will be raised no matter what.

If Navalny dies, God forbid, it's very difficult to predict consequences. But definitely, his cause will not die with him. I think that what he started doing will get a lot of followers, and that will have implications for the country, if not in the immediate future, then in the mid-term and long-term future.

CAROL SAIVETZ: Angela, do you want to add something?

ANGELA STENT: I think there's still the question of, if things get worse, obviously, what actions could the US take? And I think you could see more sanctions on individuals possibly. But again, there's really a limit to what the US can do. And I agree with Andrey, that at some point, this can also be counterproductive for his movement. So it's an unfortunate situation.

CAROL SAIVETZ: I think we've probably come to the end of our time. I want to thank, first of all, our speakers, Andrey Kortunov and Angela Stent. We could have continued this for hours.

I think there were 28 questions in the Q&A, and we didn't get to half of them. So I apologize. We'd love to have you back in person, COVID permitting, perhaps in the winter or spring of next year. I think it would be a great conversation to have.

And I'd like to thank Michelle English and Laura Kerwin from CIS for helping us run, and do all the technical stuff behind the scenes, and do the publicity. And I realized that I forgot to introduce myself at the very beginning. I am Carol Saivetz. I am a senior advisor at the Security Studies program at MIT.

And, again, thank you all for attending, and thank you, Angela, and thank you, Andrey. It's been great to see you both, given that we've been isolated for so long. And really, we'd love to have you both in person sometime next year.

ANGELA STENT: Thank you.

ANDREY Thank you.

KORTUNOV:

CAROL Thank you, everybody.

SAIVETZ:

ELIZABETH I thought that was really terrific, you guys.

WOOD:

[MUSIC PLAYING]