

December 29, 1999

**Cable, Secretary of State to the US Embassy
Moscow, 'Memorandum of Conversation -- Meeting
between the Deputy Secretary and Russian Prime
Minister Putin, Moscow, 22 December 1999'**

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Summary:

Putin and Talbott discuss the Russian Duma elections, Chechnya, Georgia, Iran's nuclear program, and START-2.

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TAGS: PREL, RS

SUBJECT: MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION -- MEETING BETWEEN THE
DEPUTY SECRETARY AND RUSSIAN PRIME MINISTER PUTIN, MOSCOW,
22 DECEMBER 1999

1. (U) CLASSIFIED BY D ACTING SECRETARY STROBE TALBOTT.

REASON: 1.5 (B) AND (D).

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SUMMARY

2. (S) DEPUTY SECRETARY TALBOTT MET WITH RUSSIAN PRIME
MINISTER VLADIMIR PUTIN FOR AN HOUR DECEMBER 22 IN THE
RUSSIAN WHITE HOUSE IN MOSCOW. SUBJECTS DISCUSSED INCLUDED
THE DECEMBER 19 DUMA ELECTION; CHECHNYA AND THE NORTH
CAUCASUS, INCLUDING TENSIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND GEORGIA;
NONPROLIFERATION AND IRAN; ABM/NMD/START; AND PROSPECTS FOR
START-2 RATIFICATION. PUTIN WAS JOINED BY FOREIGN POLICY
AIDE ANDREY TSYGANOV, DEPUTY FM MAMEDOV AND MFA NORTH
AMERICAS DIRECTOR CHIKVISHVILI. TALBOTT WAS JOINED BY
CHARGE ORDWAY, S/NIS DEPUTY BEYRLE, AND EXECUTIVE ASSISTANT
GOLDBERG.

RUSSIAN ELECTIONS / U.S.-RUSSIA PRIORITIES

3. (S) WITH MEDIA PRESENT AND CAMERAS ROLLING, PM PUTIN

REVIEW AUTHORITY: Marvin
Russell, Senior Reviewer

WELCOMED DEPUTY SECRETARY TALBOTT BY RECALLING THEIR MEETINGS OVER KOSOVO IN JUNE AND THEIR SUCCESSFUL JOINT EFFORTS TO RESOLVE "SOME POINTED ISSUES." RUSSIA WAS GRATEFUL FOR THE AMERICANS' POSITIVE ASSESSMENT OF ITS ROLE IN SETTLING THE CONFLICT. NOT EVERYTHING HAD TURNED OUT AS RUSSIA HAD HOPED , BUT IF BOTH SIDES USED THE MECHANISMS IN THEIR RELATIONS AND MADE A GOOD FAITH EFFORT, JOINT SOLUTIONS COULD BE FOUND. TALBOTT RECALLED THAT HE'D BEEN FORCED TO TURN HIS PLANE AROUND TO RETURN TO MOSCOW FOR CONTINUED DISCUSSIONS WITH PUTIN AFTER THE RUSSIAN MILITARY OCCUPIED THE PRISTINA AIRPORT; THIS TIME HIS FLIGHT WAS COMMERCIAL SO HE DIDN'T HAVE THAT OPTION. PUTIN OBSERVED DRYLY THAT HE REMEMBERED THE INCIDENT WELL.

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4. (S) AS THE PRESS WAS USHERED OUT, TALBOTT SAID HE REMEMBERED IT WELL, TOO. HE THEN OFFERED CONGRATULATIONS ON THE DEC. 19 DUMA ELECTIONS; THIS WAS NOT A PARTISAN STATEMENT REGARDING THE ELECTION OUTCOME BUT AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT THAT THEY REPRESENT ANOTHER IMPORTANT STEP IN RUSSIA'S DEMOCRATIC TRANSITION. PUTIN INTERJECTED THAT HE HAD PUBLICLY SUPPORTED THE RIGHTIST PARTIES IN THE VOTE, A GREAT RISK CONSIDERING THE LEFTIST ORIENTATION OF THE RUSSIAN ELECTORATE. IT WAS A CONSCIOUS DECISION: HE WANTED THE RIGHT TO BE REPRESENTED IN THE DUMA TO PROVIDE BALANCE. TALBOTT CONTINUED THAT 1999 HAD BEEN A YEAR OF DIFFICULT CHALLENGES FOR THE U.S. - RUSSIA RELATIONSHIP. WITH A NEW YEAR APPROACHING BRINGING ANOTHER ELECTORAL SEASON TO BOTH COUNTRIES, TALBOTT SAID THE U.S. PRESIDENT WAS DETERMINED TO LEAVE TO HIS AND YELTSIN'S SUCCESSORS A RELATIONSHIP THAT PRESERVED THE POSITIVE ESSENTIALS BUILT UP OVER THE PAST SEVEN YEARS. THE U.S. WANTS TO CONTRIBUTE TO RUSSIA'S EVOLUTION AS A STRONG, SECURE, PROSPEROUS, UNITARY, DEMOCRATIC STATE, WHICH IS VERY MUCH IN THE U.S. INTEREST. DURING THIS MEETING, HE HOPED TO HEAR FROM PUTIN HIS VIEWS ON THE YEAR AHEAD FOR U.S.-RUSSIA RELATIONS AND HAVE A MORE SPECIFIC DISCUSSION OF ARMS CONTROL TOPICS, NON-PROLIFERATION, AND THE CAUCASUS.

5. (S) PUTIN AGREED 1999 HAD BEEN CHALLENGING BUT SAID THE TWO SIDES HAD SUCCEEDED IN BUILDING SOME BRIDGES. THE PERSONAL RELATIONS BETWEEN LEADERS WERE EXTREMELY IMPORTANT. (COMMENT: HE DID NOT REFER TO YELTSIN DIRECTLY.) HE SAID HE WAS SURE TALBOTT HAD NOTED THE PUBLIC STATEMENT HE'D MADE ON THE STRENGTH OF U.S.-RUSSIA

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RELATIONS (COMMENT: THE CLEAR BUT UNSPOKEN REFERENCE WAS TO HIS COMMENT IN THE WAKE OF YELTSIN'S OUTBURST IN CHINA REMINDING THE U.S. THAT RUSSIA STILL POSSESSED NUCLEAR

WEAPONS). WITHOUT EXAGGERATION, HE COULD SAY THAT STATEMENT WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WITHOUT THE PERSONAL

CONTACT HE'D HAD WITH PRESIDENT CLINTON AND SANDY BERGER.
THESE MEETINGS HAD NOT BEEN WITHOUT VALUE.

CHECHNYA

6. (S) TURNING TO THE CAUCASUS, PUTIN SAID HE WAS REMINDED OF THE SAYING THAT ALL RUSSIA'S ILLS COME FROM THE EAST. HE SAID THIS BECAUSE THE WEST WAS PUSHING RUSSIA TOWARD THE EAST WITH ITS CRITICISM OVER CHECHNYA. EVERY RUSSIAN CITIZEN RESENTS THIS CRITICISM AS FUNDAMENTALLY DISHONEST. RUSSIA WAS PROVOKED TO TAKE ACTION IN CHECHNYA, HE ARGUED, WHEN THE REBELS CARRIED OUT A TERROR CAMPAIGN, KILLING WOMEN AND CHILDREN. THERE WAS A REAL GENOCIDE OF RUSSIANS IN CHECHNYA; IT WAS NOT WIDELY REPORTED, BUT IT WAS A FACT. SOME 220,000 RUSSIANS HAD ALREADY LEFT THE TERRITORY. JOURNALISTS DIDN'T REPORT SUCH FACTS; HOW COULD THEY REPORT OBJECTIVELY AT ALL WHEN THEY WERE AFRAID TO TRAVEL TO THE REGION FOR FEAR OF BEING TAKEN HOSTAGE. PUTIN ASSERTED IF YOU EXPLAINED THE TRUE STATE OF AFFAIRS IN CHECHNYA - KIDNAPPINGS, LAWLESSNESS, CRIMINALITY - TO THE AVERAGE AMERICAN, HE WOULD FIND IT IMPOSSIBLE NOT TO BE ON THE RUSSIAN SIDE.

7. (S) PUTIN SAID HE WASN'T SURE IF THE POLICIES WERE COORDINATED TO A CERTAIN END, BUT THE U.S. COMMENTS ON
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CHECHNYA APPEARED MORE MEASURED THAN THE EUROPEANS': "WE NOTICE SUCH THINGS." RUSSIA WAS AWARE OF THE HUMANITARIAN DEMANDS RELATED TO THE CONFLICT, AND WAS DEALING WITH THEM. IN GENERAL, THE SITUATION HAD TURNED GREATLY IN RUSSIA'S FAVOR. THE CHECHEN PEOPLE FELT BETRAYED. IT ACTUALLY HELPED THE RUSSIAN CAUSE WHEN THE SAUDIS SENT SUPPORTERS OF WAHABBISM TO THE REGION, WHICH WAS TRADITIONALLY SUNNI, BUT IT BROUGHT LITTLE FOR THE CHECHENS. SCHOOLS HADN'T BEEN OPENED FOR THREE YEARS, PENSIONS AND SALARIES WENT UNPAID - IT WAS A TOTAL DEGRADING OF THE PEOPLE. PUTIN SAID THE DESTRUCTION IN CHECHNYA WAS "INSUBSTANTIAL" - DAGESTAN HAD BEEN HIT WORSE IN THE EARLY PHASE OF THE CAMPAIGN. RUSSIAN WAS DOING ALL IT COULD TO AVOID DESTRUCTION AND CIVILIAN CASUALTIES, AND WAS SUCCEEDING IN THE MAIN. PERHAPS THE MILITARY WAS HIDING SOMETHING FROM HIM, PUTIN MUSED - IT WAS POSSIBLE, BUT HE DOUBTED THAT "MASSIVE LOSSES" COULD BE HIDDEN. RUSSIA WAS NOT USING WMD IN CHECHNYA - SUCH CLAIMS WERE NONSENSE, AND BESIDES THERE WAS NO NEED FOR THEIR USE. PEOPLE WERE NOW ANXIOUS TO LEAVE THE CAMPS AND RETURN TO THEIR HOMES; 1500 ALREADY HAD. RUSSIA WOULD RESPOND TO THESE DESIRES: GAS AND POWER WERE BEING RESTORED AND

ASSISTANCE WAS GIVEN TO THOSE WITHOUT HOUSES. NINETY PERCENT OF THE POPULATION NOW LIVED IN AREAS UNDER RUSSIAN CONTROL.

8. (S) MILITARILY, THERE WAS NO ORGANIZED RESISTANCE LEFT. RUSSIAN COMMANDO FORCES WERE WORKING IN ALL AREAS TO REMOVE

THE LAST HOTBEDS OF RESISTANCE, AND CHASE THE FIGHTERS SOUTH TO THE MOUNTAINS. PUTIN SAID HE REGRETTED SHEVARDNADZE'S REFUSAL OF RUSSIA'S OFFER TO STATION FORCES
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ON THE GEORGIAN SIDE OF THE CHECHEN BORDER. WITH GROWING IRRITATION, PUTIN DESCRIBED HOW SHEVARDNADZE HAD ACCEPTED YELTSIN'S OFFER OVER THE TELEPHONE, ONLY TO CALL BACK THE RUSSIAN DEFENSE MINISTER THE NEXT MORNING TO SAY NO, HE'D CHANGED HIS MIND. TALBOTT SAID SHEVARDNADZE RECALLED THAT HE'D SAID MAYBE, NOT YES. " WE KNOW EXACTLY WHAT HE SAID," PUTIN SHOT BACK - " 'YES, BORIS NIKOLYAEVICH, I AGREE' " - AND THEN CALLED TO RETRACT IT THE NEXT DAY.

9. (S) RESPONDING TO TALBOTT'S QUESTION, PUTIN RECOUNTED RUSSIAN EFFORTS TO BEGIN A DIALOGUE WITH CHECHEN LEADERS. HE HAD MET PERSONALLY WITH THE VICE CHAIRMAN OF THE CHECHEN GOVERNMENT. HE'D LAID DOWN CONDITIONS FOR THE START OF TALKS. THE OFFICIAL RETURNED TO GROZNY BUT REPORTED BACK THAT MASKHADOV "HAD GONE CRAZY," CHANGED HIS POSITION AND REJECTED THE CONDITIONS. A SECOND EMISSARY CAME TO MOSCOW FOR MEETINGS, RETURNED TO GROZNY, AND DISAPPEARED. MASKHADOV HIMSELF COULDN'T LEAVE CHECHNYA BECAUSE HE WAS TOTALLY UNDER CONTROL BY KHATTAB AND BASAYEV. HE WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO DEAL WITH. PUTIN HAD MET WITH THE CHECHEN MUFTI, AFTER WHICH MASKHADOV HAD SENTENCED HIM TO DEATH AS A TRAITOR. LET HIM RELEASE SOME OF THE 252 HOSTAGES STILL BEING HELD - A NUMBER OF WHOM ARE FOREIGNERS - THEN WE'LL BE READY TO MEET, PUTIN SAID.

CHECHNYA AND GEORGIA

10. (S) TALBOTT RAISED THE DANGER OF REGIONAL SPILLOVER FROM CHECHNYA. AS RUSSIA DEALT WITH A THREAT TO ITS OWN SOVEREIGNTY AND TERRITORIAL INTEGRITY, IT WAS EXCEEDINGLY IMPORTANT IT RESPECT THE SAME PRINCIPLES VIS-A-VIS ITS
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NEIGHBORS. THE U.S. HAD NOTED PUTIN'S ASSURANCES ON THAT SCORE IN THE DEC. 11 FINANCIAL TIMES; THESE STATEMENTS WERE WELCOME AND SHOULD BE REITERATED. FOR ITS PART, THE U.S. WOULD USE ITS GOOD RELATIONS WITH SHEVARDNADZE TO ENSURE THE GEORGIANS UNDERSTOOD THE IMPORTANCE OF AVOIDING ANY SUSPICIONS ITS TERRITORY WAS BEING MISUSED BY CHECHEN FIGHTERS.

11. (S) PUTIN SAID HE COULD OFFER AN IMMEDIATE PRETEXT FOR DISCUSSION WITH TBILISI: A REBEL BASE LOCATED 5KM INSIDE GEORGIAN TERRITORY. WITH UNCONCEALED CONTEMPT, HE SAID "YOUR FRIEND SHEVARDNADZE IS A FOOL;" HE EITHER DIDN'T UNDERSTAND WHAT IS GOING ON AT THE BORDER OR WAS TOO AFRAID TO ACT. WITHOUT RUSSIAN TROOPS TO ACCOMPANY THEM, PUTIN CLAIMED, GEORGIAN FORCES WOULD NOT DARE VENTURE INTO CERTAIN REGIONS OF THEIR OWN COUNTRY. IF RUSSIA WITHDREW

ALL ITS FORCES FROM GEORGIA, OTHER REGIONS WOULD DECLARE IMMEDIATE INDEPENDENCE. PUTIN ILLUSTRATED HIS DISDAIN FOR THIS SUBJECT BY RECOUNTING AN INCIDENT IN WHICH CHECHEN MERCENARIES IN ABKHAZIA HAD PLAYED SOCCER WITH THE DECAPITATED HEAD OF ONE OF THEIR CAPTIVES.

12. (S) TALBOTT REITERATED THE IMPORTANCE OF RUSSIA'S RESPECTING GEORGIA'S TERRITORY AND SOVEREIGNTY. ANY RUSSIAN INTERVENTION IN GEORGIA AGAINST THE WISHES OF THE GEORGIAN AUTHORITIES WOULD SIGNIFICANTLY WORSEN ALREADY STRAINED RELATIONS BETWEEN RUSSIA AND THE REST OF THE WORLD. AS FOR THE ALLEGATION THAT GEORGIA WAS ALLOWING ITS TERRITORY TO BE USED FOR OPERATIONS AGAINST RUSSIA, TALBOTT ASKED PUTIN TO PASS HIM MORE SPECIFIC INFORMATION ABOUT THE REBEL BASE THAT HE COULD SHARE WITH THE GEORGIAN

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LEADERSHIP. HE RECALLED A CONVERSATION HE'D HAD THE PREVIOUS WEEK WITH GEORGIAN FM MENAGHARISHVILI TO WARN HIM OF THE POTENTIAL DANGERS ON THE BORDER. PUTIN SAID RUSSIA WOULD MAINTAIN A SOBER POSITION, AND WOULD DO ALL IT COULD TO SAFEGUARD THE SOVEREIGNTY OF ITS NEIGHBORS. PUTIN SAID HE WOULD DO SO. (COMMENT: FM IVANOV SUBSEQUENTLY PROMISED THAT SPECIFICS WOULD BE PASSED THROUGH OUR EMBASSY.)

ARMS CONTROL / NONPROLIFERATION

13. (S) PUTIN SAID SANDY BERGER AND RUSSIAN NATIONAL SECURITY CHIEF SERGEY IVANOV WERE IN CONSTANT TOUCH OVER NONPROLIFERATION ISSUES CONCERNING IRAN. HE SAID RUSSIA WOULD MEET ITS OBLIGATIONS HONESTLY IN THIS AREA, BUT FACED PROBLEMS WITH THE "MILITARY-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX." RUSSIA SOUGHT A BALANCED POLICY: HE HAD SPOKEN WITH BARAK, AND ASSURED HIM RUSSIA HAD NO DESIRE TO CREATE AN "ARMED MONSTER" IN THE MIDDLE EAST. ON THE OTHER HAND, RUSSIA DID NOT WANT TO RENOUNCE ITS MARKET IN IRAN ONLY TO SEE THE VACUUM FILLED BY WESTERN COUNTRIES, INCLUDING THE U.S. NONETHELESS, RUSSIA WOULD TRY TO FULFILL IS OBLIGATIONS TO AVOID PROBLEMS WITH THE U.S. CONGRESS.

14. (S) TALBOTT SAID HE LOOKED FORWARD TO HIS MEETING LATER THAT DAY WITH SERGEY IVANOV FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION OF THE

ISSUE, BUT PUTIN SHOULD KNOW THERE WERE SERIOUS PROBLEMS HERE THAT NEEDED TO BE ADDRESSED QUICKLY. IRAN REMAINED AN ACTIVE SUPPORTER OF TERRORISM. EVEN IF KHATAMI APPEARED SERIOUS ABOUT PROMOTING REFORM, OTHER POWERFUL IRANIAN FORCES WERE DETERMINED TO THWART THE PEACE PROCESS, AND

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WERE CLEARLY BENT ON ACQUIRING WMD AND SOPHISTICATED DELIVERY SYSTEMS AT ANY COST. THIS WAS AS CONTRARY TO RUSSIA'S INTERESTS AS TO AMERICA'S. PUTIN AGREED WITH THE LATTER POINT: "TODAY THEY ARE ANTI-AMERICAN, TOMORROW THEY

MAY BE ANTI-RUSSIAN -- THEY ARE THAT KIND OF PEOPLE."

15. (S) BRIEFING PUTIN ON HIS TALKS WITH DEPUTY FM MAMEDOV AND THE GENERAL STAFF, TALBOTT SAID HE SAW SOME POSSIBILITY THAT A WAY COULD BE FOUND TO REGISTER PROGRESS IN THE NMD/AMB/START DISCUSSIONS IN THE COMING MONTHS. HE AND MAEDOV WOULD MOVE THINGS AS FAR AS THEY COULD, BUT THE SUBJECT MIGHT REQUIRE THE PERSONAL ATTENTION OF THE PRESIDENTS AND OF THE PM, AS WELL AS OF MINISTERS. PUTIN AGREED THIS WAS A VERY IMPORTANT QUESTION. HE LIKENED STRATEGIC STABILITY TO A STRONG BUILDING ERECTED OVER MANY YEARS. AVOIDING DAMAGE TO THE FOUNDATION WOULD REQUIRE A LOT OF EFFORT -- OTHERWISE, BOTH SIDES WOULD NEED TO START OVER FROM SCRATCH. HE SAID HE "WOULD LIKE TO SHARE" TALBOTT'S OPTIMISM (IMPLYING HE DIDN'T). FORTUNATELY, HE JOKED, GIVEN THE OUTCOME OF THE ELECTIONS FM IVANOV AND HIS MINISTRY WOULD HAVE "CARTE BLANCHE" TO RESOLVE SUCH PROBLEMS.

16. (S) TALBOTT EXPRESSED APPRECIATION TO PUTIN FOR HIS EFFORTS TO SECURE START-2 RATIFICATION. PUTIN SAID THIS WAS A KEY PRIORITY OF THE GOVERNMENT, AND SAID THE CHANCES FOR RATIFICATION HAD IMPROVED MARKEDLY WITH THE ELECTION OF A NEW DUMA.

17. (S) IN A PRIVATE EXCHANGE AT THE END OF THE MEETING, PUTIN ASKED THAT TALBOTT CONVEY GREETINGS AND RESPECTS TO
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THE PRESIDENT, SEC. ALBRIGHT AND BERGER, "ALL OF WHOM I'VE VALUED THE CHANCE TO MEET AND WORK WITH," AND TO THE VP, "WHOM I HOPE TO MEET AND WORK WITH."
TALBOTT

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