
Program Brief

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"The Bush-Putin Summit" A Nixon Center Press Briefing

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While welcoming the announcement that an treaty further reducing U.S. and Russian nuclear stockpiles will be signed during the forthcoming summit meetings in Moscow and St. Petersburg, speakers at a recent Nixon Center briefing also called for a genuine strategic partnership with Russia including broader, forward-looking cooperation on issues such as terrorism and non-proliferation and stressed the potential to transform the relationship. Center Advisory Council Chairman and former Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger chaired the panel, which also included Senator Pat Roberts (R-KS); Graham Allison, Director of the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs at Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government; and Nixon Center President Dimitri K. Simes. The Belfer Center co-sponsored the discussion, which was broadcast on C-SPAN.

Nuclear Deal More Symbolic Than Substantive

James Schlesinger termed the Bush Administration's decision to sign a new arms control treaty with Moscow as "wise," though he noted that the substance of the agreement was perhaps not "historic." In his view, having a treaty—rather than the parallel unilateral commitments, or even simple unilateral steps by the U.S., that the administration preferred—was a sensible concession to Russia that bolstered President Vladimir Putin's efforts to develop closer relations with the United States without affecting important American interests. In

this context, Dimitri Simes argued that observers in both countries should focus less on the terms of the treaty than on its political significance within the evolving U.S.-Russian relationship.

Graham Allison similarly downplayed the details of the agreement and noted that the reductions from around 6,000 nuclear warheads to the range of 1,700 to 2,200 warheads specified in the agreement were desirable to each side for its own reasons. Moreover, he expressed disappointment that the agreement did not address issues that contribute to predictability and security in crisis situations, such as increasing "decision time"—the time period during which each side would have to take a decision to launch its weapons in order to avoid their destruction by a potential attack. Senator Roberts suggested that the treaty would receive careful and thorough consideration by the U.S. Senate, which must ratify the agreement if it is to come into force, but added that no Senator had yet spoken out in opposition to the deal. He also called for a systematic evaluation of the impact of the nuclear cuts on other important strategic matters, such as Chinese and Russian military modernization plans.

One participant argued that the fact that a treaty will be signed is very important to the overall relationship, in that it preserves an environment in which the United States and Russia can continue to work together on the so-called Cooperative Threat Reduction programs to secure Moscow's nuclear

arsenal. In her view, refusing to sign a treaty—particularly after the U.S. withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty—could have endangered such joint projects. Schlesinger made a similar point in responding to a question about President Bush’s reported statement that he worries about Russian nuclear weapons no more than he worries about Great Britain’s. While he agreed that the chance of a Russian nuclear strike is “near zero,” Schlesinger drew a sharp distinction between that danger and the threat of leakage of Russian nuclear materials to hostile third parties. Senator Roberts repeatedly expressed concerns about the nature of Russian nuclear cooperation with Iran.

A New Agenda and a New Relationship

Several of the panelists emphasized the importance of pursuing a new, broader agenda in the U.S.-Russian relationship. For example, Graham Allison pointed out that the United States could face terrorist attacks far worse than those of September 11 if a nuclear weapon were used. To lessen the danger of such an event, he urged Washington and Moscow to take the lead in forming a global alliance against terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. In Allison’s view, Russia has already become one of America’s most important allies in the war on terror, behind only Great Britain—with which the United States has a long heralded “special relationship”—and Pakistan, whose cooperation was almost essential in launching military operations in Afghanistan. Simes added that many Russians view the threat of Islamic extremism as one that is common to their country and the United States. Senator Roberts suggested that NATO—with new Russian participation—could play an important role in the war on terrorism.

More generally, Simes maintained that the U.S.-Russian relationship has made considerable progress in the last two years. According to Simes, Moscow is content with the new arms control treaty, is no longer particularly concerned about missile defense or NATO enlargement, and has been of great assistance to Washington in the war on terror. For its part, the U.S. destruction of Afghanistan’s Taliban regime—long despised by Moscow—was an important contribution to Russian interests, he said, and there is room for constructive cooperation on energy projects. Though Simes explained that “the extremes” in Russia have not yet reconciled themselves to the country’s reduced status, he argued that the

population as a whole is prepared to accept a role as America’s “junior partner” if the U.S. is able to exercise appropriate sensitivity in its dealings with Moscow.

Responding to a question about the President Bush’s pre-election attacks on former President Bill Clinton for his close relationship with Boris Yeltsin—and Bush’s new close ties to Vladimir Putin—Schlesinger suggested that U.S. presidents as a whole tend to value such relationships more after taking office. The danger, in his view, lay only in allowing the personal relationship to have undue influence over the government-to-government relationship. Simes amplified this point, suggesting that the Clinton Administration had suffered particular criticism because of the perception that the former president had sacrificed longer-term American interests to support the unpopular and undemocratic Yeltsin. In contrast, Simes concluded, President Bush is using his relationship with Putin to promote U.S. objectives.

This Program Brief was prepared by Nixon Center Director Paul J. Saunders.

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