



# How Russia Can and Can't Help Obama

In hindsight, KGB analysts and Soviet officials were extraordinarily prescient about the perils of Islamist terrorism and the fallout from the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Could Russia, for all its faults and foibles, be a more valuable counterterrorism partner today?

BY BRIAN MICHAEL JENKINS | AUGUST 26, 2009



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U.S. President Barack Obama's recent diplomatic effort to push past differences between the United States and Russia in order to seek cooperation of mutual interest has a fascinating and little-known antecedent. In 1987, I received an unusual request. The Kremlin invited a group of American experts to come to Moscow. It said it wished to explore how the United States and the Soviet Union might cooperate in combating terrorism.

The idea seemed almost absurd. This was the bitter height of the Cold War. True, Soviet premier Mikhail Gorbachev and U.S. President Ronald Reagan met off personally, and the two reached some surprising arms-control agreements. But personal cordiality did not extend to other areas of superpower competition.

Many U.S. analysts suspected Moscow of backing terrorist campaigns in the Middle East and Western Europe. Meanwhile, the United States was making efforts to aid the mujahedeen in driving the occupying Soviet force from Afghanistan and backing Contra rebels against the Marxist Sandinistas.

Cuban assistance, taken over Nicaragua. Each side was accusing the other of sponsoring terrorism.

For 15 years I had been directing the RAND Corporation's research on terrorism, and though skeptical of the view that all the world's terrorism command post in the Kremlin, neither did I see the Soviet Union as the United States' most likely ally in combating terrorism.

Wary of walking into a propaganda ploy, I sought advice from Washington. Officials at the State Department informed me that the U.S. government touch the Moscow meeting with a 10-foot pole, but as a private citizen, I could do whatever I wanted (and if I went ahead, U.S. officials would see what the Soviets were up to).

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Only somewhat reassured, I decided to participate, but urged that a pre-meeting meeting of organizers to establish ground rules. We would assemble as private citizens, not national representatives. There would be no public pronouncements. No signed communiqués. No photo ops. If there were ideological debates, these would be held only at 2 a.m., and attendance would be optional. The meeting and our first meeting was set for early 1988.

Led by John Marks, a former State Department intelligence official, we traveled under the auspices of Common Ground, a daring but respected nongovernmental organization. Our team included, among others, Robert Kupperman, former director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency; a former assistant to President Reagan for national security affairs; John Murphy from West Point; Augustus Richard Norton, then a professor at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point; David Millhauser, a conflict resolution attorney; and Robin Wright, a reporter who had written extensively about Middle Eastern terrorism. We were joined later by former CIA Director William J. Casey, a former CIA deputy director. The Soviet team included officials from various ministries, research institutes, as well as KGB officers who said they were retired.

Our rule-making meeting had taken place in early winter. Moscow was cold and white. By the time of our first full meeting, an early spring had melted the streets with a thick chocolate milkshake of melting snow and mud. Was it an omen of warm success or a slippery mess?

At our very first session, following the mandatory exchange of warm greetings, my colleagues and I dispensed with the usual diplomatic niceties and asked what Americans considered terrorism and wanted to know what the Soviets worried about. Expecting the standard Marxist diatribe about U.S. imperialism, I was surprised by their answer.

Two threats topped the Soviets' list of concerns. The first was Islamist terrorism. The Soviet Union had by then decided to withdraw from Afghanistan, but expected no end to the Islamist fanaticism its invasion had unleashed. The Kremlin thought Islamist terrorism would spread through Central Asia and the Caucasus -- much of which was then Soviet territory. Moscow itself would suffer terrorist bombings. The Soviets' warned that the United States' support for the mujahedeen, would also be a target of Islamist terrorism.

In retrospect, it was a remarkable forecast. In 1988, we had never heard of Osama bin Laden or al Qaeda in the United States. It was eight years before bin Laden's declaration of war against the infidel West, a decade before the al Qaeda bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa, 12 years before the September 11 attacks.

It is hard to say whether this prescience was due to the KGB's analytical skills or to deep-seated prejudices. Most of our Soviet interlocutors were Russians with few pretenses of political correctness. Over the course of centuries, Russian armies had expanded their empire through the steppe, and the Ottoman-controlled Balkans. Russians and Muslims, in their eyes, were implacable enemies, a fact unchanged by a multi-century truce. For them, Islam could only be in retreat or on the march.

The second Soviet fear was nuclear terrorism. This was also surprising. The United States worried about the security of its own nuclear facilities and weapons in the event of a possible terrorist attack. But the United States still considered nuclear terrorism a remote threat. Here it was, Moscow

Why?

The answer was the disaster at Chernobyl. In 1986, a nuclear reactor caught fire and spewed radioactive contamination across Europe. Because we emptied a city, the Soviets said. But a Chernobyl-like catastrophe could just as easily have been because of human malevolence. Given our obsession about dirty bombs, this also now seems prescient.

The unofficial dialogue continued in Moscow and then moved to the RAND Corporation in California the following year. As we gained confidence, more participants signed on. Soon enough, even former CIA Director Colby, a staunch Cold Warrior, was locked in intense discussions with (or over) Russian officers.

Our informal talks facilitated discussions at the official level, but the two-tier effort ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. American officials worried about the security of the USSR's vast nuclear arsenal and to the fate of its army of nuclear scientists and weapons designers. Arguing that the security of nuclear weapons was in the national interest of the United States, Senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar introduced farsighted legislation that laid the basis for U.S.-Russian collaboration on nuclear security that continues to this day.

Of course, no one seriously expected our Soviet interlocutors to hand over their dossiers on Germany's Red Army Faction or Italy's Red Brigades or groups suspected of receiving Soviet assistance. Nor did anyone expect to address the issue of the infamous terrorist Carlos the Jackal, run by a Soviet operative and still at large at the time. Apart from the symbolism, U.S.-Soviet cooperation was likely to be limited, but still worth trying. Even if the two superpowers even seeming to be cooperating could dishearten their terrorist foes. And it would provide another channel of communication that gradually could be widened.

With U.S. President Barack Obama eager to cooperate with Russia on matters of mutual interest, expectations must remain limited. The cooperation of the 1970s and 1980s are ancient history. Russia does not have superior intelligence on al Qaeda or the jihadi movement. Although U.S. analysts suspect Moscow's hand behind today's terrorist groups, it is difficult to envision a close working relationship between the CIA and the KGB's Russian intelligence. Suspicion is mutual and runs deep.

Despite the two countries' shared concerns about jihadi terrorism, Russian troops are not about to return to Afghanistan to fight alongside U.S. forces. Passive logistics support is the most that can be expected. And U.S. willingness to assist Russia's often-brutal counterterrorist operations in the Caucasus is constrained by human rights concerns.

Yes, Russia participates in the six-party talks aimed at persuading North Korea to give up its nuclear weapons, and Russia opposes Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. Russia and the United States both think that either country's possession of nuclear weapons increases the threat of nuclear war.

But here, common ground gives way to realpolitik. Russia would prefer that North Korea not have nuclear weapons, but knows that China is more capable of bringing about true change in Pyongyang. Russia sees little utility in messianic efforts. Its course will be pragmatic, maintaining a balance with nuclear-armed North Korea, while exploiting the standoff when it can for its own strategic or commercial gain. And though Moscow does not want to antagonize Iran, neither does it want to jeopardize its friendship or commerce, including lucrative arms sales, with Tehran.

On the other hand, Russian ships have joined the anti-piracy flotilla off the coast of Somalia. Thwarting terrorist ambitions to acquire nuclear weapons and weapons material is a shared concern and historic cause for cooperation. Obama's recent agreement to remove unneeded nuclear weapons from U.S. arsenals is a positive step, but will also add to the existing mountains of plutonium and highly enriched uranium in Russia. To facilitate the exchange of information on nuclear smuggling already agreed to in principle, he could propose a U.S.-Russian intelligence fusion center, which could help identify mutually identified terrorist threats.

A strategic partnership may be an illusion, but 20-odd years after that unusual first meeting, terrorism still offers a chance for pragmatic cooperation worth a shot.

*Brian Michael Jenkins, author of Will Terrorists Go Nuclear?, is senior advisor to the president of the RAND Corporation, a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decision-making through research and analysis.*

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