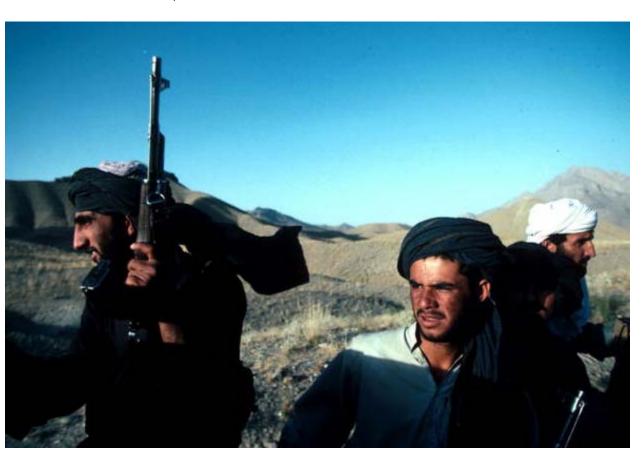


## How Russia Can and Can't Help Obama

In hindsight, KGB analysts and Soviet officials were extraordinarily prescient about the perils of Islamist terrorism and the fallout fron 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 configuration of mutual interest has a fascinating and little-known antecedent. In 1987, I received an unusual request. The Kremlin invited a group of experts to come to Moscow. It said it wished to explore how the United States and the Soviet Union might cooperate in combating terrors.

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

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

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 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. go 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 what the Soviets were up to).

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

Led by John Marks, a former State Department intelligence official, we traveled under for Common Ground, a daring but respected nongovernmental organization. Our team others, Robert Kupperman, former director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Age former assistant to President Reagan for national security affairs; John Murphy from Vaugustus Richard Norton, then a professor at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point; Millhauser, a conflict resolution attorney; and Robin Wright, a reporter who had written about Middle Eastern terrorism. We were joined later by former CIA Director William former CIA deputy director. The Soviet team included officials from various ministries, 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 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 what Americans considered terrorism and wanted to know what the Soviets worried about. Expecting the standard Marxist diatribe abou 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 expected no end to the Islamist fanaticism its invasion had unleashed. The Kremlin thought Islamist terrorism would spread through Ce the Caucasus -- much of which was then Soviet territory. Moscow itself would suffer terrorist bombings. The Soviets' warned that the Unsupport 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 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 Cole, and 13 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 interlocut 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-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 fewerpons in the event of a possible terrorist attack. But the United States still considered nuclear terrorism a remote threat. Here it was, I

The answer was the disaster at Chernobyl. In 1986, a nuclear reactor caught fire and spewed radioactive contamination across Europe. Be we emptied a city, the Soviets said. But a Chernobyl-like catastrophe could just as easily have been because of human malevolence. Given 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 coparticipants signed on. Soon enough, even former CIA Director Colby, a staunch Cold Warrior, was locked in intense discussions with (or 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. Ameri 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 sweapons was in the national interest of the United States, Senators Sam Nunn and Richard Lugar introduced farsighted legislation that Lucis are used to the 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 Egroups suspected of receiving Soviet assistance. Nor did anyone expect to address the issue of the infamous terrorist Carlos the Jackal, ru 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 it the two superpowers even seeming to be cooperating could dishearten their terrorist foes. And it would provide another channel of common 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 the 1970s and 1980s are ancient history. Russia does not have superior intelligence on al Qaeda or the jihadi movement. Although U.S. a Moscow's hand behind today's terrorist groups, it is difficult to envision a close working relationship between the CIA and the KGB's Russicions are mutual and run deep.

Despite the two countries' shared concerns about jihadi terrorism, Russian troops are not about to return to Afghanistan to fight alongsic forces. Passive logistics support is the most that can be expected. And U.S. willingness to assist Russia's often-brutal counterterrorist oper 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 nuclear weapons. Russia and the United States both think that either country's possession of nuclear weapons increases the threat of nu

But here, common ground gives way to realpolitik. Russia would prefer that North Korea not have nuclear weapons, but knows that Chir capable of bringing about true change in Pyongyang. Russia sees little utility in messianic efforts. Its course will be pragmatic, maintaini nuclear-armed North Korea, while exploiting the standoff when it can for its own strategic or commercial gain. And though Moscow does 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 numberial is a shared concern and historic cause for cooperation. Obama's recent agreement to remove unneeded nuclear weapons from U arsenals is a positive step, but will also add to the existing mountains of plutonium and highly enriched uranium in Russia. To facilitate information on nuclear smuggling already agreed to in principle, he could propose a U.S.-Russian intelligence fusion center, which could 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 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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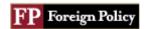
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