



## Russia and U.S.-Russia Relations: David Speedie Interviews Ambassador Thomas Pickering

Thomas R. Pickering , David C. Speedie

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[Thomas R. Pickering](#)

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Good morning. I'm David Speedie, Director of the U.S. Global Engagement Program here at the Carnegie Council for Ethics and International Affairs.

I'm delighted to welcome today a very special guest, Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Ambassador Pickering has held ambassadorships over a 20-year-plus period, from Jordan, Nigeria, El Salvador, Israel, the United Nations, India, and Russia—literally, a global ambassadorship, Mr. Pickering. Most importantly, I think, he was our first ambassador to Russia—that is, the post-Soviet Russia—and he was ambassador to the United Nations during the First Gulf War. So some of these posts were held in incredibly sensitive and critical periods.

He is a career ambassador, the highest-ranking recognition in the U.S. Foreign Service. He was described by *Time* magazine as "a five-star general of the diplomatic corps."



[David C. Speedie](#)

Tom, I feel like I should salute you—

**THOMAS PICKERING:** Don't waste your time, David.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Instead, I will welcome you to Carnegie Council. Thank you so much.

**THOMAS PICKERING:** Thanks. It's a delight to be with you.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Let me say very briefly that Ambassador Pickering has just spoken to us on [U.S.-Iran relations after the Iran election](#). I would encourage people to check this out on the Council's Web site at <http://www.cceia.org/index.html>.

Since we have you here, Ambassador Pickering, we'll make this a doubleheader and focus mainly on an area that you are a bona fide expert on—and that is U.S.-Russia relations—but perhaps, as a segue from this morning, you could talk a little bit about Russia's role in the unfolding situation in Iran. You mentioned this morning, of course, the possibility of Iran participating in a multilateral enrichment facility in Siberia. Could you perhaps develop a little bit that idea and then talk a little bit more about Russia's role—hopefully, useful role—in the unfolding situation in Iran?

**THOMAS PICKERING:** Sure. Let me begin by setting the stage.

The [Bush](#) Administration was concerned about Russia not being willing to ratchet up sanctions against

Iran. Russia, I think, was concerned about the Bush Administration being not willing to talk directly to Iran and indeed to put on the table a kind of proposal that might actually work with Iran. So the [Obama](#) Administration now has within its grasp, having opened up a new set of conversations with Russia and already started to negotiate strategic disarmament, to use that as an envelope within which to put conversations on nonproliferation.

None of us know where this will go, but it is clear that the U.S. and Russia share a common concern about an Iranian nuclear program that might lead to a nuclear weapon. I think it is possible—but I don't know—that Russia and the United States could work out ahead of time how they intend to proceed. That would be very helpful as an influence on Iran to open the door to something useful.

That takes us to multilateral enrichment and the possibility that at least one opportunity is that Russia has, in fact, established a multilateral enrichment facility at Angarsk and said it would be ready to welcome Iran. Unfortunately, Iran has not yet picked up on that opportunity.

Of course, a lot of this relates to the question of when do we start talking to Iran. Much of that relates to the question of the fallout after the election, and indeed some domestic controversy in the United States about whether one can talk to Iran while at the same time Iran is persecuting individuals who want to demonstrate against the election results and beyond.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: On, then, if I may, to the question of U.S.-Russia. In its approach to the relationship with Russia, the mantra of the administration has become "pressing the reset button." That was, I think, first used by Senator [Biden](#) in Europe. What exactly did you take that to mean, "pressing the reset button"?**

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I think it was shorthand for saying that we have had not a good relationship with Russia over the last couple of years and we need to find a way to put that relationship back on track—back on track with the way it was, perhaps, after the fall of the Soviet Union and before the fall, if I could put it this way, of [Boris Yeltsin](#).

**DAVID SPEEDIE: On the other hand, one might say that in the 1990s, while some remarkable successes were achieved, of course, particularly in, for example, the [Cooperative Threat Reduction Act with Russia](#) and other areas of progress, there were, from the vantage point of Moscow, some elements of the relationship that were perhaps not so harmonious—NATO expansion, for example, eastward to Russia's borders, the war in Yugoslavia, and, of course, missile defense, all of which are, to some extent—at least missile defense and NATO expansion are still current areas of conversation, shall we say. So the reset button would seem to be back to an era that wasn't entirely harmonious. Is that a fair thing to say?**

**THOMAS PICKERING:** It's true. The point I was trying to make was that they were less harmonious more recently than they were prior to that. Prior to that was not necessarily exemplary. No one would say that.

But to take the three examples that you raised, certainly it does seem to me that, for the moment, NATO enlargement is now—put it this way—in a holding pattern and people aren't pushing forward. There are plenty of other things to be done, including NATO's engagement in Afghanistan, the question of solidifying the enlargement that has already been put in place, and indeed working out with the European Union some aspects of their mutual relationships, among other things.

The second piece that is there, the war in Yugoslavia, seems to be over. Certainly Kosovo independence was not greeted with enthusiasm with the Russians, but it does seem at least to have been perhaps a final act. We would all like to see Serbia more engaged in Europe. We would like to see further engagement of the other Balkan states and have a European engagement be a kind of harmonization principle, if I can put it this way.

The final point is that President Obama, during the campaign, always managed to turn criticism into some advantage for himself. He now can do that with respect to missile defense. In fact, there is on the table the potential to revive something begun under [George Bush I](#), which was cooperative missile defense arrangements between the United States and Russia. If cooperation can be achieved in nuclear disarmament and prolonging [START](#) [Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty], perhaps under a new form, then that ought to be able to lead not just to nonproliferation, but perhaps to cooperation on missile defense. Let's hope it will move that way.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** On that point, next week, in fact, Presidents Obama and [Medvedev](#) will meet for the second time. High on this agenda, and building on their first conversation in London this spring, will be what might be described as a fast-track process to reach agreement on strategic arms control beyond the current START agreement, which, of course, expires in December. Recent statements suggest that while Moscow is committed to progress on this front, the arms-control agenda could be held hostage to the antiballistic missile proposed installations in the Czech Republic and Poland. You mention this as a possible point of leverage for the Obama Administration.

**But while there seems to be at least a basic sense of willingness to talk and to make real progress on the Russian part, do we make a mistake in thinking that the missile defense question can be decoupled from START, that different elements of arms control can be treated at different times, whereas the Russians seem to see it as something of a holistic package that isn't so easily decoupled?**

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I don't know. We'll have to wait and see. The reasonably good news is that—last week I had the opportunity to attend a briefing by members of the administration who are in a strong position to know. I obviously can't identify them, because they asked not to be identified. But without being more specific, they were quite optimistic that there would be some very important forward progress in strategic disarmament post-START and that the two presidents would have something to say about that at the end of their meeting on the 8th of July.

Let's hope that they are right. Let's hope that that continues on track.

The issue of linkage didn't seem, at least in that conversation, to be a primary stumbling block. One can only hope and wait and see. Linkage has often taken place in disarmament negotiations. In the end, obviously, we made the most progress when we didn't link a whole bunch of things in a chain together, and in order to make progress on one, we had to solve all the problems of the world.

**DAVID SPEEDIE:** Yes. It seems, just to stay on the arms-control issue for a moment, that there are, of course, just different slices of this that maybe have to be dealt with *seriatim*—for example, the [Conventional Forces in Europe](#), CFE. There is a certain stalemate on what has been described as the cornerstone of European security. There isn't much, obviously, in terms of front-page above-the-fold press here in this country, although in Russia it is quite an issue.

**Basically, is this something that can be agreed upon? For the Russians, of course, it's a question, as they see it, of new elements of security, especially on the southern flanks—the flank agreements that were originally negotiated. There was the 1999 revised treaty. So there is a bit of a stalemate on this issue. Where does CFE come into play, in your opinion, both in terms of timetable and in terms of likely progress?**

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I think, because it's neuralgic, because it has been difficult, because the Russians, in fact, pulled out of it as a result of political differences and political disagreements, we need, obviously, to address it. I'm not sure that one can address that without having put some pieces otherwise in place that are easier to do. Certainly, if the Russians want to talk about it, the president will have to address it. I don't see them rushing, at the moment, to revise CFE.

What is interesting, however, is that many months ago, President Medvedev did propose that we take a look at European security together, and specifically, later, included the United States. I think there is an opportunity there. Whether that set of conversations would lead to a revision of CFE and/or other new arrangements remains open. Both sides have sort of said, "That's an idea that we want to take a look at," but neither side has come forward and said, "Let's start talks soon. Here's an approach."

So it's early days.

The truth is that, so far at least, the Russian denunciation of the flank arrangements under CFE hasn't turned the world off its axis. Perhaps we can continue to find those new early targets of opportunity, the low-hanging fruit, as a way to build confidence that we are both in this together for the long haul and we have significant mutual advantages to achieve, and that working together in Europe, with the Europeans, ought to be one of those, when the time comes to move in that particular direction.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: So what you are saying, essentially, is that there is a sort of delicate pas de deux going on here, without anyone forcing the issue on CFE, and perhaps, if done so prematurely, then there could be some degree of—**

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I think that's right, David, and I think that there are also only so many things that a country's leaders can address all at one time. Those have to be parsed out, too. So I think this combination of finding a path back, looking down the road, lining up the questions or the issues in some rough order of mutually agreed priority, and then addressing them seems to me to be the best way to proceed. It's that kind of, if you could put it this way, roadmap or plan-ahead that makes the most sense here.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: One final guns-and-bullets question, as it were, since it is a current area of some contentiousness—again, back to the antiballistic missile question. There was on the table, I guess, last year—or probably longer, when [Vladimir Putin](#) was president—the proposal for a joint development of an antimissile system in Azerbaijan, U.S.-Russia, I suppose the logic being that if indeed the threat was from the South, from Iran, then geography would suggest that this was a more logical place for the United States to be focused than Katowice or Brno or wherever.**

**Where does that stand, as far as you know?**

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I don't know. It was an offer that I think was put on the table that had two relevant aspects to it. One, it was an offer that appeared to indicate that then-President Putin was open to the idea of negotiating a joint arrangement. I think that still is partly true. Secondly, he put on the table a Russian radar facility in Azerbaijan, which he, at least, felt might play a role, at least in the information-gathering aspects of a joint arrangement.

I'm not sure that the U.S. agrees that the facility is necessarily accurately placed or that its data and its information would be important. On the other hand, I'm not sure that the U.S. would close the door to some kind of access to similar or related information.

The question of where the interceptors are placed has to do not with propinquity, but with appropriate alignment. To some extent, you don't want your missiles so close that the envelope within which they have to work against a rising missile from the other side is too short, actually, to get to that target and be accurate. You don't want them so far away that they can only deal with the reentry vehicles in the final stages when, in fact, a multiply-warheaded missile has already defeated the opposition by splitting its incoming reentry vehicles. So it's in that long midcourse period, and you have to put your launch sites in a way that is able to intercept the missiles on the most advantageous midcourse period.

To some extent, that, I think, argues for Poland and having the radar in the Czech Republic, although one wonders how tight that envelope is and whether there would be other alternatives that would be

less—put it this way—waving a red flag at the Russian bull than Poland under these circumstances.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: But at the very least, the offer on the table, as it were, was a diplomatic overture that ought not to be ignored.**

**THOMAS PICKERING:** And I think, to some extent, it has continued. I think that, to some extent, informally, I have heard from Russians who are in a serious position to know—again, without identifying them—that if there were full transparency in a place like Poland, they would be less concerned. They want enough transparency to ensure that the system did not have massive capabilities in dealing with their systems so that the mutually-assured-destruction capacity of mutual deterrence would somehow disappear, either through the use of the Polish site, which seems fairly farfetched, or its rapid enlargement, which they might fear in a breakout solution—all of which, I think, can be dealt with in conversations. They need to be engaged. It obviously should have a high priority on both sides' agenda, if not the top priority.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: Let me switch focus, if I may, for a moment. You mentioned this morning that you were once a dedicated Kremlinologist, I believe was the way you put it. Dmitry Medvedev has now been president of Russia for about a year and a half. There was obviously the initial sense that Medvedev was Putin's handpicked successor, and thus, perhaps, even his surrogate or even his placeholder for a "once and future" Putin presidency.**

**Recently, however, there have been indicators of Medvedev not just being his own man, but perhaps even actively distancing himself from his hard-line predecessor. In fact, fairly early in his presidency, I remember he declared that he was "a lawyer to my bones," and on the question of inculcating rule of law in Russia, he went on to say, "It is a monumental task. Russia is a country where people do not like to observe the law. It is, as they say, a country of legal nihilism," which seemed at least a veiled criticism of what had gone before.**

**More recently, there have been both discussions with smaller political parties, including, I believe, [Yabloko](#), which is no longer even represented in the Duma, and there have been hints of relaxation, for example, in the draconian regulatory processes surrounding NGOs and so on and so forth.**

**How do you see these developments, in your opinion? Is Medvedev really emerging again as his own guy?**

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I think the bulk of the opinion that looks at this—and I would certainly join with it—sees a couple of tendencies. The major tendency is that Prime Minister Putin seems to be on top of the heap. For his own reasons, he and Dmitry Medvedev seem to have formed a coalition where they are not entirely in agreement on every particular issue and see, perhaps, even some virtue in that. They are not in such violent disagreement that one would see a government crisis looming around the bend.

The question about the future remains very open. Is Medvedev on a road gradually to erode the authority of Putin and accrete it to himself? Is he a modern reformer who is about to lead Russia into the beautiful uplands of democracy? Or is he basically taking on what he can to try to change the image, and indeed the impression, of Russia over a period of time through some of these activities because he generally believes that that's important, but he knows there are limits as to what he can achieve within the Russian system in the kind of time that he has available to himself as president?

Does former President Putin, now prime minister, covet the office? Was the six-year term for Medvedev a way of satisfying that particular approach, but also keeping the door open for him to come back?

These, at the moment, are all subject to speculation. I think that anybody who tells you they know precisely what's going to happen in Russia—probably including Mr. Putin—isn't really fully aware of what the possibilities are and where it all might go. So, like a lot of other situations, we need to watch and

observe, try to read the tea leaves, but not read too much into the tea leaves, for fear of self-deception.

So I think Putin is around. I think he will probably stay. I think there's a chance that he will try to succeed himself. I don't think that can be ruled out. If he doesn't, then Mr. Medvedev would be an ideal and probable replacement for him as that process goes ahead, and they can switch at the fork in the road anytime they want.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: So there's a continuing career in being a Kremlinologist.**

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I think there is, yes.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: It's not one with any degree of certainty.**

**THOMAS PICKERING:** Well, there never was in the past. Kremlinologists were never hanged for their mistakes, or there would be none left.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: Exactly.**

**Back to the question of relations with Russia and specific areas of cooperation. We began with Iran. Let's think about Afghanistan, which also came up briefly this morning. Clearly, obviously, there is a sense of shared history here. At least in fairly modern times, in the Soviet period, Russia had its own adventures in Afghanistan. On the one hand, we have some shared interest in not seeing Afghanistan totally implode. Russia is concerned that if the Taliban is defeated but not totally eradicated, they could infiltrate into Central Asia. Of course, we have from recent times, post-9/11, the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan. There are cells there that could easily be enriched, so to speak, if things went dreadfully wrong in Afghanistan.**

**On the other hand, Russia could play, to some degree, a mischievous role. They could look, I suppose, at the question of the fissures within NATO on how to handle the Afghanistan situation. There was the issue of the [Manas Base](#) in Kyrgyzstan and how that may or may not have had Russia's heavy hand behind it.**

**How do you see this very complex scenario playing out in terms of the future trajectory of Afghanistan?**

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I think that Afghanistan is also part and parcel, from the Russian perspective, of the totality of U.S.-Russia relationships. In the past, we have seen it not widely divorced from that.

In some sense, the Russians saw it as an ancillary area of engagement, where some of the negatives tended to predominate and where they could, for domestic political reasons, among others, achieve a degree of independence of American policy, and where, despite the fact that President Putin early on called President Bush—right after 9/11—and indeed offered, then and subsequently, cooperation on Central Asia, I think President Putin said, in his own mind at least, and maybe publicly or privately, "This isn't forever. You're here as long as you need to be here."

But I think he was quite shocked that we ended up, 2002 to 2009, seven years later, still deeply engaged in Afghanistan and making a new major push to try to deal with the problem.

I also think that, to some extent, the Russian support for the Kyrgyz on Manas was designed to reinforce their relationship with the Kyrgyz. In the end, the Kyrgyz decided, apparently for a somewhat larger rental, that they would continue to work with the United States on a limited basis, and the U.S. is pleased with that.

So those are all things that will, I think, continue to flow.

The major question is, will we be able to achieve a sufficient degree of engagement with the Russians on principal questions of common interest that we will also help, in the process, to add new flexibility on both sides to our ability to deal with the negatives? Some of those, like Manas or what the future is in Afghanistan, need to be talked about with the Russians, I think, to get a degree of celerity about the process. This includes, I think, the full scope of the near abroad.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: Finally, reflecting again on almost two decades of post-Cold War history, I remember, shortly into the birth of the new Russia, when we looked at the tripartite challenge that Russia faced—the move to democracy, to a market economy, and establishing rule of law—a sage Russian observer mentioned at a conference in the mid-1990s that, at best, the U.S.-Russia relationship would be on a spectrum of "muddle through plus to muddle through minus."**

**Has anything changed?**

**THOMAS PICKERING:** I don't think so. I don't think we have a long-term superior game plan. There is an opportunity with the new administration, with the new launch, with new seeming acceptance on the Russian side, and with new interest, perhaps to muddle through at a higher level of positive capability, and to do so, one would hope, with more control over when things go awry or when they go bust or when they, in fact, bring us to head-to-head confrontations of one kind or another. Some of that is always going to occur, but the ability to manage that, which seemed to have escaped us over the last eight years, is now back within grasp.

One of the values of having something like the [Gore-Chernomyrdin process](#) was that you had high-level, if I could put it this way, adult supervision of the relationship, which helped to engage the various pieces of both governments and bring through projects and provide a note of what one would call strategic direction to the overall issue on behalf of both presidents. I have always thought that that made sense.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: Very quickly, before we wrap up, you mentioned Gore-Chernomyrdin. Can you think of an analogous set of subjects around which a useful Biden—well, it would be Biden-Putin, I suppose—a similar high-level formalized dialogue could be—**

**THOMAS PICKERING:** Sure I can. I think we have the broad panoply of disarmament, certainly ballistic missile defense issues, nonproliferation. Taking it more broadly, we certainly have to deal with the WTO. The Russians have been quirky about that. They now want to join with Kazakhstan and Belarus, even though there are huge issues between them and Belarus. We have issues of NATO enlargement. We have issues of the near abroad—maybe the near abroad on both sides of the Atlantic—that have to be discussed and certainly, if not agreed upon, worked together. We have our commercial relationships, which over a long period of time have developed slowly, but very, very importantly, and in the future, could be significantly related with the trade questions.

There is a very broad agenda. We have cooperation in nuclear energy that we can put back in place. There are a lot of things to do, and a lot of these reflect common interests and they ought to be pushed ahead with. I suspect both governments have their agendas.

**DAVID SPEEDIE: On that positive note, I'm glad to say, Ambassador Pickering, thank you so much for being a guest on our U.S. Global Engagement Program interview series. Thank you so much.**

**THOMAS PICKERING:** Thanks, David. It's a delight to be with you, as always.

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