



Briefing En Route to Moscow

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Washington, DC
April 19, 2005

SECRETARY RICE: Hi. I understand I'm all that's standing between you and meal service so we won't make this very long. This is an opportunity to go to Russia and Vilnius, first of all, an opportunity to go out ahead of the President's trip, which will take place in May, to discuss issues on the U.S.-Russia agenda.

The agenda will not be surprising to you. We have a really broad relationship with the Russians so it will be everything from trade relations to energy. In particular, I think we'll want to talk about Russia and the progress that we are trying to help the Russians with toward WTO accession. We will obviously talk also about domestic developments in Russia and about continuing concerns about the course of both democratization in Russia and issues concerning the rule of law, which are important in order to make certain that there is investor confidence for the Russian economy.

We expect to talk about a wide range of regional issues, most especially the Middle East because, as you know, Russia is a member of the Quartet and the Quartet is now very actively getting ready for the Gaza withdrawal. We just asked Jim Wolfensohn to act as the Quartet envoy so Sergey Lavrov and I will have a chance to talk about that.

We'll see each other. We'll see each other also at the NATO-Russia Council in Vilnius so I'm certain that there will be discussions of how to make certain that that becomes a more energetic forum.

I'm looking forward to the trip to Vilnius. It's in many ways a remarkable development when you look some 15 years ago or so that we're having a NATO ministerial in Lithuania. But indeed, Lithuania is a full-fledged and very active member of NATO. It simply demonstrates that NATO has been an important pillar of European stability and it's been a draw for the young democracies of East Central and Eastern Europe that have found their place now in these Euro-Atlantic structures.

So that's the course of the trip. I think you know that at the last NATO meetings, the head of state meetings, the Secretary General of NATO talked about making certain that NATO remained a vibrant and vital forum for the discussion of political affairs, and so this will be an opportunity to do that. And he's going to report back to the foreign ministers on his efforts -- he's been out doing consultations -- his efforts in that regard. And it's going to be a vital forum because we're going to be talking about everything from Afghanistan to Middle East to Iraq and, of course, the Balkans.

QUESTION: George Gedda of AP. Could you talk to us about trend lines concerning democracy and the rule of law in Russia? Are there any positive things happening or are they continuing to regress?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I do think that we've been concerned about certain centralizing tendencies in Russia; for instance, the decision to no longer directly elect governors but to appoint them from the center. On the other hand, as is always the case with Russia, this is a very -- this is a varied and large country in which I think you see that the regions still continue to have some autonomy in their affairs.

There are also concerns about the state of the media and that probably is right now a principal concern because the virtual absence of independent media on the side of electronic media has to be concerning although in terms of print media there is great variation in Russia in what one can read.

So while the trends have not been positive, this is a very complex place and I would note that there are people who are emerging who say that they are going to challenge the President, President Putin, in his next election. They've certainly had their share of protests concerning the pension reform. I think it would be a mistake to start to think of this as somehow reverting back to Soviet times. That is most certainly not what is happening here. But our concern is that in trying to rebuild a Soviet state, which -- the Russian state, which everybody understands -- that was a slip -- the Russian state, which everybody understands, that it not be such a centralized state such as to begin to mimic the Soviet state.

QUESTION: Just following up on what George said, two questions. The G-8 meeting is due to be in Russia, I think, next time. There's been some grumbling about whether or not that should take place because of these trends. Is that even an item for discussion yet by you or other G-8 members?

And others say would it not be a bad sign of -- you referred to President Putin running again for election.

SECRETARY RICE: (Inaudible.)

QUESTION: I'm sorry, I misunderstood. Yes. Then others say that the next big benchmark is to make sure that nobody even thinks about the idea of President Putin running or seeking another term.

Can you comment on those, please?

SECRETARY RICE: Yes. On the matter of the presidency, I think everybody expects that since the Russian constitution prohibits a third term for the president that President Putin will respect that, and he has said it several times and obviously everybody expects that to be the case. And the point that I was making is that people are already sort of starting to talk about running and running for the presidency and challenging the President's party and so forth. So I think that's a positive development but obviously would not be a positive development if there were some change in that circumstance. I don't expect that there will be. We take President Putin at his word.

In terms of the G-8, I don't see any reason and the President doesn't see any reason that we would want to see Russia isolated. This is a big and complex country that's going through a major transition. From everybody's point of view, a Russia that is democratic and committed to free market principles and moving toward these Western and Euro-Atlantic structures would be a positive development for the region and for the world. So isolating Russia and threatening to exclude the Russians from various organizations doesn't really make sense.

On the other hand, we have to continue to impress upon the Russians that certain responsibilities come with membership in the G-8, that this is, in fact, a group of democracies, that it is a group that is fully committed to free market principles, free trade, rule of law, and that especially with the chairmanship or with the meetings being held in Moscow after the British meetings that Moscow should make every effort to convince the world that they understand those responsibilities that attend inclusion in organizations like the G-8.

QUESTION: I'd like to move to NATO in Vilnius and sort of European-U.S. relations. When you were in Asia you talked about the United States being the dominant force in the Pacific when it came to China and the embargo. I understand that now you'll have a strategic dialogue with the European Union and Europe about the Pacific, about that part of the world. Can you tell us what that dialogue will be, its beginning, and what are the emphasis when it comes to the role of the United States, the continued role of the United States in that part of the world?

SECRETARY RICE: It's a very positive development that the Europeans want to have a dialogue as transatlantic partners about this really dynamic and changing region. I mean, Asia is probably facing more change than almost any region, maybe the Middle East. But when you look at this huge new factor of China's rise in Asia, which everybody is trying to find ways to make that a positive development, when you look at the trends that are democratizing trends in -- even in Southeast Asia but most especially now this sort of solidity of democracy in South Korea, when you look at the dynamic economic relations in that region, there's no doubt that it's a useful thing to have a dialogue.

That dialogue is not -- and I want to emphasize it's not somehow a substitute for restraint in terms of the lifting of the arms embargo because one way that we got to this unfortunate set of circumstances is that perhaps we didn't have or we didn't have a common understanding of how the United States, and indeed not just the United States but other allies in the Pacific, saw the security environment in Asia and saw the political signal that would be sent by the lifting of the arms embargo, not to mention the human rights signal that that would send.

So it's a very important dialogue. It's a good thing that we in Europe can now talk through these things. I think that we can help Europe to understand better the responsibilities that the United States and the Asian allies are shouldering to try and keep a peaceful Asia-Pacific region at this time of dramatic change there.

QUESTION: Yeah, last week you said Lithuania for a long time was trapped on the wrong side of freedom's divide. A few months ago, Freedom House said that Russia is now not free. Would you say Russia is now on the right side or the wrong side of freedom's divide.

SECRETARY RICE: Russia is clearly a state that's still in transition. This is a place with a very complicated history and we have to remember that it emerged out of the collapse of an empire, so this is a very complicated task to get to a Russian state that is democratic and still capable of managing this big and broad place that, you know, ranges over, what is it, ten or eleven time zones.

So of course it's still a state in transition. There's no doubt when we talk about the trends, the trends have not been positive on the democracy side. But it is also not the Soviet Union. I mean, when you look, Glenn, at the way that people did go out into the streets to protest on the pension issues, when you look at the fact that there are people who are talking openly about challenging the President's party in the next elections and pretty critical of what is going on in Russia, I don't think that anybody thinks that this has gone all the way back.

But if I had to focus on a couple of things that are really worrying, one is that the centralization of state power in the presidency at the expense of countervailing institutions like the Duma or an independent judiciary is clearly very worrying. The absence of an independent media on the electronic side is clearly worrying. But there are also then a lot of trends of progress in Russia and we're just going to have to try to help push on those trends that are positive and to try to help to ask them and, in effect, and organizations like the G-8 insist that some of the responsibilities that attend that kind of inclusion is that they have to deal with these problems.

QUESTION: Is it on the knife's edge? I mean, where is it on the --

SECRETARY RICE: I can't answer that. It is certainly -- it has come a long way from where it was. There have been some setbacks but I do still think that there is a considerable amount of individual freedom in Russia, which is important. That is indeed one of the things that we watch very carefully, what is happening to the rights of individuals to challenge. We've been very clear with the Russians that the ability of individuals to coalesce into political groupings is also a test of democracy, and so one of the things that we talked about is treatment of nongovernmental organizations that are trying to promote that path. So it's a mixed picture but it's not the Soviet Union.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, as you've pushed to help Russia on a democratic path, you know that the Russians are particularly sensitive to criticism on this issue, so how publicly can you go when you are in Russia in making these criticisms?

SECRETARY RICE: I'd like not to think of them as criticisms. We understand how complicated this is. We understand that a democratic path isn't easy. I mean, of all the countries in the world who should understand that democracy is not easy, the United States ought to understand that. So this is not a matter to lecture Russia or to criticize. It's to raise issues which are concerning for us because we want this to be a relationship that is not just constructive but that is deep, that is broad, that is based on common values, that has Russia with all of its really incredible capability and its population and its country to fully realize that potential.

And so in order to do that what we've learned over now many years is that people have to be free and have to have a sense of liberty in order to be at their best and to be at their most creative, particularly when you're talking about a country that can, we fully believe, be on the leading edge of some of the higher aspects of economic development like, for instance, software development or -- this is not a country that is going to forever be just a natural resources supplier. So it's meant in a spirit of friendship and discussion, not in a spirit of criticism.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. First, are you willing to use American prestige and power to improve my seat on this plane? (Laughter.) You can get back to me on that, if you want.

Has American access to Russian nuclear facilities improved since your last visit here, or shall I say since February? And is the security of Russian nuclear material something that should keep us lying awake at night?

SECRETARY RICE: As you know, we have a number of programs for cooperative threat reduction and those continue. We have undoubtedly had some difficulties. We've had some liability issues that we're trying to resolve on the plutonium disposition program. We have some concerns about the ability to go to some places. I think generally the atmosphere has improved; generally the atmosphere is somewhat better.

Look, we should all worry about nuclear safety and we should all worry about nuclear security and there's no doubt that Russia, which underwent a lot of change in a very rapid period of time, needs to pay particular attention to this problem. But since nobody wants to have loose nuclear material, or loose nukes even worse, I have to assume that the Russian Government puts this among its highest priorities too, and I actually think that is the case.

I think we're working fairly well cooperatively but we do have some issues of access and we have some issues of liability that we have to resolve.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, could you talk a little bit about some of the Belarusian opposition members that you'll be meeting there? And this is one area where President Putin is likely to feel very threatened because of continued U.S. work in fostering democracy in countries right in his back yard. This country might be particularly sensitive. How are you going to deal with that?

SECRETARY RICE: Our point is -- to Russia is that nobody benefits from the kind of last dictatorship in Europe, which is the Lukashenko government in Belarus. Belarus has been held back by the nature of that regime, it's not possible to integrate it into anything, and the Belarusian people deserve better than that.

So this not by any means a zero sum game. A reformed, democratic, prosperous Belarus would probably benefit Russia more than anybody else because of the potential trade relations and economic relations there, not to mention the kinship between the peoples.

The development of democracies in these countries is simply because people have a right to those aspirations. They shouldn't be ignored in what is a worldwide trend toward democratic development. And it's not a zero sum game with Russia. I think we saw in Kyrgyzstan that we've worked very well with the Russians, for instance, through the OSCE and with the OSCE to help what began as a really very difficult situation with the kind of protests in the streets now is taking political form that looks like it will move toward some kind of democratic development.

We've worked very closely with the Russians. I hope that will be more the model as we move forward.

QUESTION: Madame Secretary, thank you. You mentioned at the top WTO and energy. What issues are there of note?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, on WTO there are clear requirements for becoming a member of WTO and some time ago the President and -- President Bush and President Putin exchanged letters about how to help Russia move more rapidly into WTO accession. It's something that's of great interest to all of us.

For instance, on the intellectual property rights issues there really needs to be Russian movement on the ability to not just have laws passed but to actually prosecute people for piracy. On certain agricultural protectionist measures it's extremely important that Russia come into conformity with WTO rules on agriculture. There may be issues on financial services, for instance.

So this is not difficult to diagnose because there's a pretty clear path to the WTO. What we've been trying to do is to work with the Russians cooperatively so that they can make the changes internally that would then bring them into the kind of compliance where they could be supported for WTO accession. But we think it would be a very, very positive trend if they do.

I have to -- oh, energy. Yeah, energy. Well, we've had a desire to have an energy dialogue and energy is becoming an issue with most countries in the world. Nobody is -- everybody is concerned about these extremely high oil prices and that they not begin to damage the prospects for international economic growth. And I think even suppliers need to be worried about the point at which international economic growth slows, therefore making it more difficult for them.

The Russians obviously are interested in the development of their energy resources. I do think there has been some inconsistency about how foreign investment will or will not play in some of those efforts to develop and in an energy dialogue I hope that there would be some opportunity to see what Russia sees as the future of the development of its energy resources because it's very important to Russia. It's also very important to the world.

2005/T5-01

Released on April 19, 2005

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