



Remarks to the Press En Route to Vilnius

Secretary Condoleezza Rice

Vilnius, Lithuania

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SECRETARY RICE: Well, we've just completed, I think, very useful meetings in Moscow. I had a very good dinner last night with Minister of Defense Sergei Ivanov, where we talked about what really is a very -- currently, very useful and growing military-to-military relationship and has resulted in joint exercises, is resulting in real substance in the NATO-Russia Council. We have good counterterrorism cooperation. We had a number of discussions also about what more we might do to stop the spread of weapons of mass destruction and the technologies associated with them, including going through some of the issues that we've had about the way the cooperative threat reduction program is going, but I think we've been doing relatively well on those issues.

I then had an opportunity...and of course since my own interest in military reform, I wanted to hear a lot about what the Defense Minister has been doing in reform of the Russian armed forces. But I will admit that that's a personal vocation, not my vocation as Secretary of State, but you'll permit me to ask those questions out of residual academic interest.

We had a discussion this morning with Foreign Minister Lavrov. I think we went through for you the entire agenda that we talked about. I think the President's trip to Moscow is well prepared. He's looking forward to that. And with President Putin we talked about the full range of issues again, especially concerns about how we are cooperating as changes come in the area that was once the Soviet Union. I wanted to send a very strong message that the United States does not see developments in the former Soviet states, now independent states, as in any way anti-Russian or meant to diminish Russian influence but rather that normal development of democratic processes and a normal development of U.S. relations with fully independent states. I think the Russians took that on board and it was a good discussion.

As you know, I had discussions also about internal developments in Russia, rule of law, economic issues, issues of the independent press, the issues of the political developments in Russia and I think those were also fruitful.

So I'll take a few questions and I'm supposed to --

QUESTION: Yes, Madam Secretary, looking forward just to your trip to NATO, now for the NATO meetings, can you tell us what you are expecting concretely to come out of the NATO meetings? Also, are you satisfied with the fulfillment of the commitments made at the previous NATO meetings to help with training of security forces in Iraq?

SECRETARY RICE: We're making progress on the NATO commitments to training the forces in Iraq. Obviously this is about to go through a different phase now with a new Iraqi Government in place. There will undoubtedly be changes in the ministries and one of the things that we want to be certain of is that there's no lost time as the changes take place in Iraq.

But NATO is fulfilling its commitments. It can obviously always happen somewhat faster, but I think we're pleased with the progress. And the good thing is that all 26 members of NATO have found a way to contribute to that alliance effort.

I'm very much forward to going to Vilnius for this meeting. There first will be an informal dinner tonight in which we're going to have ministers discuss a whole range of issues. I think there will be interest in what we do in the Balkans, what we do in the Middle East, what will happen in Iraq, concerns about the Iranian program. This is in fulfillment of the Secretary General's mandate to make certain that NATO remains a viable and energetic forum for transatlantic dialogue on political issues.

And I think the very fact that we're going to meet and have this transatlantic dialogue on really key strategic issues is really the purpose of this meeting, that's what we're expecting to come out of this meeting. I know that the Secretary General will also will have some ideas about how we further that goal of transatlantic dialogue on political issues, but that's really the purpose of the meeting.

QUESTION: Madam Secretary, could you talk about how the Russians, how President Putin and Foreign Minister Lavrov respond to you when you talk about democracy, commitment to the rule of law -- at least the Foreign Minister seemed a little defensive when you said that you want them to be a strong and vibrant Russia. He kind of threw it back, that he wants the United States to be a strong and democratic presence. How did they respond to that?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, we want the United States to be a strong democracy, too. I think the United States is a strong democracy. We know that these are sensitive issues and the very fact that we do have an open discussion of these issues -- and I have to say that the Russian side, is not defensive when we bring these issues up, they are willing to talk about them, there isn't a sense of, you know, this is somehow not an appropriate set of discussions for the bilateral agenda, which is what you might have gotten several years ago.

They talk about what they're trying to do. I think they recognize that particularly on issues concerning investment, rule of law, economic development, that there have been some -- that there has been some confusion and that they need to really, in the wake of the Yukos affair and a number of other circumstances, that they need to improve the understanding of the rest of the world that Russia is in fact committed to the rule of law, that the law is not going to be used somehow as a weapon against foreign investors and I think they understand as well as we do that that's important to investor confidence and to future investment in Russia.

So those discussions are fine. We talked about the WTO, talked about the opening up of the Russian economy, what that would mean for the nature of the Russian economy. On the independent media, we obviously have some definitional differences about what constitutes independent media, but we'll continue to have those discussions. And they are in -- they point to the considerable variation that is there, particularly in the print media, but also in the electronic media. And I think our view is that it's a variation within a fairly narrow range and that something needs to be done about that.

So, I find the discussions fruitful. I find them friendly and in the spirit of recognizing that Russia is a state in transition and these are legitimate issues.

QUESTION: But do you believe, are you convinced that they are committed to developing democracy and the rule of law?

SECRETARY RICE: I believe that the Russians understand that a modern state has to have a rule of law and that it has to have institutions that can protect that rule of law. I do think that some of the decisions that they have made have not been good in the direction of the establishment of truly competitive democratic institutions. And what democracy is really about -- it's the promotion of competition in the political sphere. And it's on that point that it seems to me that Russia has not made as much progress as we would have hoped.

So we're going to continue talking about it, we're going to continue to make the case, we're going to continue to try to persuade and we did talk about the fact that the G-8 -- of which Russia will have the Presidency -- is an organization of democratic states with commitment to the rule of law and to open economies. And Russia has obligations if it is going to be a member of the G-8 and it's going to hold the Presidency to make progress on those issues.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. The poll this morning that the radio station asked you to comment on was obviously very far from scientific. But were you surprised by how many questioners who called in or e-mailed in saw the U.S. as an adversary? And if so, where does that come from, do you think, that perception?

SECRETARY RICE: Yeah, and I kept getting the question, you know -- like two or three times that that question came up. And apparently, it was a major question on the internet. I think there's a long history here, going all the way back into the Soviet period, of characterizing the United States as against the interests of Russians. It used to be that it was the Soviet Union and the United States. It was a period in which there was heavy propaganda about the American role. I remember that there was heavy propaganda about why the Soviet Union broke up, about what role the United States may have played in that. And you have to remember that it takes a long time to overcome attitudes when people have been told that the United States -- that it's a zero-sum game between the United States and the Soviet Union.

I think the Putin administration has been trying to make the case that it is not a zero-sum game, that we and Russia have much in common. But we're overcoming a lot of very long held attitudes that were reinforced and reinforced in the schools, in the textbooks, in public life, in very strong ways. And it takes the time to overcome that.

We have made a lot of progress -- we've made a lot of progress as a result of the good relationship between the President and President Putin. I think Russians appreciate that. Russians also appreciated the American response to the Beslan events. That was clearly a moment at which the United States was able to demonstrate its concern for the Russian people. It's also true that when sometimes things are said even in today's press in Russia, that what happened in Ukraine or what happened in Kyrgyzstan or what happened in Georgia is somehow the United States trying to supplant Russian interests, that feeds into the views of the population.

But generally I think Americans and Russians tend to like each other. I think the Russian population admires America and Americans. And I know that Americans certainly admire Russia and Russians. We need to reestablish many of the links and efforts that were made oddly enough during the Soviet time to have exchange among the peoples. But I think there's been interestingly less of that and we probably need to establish those ties at the ground level.

QUESTION: Madam Secretary, thank you. Among the most critical Americans of Russian practices right now are leaders of the oil industry. And there have been some very unfavorable developments in their view. But your language has been very delicate and perhaps even diplomatic, dare one say.

But can you be a little bit more explicit, without being undiplomatic, of course, about exactly what you have been saying in private about investment rules. And also about the Yukos affair, you've been very nonjudgmental and if you don't mind my saying on this trip, tell us a little bit more about what you think about that.

SECRETARY RICE: Well, on the Yukos affair, I -- the way it was handled, particularly at the beginning but continuing has done nothing to stabilize views of the role of the rule of law in Russian economic relations. I think there's no doubt that what happened with Yukos was one of the first episodes that shook confidence in what was really going on in Russia. And I tried to remind my Russian colleagues that they are a state in transition and so people are looking for signals and perhaps reading signals more fully than if this were a fully formed state where the rules of investment and rule of law was certain and people had been dealing with it for many, many years. You know, there was a tendency at a time to say, "Well, you had Enron" and I would say, "But you understand that nobody believes that what happened there is somehow going to bring down American democracy." That's because this is an established system and it's established legal systems and so forth.

And so, what I've been trying to do is to make clear why the Yukos affair shook people's confidence in this transition. And then to say that how it's handled, from here on out, when it's finally resolved, people are really watching that for signals that indeed there is rule of law in Russia. As to foreign investment in the energy sector, I don't think it's -- it would be any secret that we think that openness to foreign investment and energy has benefits, not just for foreign investors but for the Russian energy sector: the technology that it brings, the investment that it brings. It's a sector that -- it could be performing, I think, better. But those are going to be decisions that Russia has to make about the rules, but they need to be rules that people can understand, they need to be consistent rules, applied consistently over time, applied consistently to various cases and we would hope would not disadvantage foreign investors versus domestic investors in Russia. But those are the sorts of points that I've been making, I've been making pretty pointedly.

QUESTION: Thank you, Madam Secretary. Can you see me all the way in the back here? Can you see me? All right. Or you can hear me? What progress did you make in your meetings on access to Russian nuclear sites? And if I might also raise an unrelated subject, what do you make of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee vote to delay the nomination of John Bolton? Why do you think that happened?

SECRETARY RICE: James, I can't speak for the Senate. Obviously, there are people who believe that they need more time to look at the case. My understanding is that Chairman Lugar has scheduled, hopefully, a vote for a few weeks from now.

There's a deliberative process in the Senate and obviously it's important that they go through it. But we need a permanent representative at the United Nations and we are at this point without someone who can engage in what is a very -- what is an intensifying debate about the course of UN reform. And that's an area that the United States is going to have to be a leader in so we need somebody who can get there and do that.

I continue to believe John Bolton would be a really outstanding UN perm rep -- Ambassador to the United Nations. And so, we'll continue to make the case that it ought to be done and ought to be done as soon as possible.

In terms of access, we did talk about the need to make these programs work. You know, we will see what the next round brings, but we've been making some progress on it. We continue to make a little bit of progress on it. The liability issue that is associated with certain of the programs, we've also been in negotiations with the Russians and we brought some new ideas to try to stimulate -- that the resolution of that issue.

QUESTION: Thanks, Madam Secretary. I just want to ask you specifically about the issue of -- you talked about the concentration or a centralizing of power into the Kremlin. Did you raise that particular issue with President Putin? And I wonder how you raised it and what his response was.

SECRETARY RICE: We talked this time more about the media and other economic issues, but I've talked to him directly about this before when I was here in July. We talked about the issue of balancing forces in any democratic society, that a strong Presidency is a good thing, but when there are no countervailing institutions, it can be also a danger because it's dependent on the individual who happens to occupy the post at that particular point in time. And it depends on that individual's willingness not to abuse the full power that might be available to him in a system that has no checks and balances. So we've had that discussion philosophically, politically, concretely before.

The Russians talk about developments in their party system, which they admit is not a strong party system at this point -- developments within united Russia that seem to suggest that there are, at least different factions going up within united Russia that might have different platforms on which they would approach the population. The essential weakness of the party system, down into the provinces, is that it's really centrally based, Moscow and St. Petersburg, and the need to develop a strong party system. So I haven't found that they are, again, that there's a hostile attitude when one brings these things up.

You do get the arguments that the Russian state was simply too weak after the collapse of the Soviet Union, that the Yeltsin period, the early Yeltsin period in any sense, the state was barely able to operate at all, concerns about what is a vast and sprawling and varied territory and how do you hold it together, if you don't have a strong central state. But these are discussions that I've had before, the President has had before and I think we'll continue to have them. And we would like to be supportive of party development because that is one answer to the question of political competition.

QUESTION: Hi, Madam Secretary, I'm Janine Zacharia, the new Bloomberg reporter. Two questions related to President Bush's visit. Did the Russians express any discontent about the President's plans to stop in Riga and/or Georgia? And second, on the 50th anniversary, there was some debate about whether Russian soldiers marching in Chechnya would participate in the parade and I'm wondering if you talked about Chechnya and sort of that kind of issue related to the parade?

SECRETARY RICE: We have not talked about the issue of who will march in the parade. It hasn't come up. We have talked about the need to make the May 9th celebration a real celebration of reconciliation, rather than one that tries to re-win historical debates. And the sensitivity of the issues like Molotov-Ribbentrop to, for instance, the Baltic states. In that regard, the Russians have raised the issue of the President's visits to Latvia and Georgia, but I think they have come to understand that it makes sense for the President to go and visit countries with which the United States has very good relations. I said to them that there is no sense in which the United States does this, in some sense against Russia, but rather goes to visit these states, hoping that they will have good relations both with the United States and with Russia. Again, it's not a zero-sum game.

In particular, where there are concerns about the minority rights or the like, you know, the United States is its own multi-ethnic state and everywhere that we go, in all the states that we talk to, we talk about the need for protection of minority rights, we talk about the need for multi-ethnic democracies that are inclusive than -- that theme isn't going to be different when we're in the Baltic states.

So I don't get the sense that there is any longer any expectation that this is going to be bad for U.S.-Russian relations that the President's decided to go to the Baltics (inaudible).

Chechnya we've talked about and you know, the need for a political solution there. Again, this is an ongoing discussion with the Russians.

QUESTION: I'd like to go back to Venezuela, which was mentioned this morning -- or this afternoon. You said you had concerns, the Minister said, "Well, that's fine but we aren't violating any laws or agreements we've signed." Is that where you will leave this and what exactly is the concern? Are you concerned that perhaps the region may be destabilizes regionally or internationally or that Chavez will use those for internal domestic purposes?

SECRETARY RICE: Well, I think that the question is not about Russian arms, it's about the Venezuelan regime and what we've always talked about is troublesome behavior. The Venezuelan regime, I guess, one would ask the question, you know, what's the purpose of this weapons purchase? But we understand that the Russians sell arms. We didn't accuse them of violating anything. In fact, that's not the point. But simply to be sensitive to issues in Latin America concerning stability in the region, that's really the principle issue.

Okay. All right.

QUESTION: Thank you. You mentioned when you were -- when you were speaking with Lavrov -- I'm sorry, you were just mentioning earlier now about the G-8 -- and that Russia, to be a member of the G-8, perhaps the leader of the G-8 at some point, really needs to show its democratic credentials. Did you in any way sort of hinge membership of the G-8 on this? Was there any sort of stronger dialogue back and forth about this? And did they express any concerns there?

SECRETARY RICE: We've been clear that we support continued Russian participation in the G-8 and we do. It's really our view that organizations like the G-8 actually produce an environment in which Russia is more likely to be responsive on issues that are of concern to the rest of the world because they are obligations that everybody freely undertakes and that the integration of Russia into these different organizations and structures really can only be positive for democratic development in Russia.

I can't imagine the circumstances in which the isolation of Russia is better for democratic development in Russia than its increasing integration.

QUESTION: Yeah. In the meeting with Lavrov, you emphasized that you spent a fair amount of time on the Middle East peace process. Putin is just making the first visit of a Russian President there. Is this a sign of a deeper Russian involvement in the Quartet and in its obligations?

SECRETARY RICE: I think that this is a sign that there's a deepening Russian involvement in the Quartet and it's a good thing. The Russians have good relations with both the Israelis and the Palestinians. This is of course a tremendous change from 15 or so years ago and it's just a reminder that a lot has happened in the last 15 years with an independent and free Russia.

We talked about what the Quartet has to achieve. I believe there's complete harmony of views between Russia and the United States within the Quartet on the need to focus very heavily now on a successful disengagement of the Israelis from the Gaza and the four settlements in the West Bank, of

Palestinian institutions that are capable of taking over the responsibilities that will be left to them, of having security forces that can actually keep the peace in that region and understanding that if we can support a successful Gaza withdrawal, then we really enhance the possibilities of accelerated movement on the Road Map.

And so there's an understanding of the phasing here and the need to concentrate now on a successful Gaza disengagement and we will most likely have a Quartet meeting, a principals meeting fairly soon, probably some time in May.

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