

BAKU DIALOGUES

POLICY PERSPECTIVES ON THE SILK ROAD REGION

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The “Night of Sapper Blades”

My Diplomatic Beginnings and Lessons from Strobe Talbott

Tedo Japaridze

Many people of my generation who took up leading roles in the various “newly independent states” (NIS) after the dissolution of the Soviet Union—i.e., at the beginning of the (renewed) independence and sovereignty period—have their own stories about how seemingly accidental happenstance came to play a decisive role in a career change that led to their rise to public prominence. I have chosen to share a part of mine in part because it seems to relate more directly than most to the views expressed over a series of conversations that took place in the span of a decade or so between me and one of America’s at the time most influential policymakers, Strobe Talbott, regarding the Silk Road region (as the editors of *Baku Dialogues* aptly refer to our part of the world) during what came to be known as the “unipolar era.”

I present it to the reader as part of my continuing reflection on the advice Zbigniew Brzezinski gave at his very first meeting with Georgia’s inaugural foreign minister, Giorgi Khostaria, in 1991 in Washington, DC: try to think contextually and reflect with sobriety and realism on the world around you, so that you and your country may lock onto a destination with “firmness

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in the right” (quoting Lincoln’s Second Inaugural) whilst retaining the flexibility to adapt your course to occurrences beyond your control.

Years later, on the day I presented my ambassadorial credentials, I also met with Zbig, and reminded him of his earlier advice. In response, he remarked that “Georgians should make Georgia not only a democratic state but also a ‘grounded and capable’ one—he used, I distinctly recall, the Russian term “*samostoyatelnoye gosudarstvo*,” to emphasize how Georgia has to become a country not only able to make but also to *defend* its sovereign choices. With his usual unrelenting clarity, he reminded me then as well as on numerous later occasions that only Georgians will spill blood for Georgia, always cautioning against the pursuit of what he called the “politics of outside salvation.”

Moscow in 1989

I am not one of those who now claims to have foreseen the truly momentous events that led to the fall of the Berlin Wall and the implosion of the Soviet Union. In fact, the year 1989 began for me as usual, in a very routine way, but with some personal glimmers of hope: I was taking stock of my fifteenth anniversary at Moscow’s U.S. and Canada Studies Institute (ISKAN)—one of the most prestigious and, I would say, elitist think tanks within the system of the USSR’s Academy of Sciences founded by Georgy Arbatov in 1967. I had joined the Institute in 1974 as a fresh-off-the-boat postgraduate student (the first Georgian ever employed by ISKAN, as a matter of fact) and now had attained the academic rank of “senior research fellow”—quite an achievement in those days, especially for a Georgian and someone without a “fully adequate” academic background. I had finally made it into the senior ranks of that venerable institution, after having engaged in grindingly pedantic research regarding the political, economic, ideological, and politico-military aspects of the United States (and beyond), navigating at the same time more or less safely through the steady torments, intrigues, and collusions characteristic of Soviet (and non-Soviet, come to think of it) academic hierarchy—or, better to say, academic bureaucratic hierarchy.

At the beginning of 1989, I had finally become, in the eyes of those who made such judgments, a full-on *amerikanist*—a more or less capable

student of the American political system, specifically of relations between the White House and Congress. Clearly, I would never have reached those academic heights had I not been guided, supported, and assisted by some, indeed, brilliant mentors whose unequivocal supervision, tutoring, and coaching enabled me to overcome properly some quite rigid sociopolitical clichés and ideological misconceptions about the United States (these individuals include legends like professors Vladimir Zolotukhin and Boris Nikiforov, and good friends like Viktor Linnik, Vladimir Pechatnov, Sergei Plekhanov, Andrei Kortunov, Nikolai Svanidze, Segei Chorbinski, Devis Bratslavski, and Giorgi Mamedov). I also finally started traveling abroad to conduct “field research,” including to America (a great perk for Soviet scholars), since for a quite long time (as I learned later) I had been on the KGB’s blacklist in this regard. I was considered, in the parlance of the day, a *nevyyezdnoy*—someone not trusted by the authorities to travel abroad.

I feel that I have to say a couple of words about ISKAN itself—a unique academic institution that was in some ways nevertheless a typical Soviet structure with all its “Soviet regalia and habits” but from the inside was a vibrant, dynamic, and forward-engaged place generating (or trying to generate) objective, unbiased studies on the American processes and developments—the “main strategic enemy,” as was said, of the USSR—and deliver these effectually “anti-Soviet ideas” and proposals to the Soviet leadership. This “anti-Sovietism” (of course I am overstressing here!) demanded quite a shrewdness, skills and, I would add, utmost courage from Arbatov to persuade the mastodons from the Politburo at least to read our papers and memos free of party clichés and slogans. How well he succeeded with this endeavor I do not know, of course. But Arbatov did succeed in establishing a genuinely unique Institute—a kind of an academic orangery in which he gathered the best and brightest Soviet *amerikanistika* academics, and practitioners, among them former diplomats and, as we say, “burnt individuals” from the intelligence community (those belonging to this last category, by the way, were very critical about different aspects of the Soviet system), and among them, by all means, unforgettable for me was the legendary General Mikhail Milstein, a former military intelligence officer and one of the brightest intellectuals on arms control and disarmament.

Still, it was ultimately a *Soviet* institution. Within the ranks of ISKAN, there were also active KGB officers, which was not uncommon in just about every organization in the USSR. They were either covert, working

in different kinds of “scientific” or analytical positions, or were embedded throughout the administrative hierarchy ensure that the Institute hewed closely to the Party line. Then there were relatives of senior members of the *nomenklatura*. They would take care of their own by making the right phone call to members of the Institute directorate. We “normal people” (without any connections) used to call them *pozvonochniki*—a play on words that incorporated the Russian words for making a phone call (*pozvonit*) and a having a backbone (*pozvonochnik*).

Another example of how ISKAN was in many ways a typical Soviet institution involves my struggle to travel abroad. I remember the time that I finally received permission to travel to America for the first time—this felt like winning the lottery—and how I still ended up not going. One of the Deputy Directors called me into his office a few days before the scheduled departure to inform me of this “unfortunate” turn of events. He said this last-minute decision was due to the “risk of provocations.” As he put it, “it would be your first visit to the United States, and it is a very difficult country, and you have no experience dealing with such provocations. If this had been your second trip, there would have been no problem.” I was shocked, but managed to reply, “how can I travel to the U.S. for a ‘second time’ when you do not allow me to travel there for the first time?” This Deputy Director got very angry and shouted, “Get out of here, I do not have time to talk to you!” And I retreated out of his office with my tail between my legs. That was the system—a surreal one designed to oppress, insult, and diminish a person at every turn.

I learned later that the reasoning, such as it was, was not simply due to my status as a *nevyyezdnoy*. Rather, this Deputy Director had wanted to use various trips to the United States as favors for the sons or daughters of one of his *nomenklatura* friends. Things like that were an essential part of my life, and of the lives of millions of others living in the Soviet Union. That world was neither rational nor predictable. And if you thought you had won the lottery, you had better think again. The world was here and now—a mentality that I am not sure we have left behind us for good.

In any event, such professional setbacks became more infrequent after the appointment of Eduard Shevardnadze as Soviet Foreign Minister, back in July 1985. All of a sudden, the indifference and even antipathies of ISKAN’s leadership—its *nachalstvo*—towards me

morphed melodramatically into visible sympathies: there were knowing grins and even enthusiastic handshakes and warm greetings from those who had hitherto simply ignored me as a matter of course. It mattered not that at that point I had never actually met Shevardnadze, although I did know some people from his inner circle (especially a few of those who came along with him from Georgia, as we had studied at the university together). Naturally, I visited them in their offices in the Foreign Ministry, and they occasionally used to drop by the Institute to chat or meet up for a beer or something more substantial. This was, of course, immediately reported and interpreted by the “conspiologists” at both the Institute and the Foreign Ministry, in full accordance with standard Soviet practice.

The scuttlebutt—to use an American military term—was that I was somehow “chummy” with Shevardnadze personally. That was how, at least it seems to me, I migrated from the KGB blacklist to if not “one of ours” status then at least to being a “reliable guy” who was “close to his Georgian patron,” as one of ISKAN’s deputy directors put it to me. Frankly, I never tried to dispel those apparent eccentricities...

Besides, my family life had become stabilized, secured, and joyful: we purchased our own apartment in Krilatskoe—a new housing district in Moscow that, (alas) soon after my departure from the city, became a fashionable residential area for Boris Yeltsin and his closest circle. My wife, Tamriko, had become Deputy Director of the newly-opened Georgian Cultural Center on Arbat Street and so had become very cheerfully busy at her new workplace. Along with her friendly and open Georgian, Russian, Abkhaz, and Ossetian colleagues, she organized different cultural events, concerts, and exhibitions, as well as a Sunday school for young Georgians. Our six-year-old son Nika was wrapping up his last semester at his kindergarten and was slowly getting ready to become a typical, normal Soviet schoolboy.

As for the country as a whole, well, a transforming USSR was not flourishing, but it was not in my view in a state of terminal rupture, either. The Soviet system, however, was beginning to shudder—people were exhibiting signs of trauma and the country was engulfed with different protests and demonstrations in various locales, including in my own Georgia.

Nonetheless, our family life was stable and cheerful (there were bittersweet episodes typical of the unaccountable ups and downs of life in the Soviet Union). Yet, our youth, passion, and enthusiasm largely carried the day.

My duties at ISKAN kept me busy, with new responsibilities coming with my move to its Military-Political Department. I also became associated with an ad hoc working group tasked with contributing research to the Soviet side on various elements of the ongoing negotiations on what ultimately became the *Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe* (*CFE Treaty*). Our papers, memos, and technical material made its way to “leading comrades” in the Central Committee, the Foreign Ministry, and the Defense Ministry—or so we were told by the *nachalstvo*.

All seemed to be going well. And yet, for an unexplainable reason, **A**in the first day or two of April 1989, I began to become aware of an undiscernible hunch—a nagging feeling of imminent disaster. Something, I was convinced, was going to happen. And in the early hours of 9 April 1989, it did: a massacre took place in downtown Tbilisi, right in front of the Parliament building, which came to be known as the “night of sapper blades.” Responding to a request from the Georgian communist authorities, a contingent of Red Army troops, armed with batons, nerve gas canisters, and sapper shovels (a weapon favored by Soviet special forces), violently dispersed a mass of Georgian demonstrators that had gathered to protest against Abkhaz secessionism and the restoration of Georgian independence. As a result, around 20 people were killed, including a disproportionately large number of women. Hundreds more were injured and hospitalized. Gorbachev instinctively blamed the “actions of irresponsible persons”—meaning the demonstrators—for the carnage.

The following days and weeks were not only terribly traumatic for the Georgian nation—notwithstanding the fact that the “night of sapper blades” truly contributed to the formation of national unity that had heretofore been elusive; for my family, this period also turned out to be one of the most rigid and difficult of our lives, turning all that we had built upside down and bringing an end to my wife’s and my professional career in Moscow.

“Night of Sapper Blades”

The massacre in Tbilisi went unreported in Moscow and in most of the rest of the Soviet Union. Neither the television channels and radio stations nor the newspapers covered those events. Whatever we learned came from fragmentary telephone conversations with our relatives and friends in Tbilisi; I also learned some details from my Georgian friends in the Foreign Ministry. Soon we learned that Shevardnadze and others from the Soviet hierarchy were dispatched to Tbilisi to investigate the horrible confrontation.

Naturally, the atmosphere in our home and at the Georgian Cultural Center (which turned into an epicenter of non-stop expressive and fiery meetings of Georgian Muscovites), was furious. The atmosphere at ISKAN, on the other hand, was gloomy: my colleagues were crushed with the reports that had filtered in of the Soviet Army’s surreal brutality, but kept their silence and did not elaborate their sentiments publicly—although everybody at ISKAN was shocked.

And then, on 14 April 1989, a group of well-known Georgians (i.e., my good friends Levan Alexidze, a prominent Georgian academic, Vakhtang Rcheulishvili, and Gia Nizharadze) arrived in Moscow with smuggled amateur video of the dreadful events in Tbilisi that had been shot by Giorgi Khaindrava, a Georgian dissident and documentalist. The video was first shown in the Cultural Center and the screening gathered a full-capacity crowd. Emotional and inflamed speeches followed, and the event became charged with tension and grief whilst further raising our anxieties, worries, and feelings. Many bitter tears were shed that night.

The next day, on 15 April 1989, I did something that heretofore would have been placed in the category of the unthinkable: I went directly to the person in charge of “international contacts” at the Institute (it was rumored that he was a member of the KGB). I then informed him of the existence of the video and of my crazy intention to show it to the ISKAN staff.

I fully recognized that I was dangerously playing with fire that might not only damage, but even destroy my entire career and, more importantly, adversely affect the livelihoods and even endanger the lives of my family,

friends, and God knows who and what else. I was going to display an evidently, 100 percent anti-Soviet video at the Institute, which was considered to be one the ideological bastions of the Soviet regime. The KGB guy listened to me carefully and then quietly responded: “That would be okay. I am also very much curious, even keen, to watch it.” In the late afternoon, our conference hall became over-full—as I learned later, colleagues informed their friends from other think tanks, seemingly all of whom came. What saved the day, I think, was that Georgy Arbatov, ISKAN’s venerable founder, first director, and by then a full member of the Central Committee, also came and stayed (together with his deputies).

Everyone watched the video in a stifling silence. When it ended, the silence of the dead lingered on for some ten minutes more. I looked in Arbatov’s direction and saw that his eyes were slightly watery. As the crowd shuffled out of the room, many colleagues came up and expressed their deepest condolences and thanked me for arranging the screening.

I came back to my apartment very much devastated but also quite proud that I had at least modestly managed to spread the truth about the “night of sapper blades” to my family, friends, colleagues, and superiors. At the same time, I learned that a rather unexpected drama was unfolding in the life of our six-year-old son, Nika.

As it happened, all his buddies in the kindergarten were ethnic-Russians. At naptime (when children the world-over never actually sleep), one of the boys stood up, unprompted, and gave a speech in which he said: “Guys, have you heard that Georgia declared a war with Russia? Who’s for Russia?” All the kids raised their hands, except for my son. The speaker then instantly proclaimed that, if this was so, then “we should kick Nika out from our kindergarten!”

My wife and I were appalled; clearly, the child was parroting what he had heard from his parents. The next morning, my wife Tamriko visited the kindergarten supervisor who promised her that strict measures would be taken, and that additional staff would be placed close by. She also added, “kids are just fooling around and repeating the nonsense they might hear at home or at the playground.”

The next day, the situation in Nika’s group worsened: again at naptime, the same child (we later learned that his father was a military man) made a

new statement: “Guys, have you heard that Georgians defeated Russia and Georgia won?” Another child chimed in: “No, no no,” he said, “guys, it was not Georgia that won, it was America!” Instantly the first child exclaimed: “So, we need to kill Nika!”

The staff on duty heard the kindergarten verdict, and the reaction was effectually more of the same. My wife and I were both shocked and devastated. We held a family meeting that night and decided to leave Moscow and move back home to Tbilisi as quickly as we could. We took this decision without an iota of doubt: Nika’s safety—his future—was the most important priority for us.

Yes, the immediate consequences for my wife and me were harsh. I left ISKAN, she left the Cultural Center, both our careers were disrupted, everything we had built in Moscow had come to naught. I had to leave my elderly mother there, we had to part ways with good friends and colleagues, and so on. And there was the question of what to do in Tbilisi. Who cared about *amerikanistika* in Tbilisi in those days, when Soviet Georgia was a mess of daily, non-stop anti-Soviet demonstrations?

Back to Tbilisi

It was one thing to make a decision to move back to Tbilisi, but quite another to figure out what to do there. I made some calls to friends and discovered that each Soviet Republic had its own Foreign Ministry—a kind of ceremonial, protocol-centric branch of the “real” Foreign Ministry in Moscow. It turned out that each of these institutions even had their own “ministers,” deputies, and staff whose sole job appeared to be meeting and greeting foreign guests of the Soviet Union who were on visits to Tbilisi and the rest of Georgia. I found out that the Georgian “Foreign Minister” was Giorgi Javakhishvili, whom I knew quite well through various Tbilisi university acquaintances. One of his deputies was my good friend Alexi Bakradze, who was an alumnus of the same faculty from which I had graduated (the Faculty of Western European Languages and Literature at Tbilisi State University).

I therefore called Alexi and shared my problems and plans in that connection with him, and in passing asked him if there was a chance to

find some sort of position for me at this “Foreign Ministry.” Alexi was very friendly and promised to take up the matter with Javakhishvili. It took quite a bit of time, however. This “Ministry” was, after all, a branch of the USSR Foreign Ministry, which meant that personnel decisions were in the hands of the Georgian Central Committee. I kept reaching out to Alexi, not too obtrusively, and he kept replying: “Nothing new yet, Tedo.”

Suddenly, at the end of July 1989, I got a call from Alexi who conveyed a message from Javakhishvili that he wanted to meet. Our conversation was truly exceptional, very warm, and so on. Although he indicated that he had no vacant “diplomatic position,” as he called it, he also shared an ingenious plan with me: to establish “Georgia’s UNESCO National Commission.” Not only did he offer me the post of Executive Secretary of that body, Javakhishvili also indicated that his aim was to assemble the “brightest Georgian minds” in this new institution, mentioning inter alia Merab Mamardashvili, a world-class, phenomenal philosopher. That clinched the deal for me.

That’s how I came back home to Tbilisi, and how began my surreal induction into the world of diplomacy—through an institution that did not yet exist but was seen from its inception as the kernel of an independent and sovereign Georgian diplomatic corps. And in October 1990, that’s precisely what happened. All this unfolded in a weird and quite dramatic way. Nika, who is now in his 40s, cannot resist reminding me from time to time that if it were not for his “courageous debates” in his Moscow kindergarten in defense of Georgia, surely, I would have stayed at my “adored Institute.”

Maybe he’s right: without a doubt, the awful set of “verdicts” pronounced against my son was the main cause of my decision to leave Moscow and return home to Tbilisi. But it would be misleading to say that, at the time of my decision, I had a feeling that the Soviet Union would implode. It would be even more misrepresentative to claim that, at the time, I could foresee that I would play a role in the establishment of sovereign Georgian diplomacy.

And yet, in very short order, that’s exactly what ended up happening. To recount all the details is beyond the scope of this essay. Instead, in the next section I will focus on recalling a series of conversations that speak to

a much larger point—a trend whose effects and consequences were felt not only in Georgia but, as it turns out, much farther afield.

Conversations with Strobe

When the Democrats won the White House in November 1992, Eduard Shevardnadze had completed his tenure as Chairman of the State Council of Georgia and became the Chairman of the Georgian Parliament (in both positions, he was the de facto head of the country; a few years later, he was elected President of Georgia). In short order, Shev—as those of us who were fortunate enough to work closely with him called him between ourselves—dispatched me to Washington, DC, in my capacity as National Security and Foreign Policy Adviser (I was accompanied by another trusted adviser, Gela Charkviani, who served at the time as the Head of the International Affairs Department of his Chancery).

Our mission was to meet the incoming Clinton Administration's foreign policy and national security team. When we arrived, the weather matched the drama of that country's domestic political landscape, with a nasty blizzard and heavy snow covering much of the United States, including Washington. Not unusually for such circumstances, the national capital seemed to be in shambles—and not just because of the infrastructural shutdown caused by the weather. The entire political establishment was effectively shut down, as outgoing George H.W. Bush Administration staffers acted as caretakers while incoming officials (and plenty of aspirants) were busy jostling for positions and influence in the White House, the broader Executive Branch, or the Hill.

In the State Department, we did manage to meet with a transitional interagency foreign policy and security team composed of Sandy Berger, Tobi Gati, John McLaughlin, and others. Later in the day, we met with Strobe Talbott, who by that point had been nominated but not yet confirmed as Ambassador-at-Large and Special Adviser to the U.S. Secretary of State on the New Independent States (he then served as Deputy Secretary of State).

The circumstances of our meeting with Strobe matched the transitional nature of the political setting. We met in the cafeteria, somewhere on the

ground floor of the State Department, where Strobe greeted us, still carrying along unpacked boxes and files.

I had first met Strobe in Moscow when he worked as a journalist for *Time* magazine, years before he became a politician, and when I was a junior researcher at ISKAN. Since that initial meeting, we kept talking to each other in Tbilisi and Washington, and I even helped Strobe to arrange a couple of meetings with Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first President of Georgia. (I remember that before one of the meetings with Gamsakhurdia at his house, two Caucasian Shepherd dogs hopped at us and barked scarily enough. Later, Strobe published an article in *Time* about that visit, recounting it metaphorically as “barking Georgian democracy.”)

The unsettled and informal nature of the meeting allowed for an agenda that was broader than usual and, in a sense, one that was “reflective.” And so, we talked about the “newly independent states,” as Westerners used to call us, and, naturally, Russia's democratic prospects were part of the conversation.

As not exactly an aside, it is worth mentioning that the Russians preferred the term “near abroad” to describe most of the former Soviet republics. I recall a long conversation that took place in March 1993 that centered on the question of Russia's democratization that turned into a conversation about their preference for using this term. My interlocutor was Luboš Dobrovský, one of the heroes of the Velvet Revolution who by then had become the head of Václav Havel's presidential administration. At one point in our discussion, I asked Dobrovský why he was so pedantic about his questions and deliberations regard the term ‘near abroad,’ and his answer was very memorable: “We Europeans should be extremely careful, aware, and familiar with all details and nuances of Russia's interpretations of that notion and how the authorities instrumentalize it towards former Soviet republics. What today they consider as their ‘near abroad,’ tomorrow it may turn out to be seen their ‘middle abroad,’ and afterwards they may go further still.”

But back to my discussion in Washington with Strobe Talbott at the de facto start of his tenure as U.S. Ambassador-at-Large on the New Independent States. In that politically transitional mood, all discussions were impromptu. Given the embedded informality and against the

backdrop of our longstanding acquaintance, I remember telling Strobe that focusing on Russian democratization was perhaps too ambitious; I proposed that it would perhaps be better to help the “newly independent states” to establish themselves as capable states and democratic regimes in their own right, which could (in good time) impact upon the democratization process inside Russia itself. The thinking was that any attempt to democratize that colossal country would be problematic in the context of its ongoing political and economic crisis. “Let’s establish a ‘democratic belt’ around Russia,” I proposed. “They won’t like an idea of a ‘belt’ around them,” Strobe muttered. Indeed, anything resembling the idea of encirclement—or any form of constraint on Russia—seemed quite beyond the spirit of the day in Clintonian policy circles.

And that’s how our conversation ended that winter. Of course, my suggestion seemed naïve to Strobe and the entire Clinton Administration decisionmaking apparatus at the time. Georgians had no idea that President Bill Clinton was about to launch his “Russia First” policy, whereby the NIS states (minus the Baltics) would be seen as mere dependent variables in the long transition process. Years later, Strobe published his memoirs, *The Russia Hand*. Therein, he referred briefly to this “meeting with Tedo Japaridze and Gela Chakrapani,” but he did not elaborate very much on its contents. Years later, he confided to me that in the first drafts of his memoirs he had referred to us as “two Georgian Rosencrantz and Guildenstern”—a reference to two characters from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. Later on, he decided to use our real names, because, he noted, those two distinguished fictional gentlemen were hanged by the end of the play. Very thoughtful of him...

So, for Tbilisi and Washington alike, Russian stability mattered, although in different ways. And during our exchange, as Strobe recalled in his memoirs, I made the point that if “our big neighbor goes, so goes the neighborhood.” Little did I know then that Georgia’s future was hanging in the balance, as I was not alone in considering a belt around Russia; indeed, things truly could have gone in a different direction, reshaping the future of Europe.

That really was a period in which choices mattered. For instance, in the early 1990s, there were intensive diplomatic deliberations about a possible land swap of Kaliningrad for Crimea. Indeed, a “belt of democratic states” could have engulfed Russia.

When choices are abundant, missing a chance seems acceptable. However, for countries like Georgia and Ukraine, when a chance is lost, it is lost forever.

In 1999, I once again found myself talking to Strobe—this time, over a Georgian dinner in my ambassadorial apartment in the Washington suburb of Chevy Chase. That was in the immediate aftermath of the confrontation between Russian and (mostly British) NATO forces over the seizure of the Priština airport in the immediate wake of the end of the 78-day U.S.-led bombing campaign of Serbia—a campaign that had not been authorized by the UN Security Council. I recall Strobe telling me how he was in a meeting with Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and Defense Minister Igor Sergeyev in Moscow when his aide passed him a note informing him that Russian army units were marching towards the Priština airport. Strobe posed a question about that, and both of his Russian interlocutors looked straight into his eyes and told him that nothing was going on in the vicinity of Priština. I recall telling Strobe that we had a few centuries of experience looking into Russian eyes and being lied to, so I was not that surprised.

Strobe countered that a different Russia was still possible. The fact is, he pointed out, that Russia was undergoing its first peaceful and democratic transfer of power (from Yeltsin to Putin). “The first time in a thousand years,” he added romantically. In his view, this surely suggested that Russia was now different and could be more different still. I looked at him in disbelief, countering that this was also the first time in history—“let’s say, the first time in a thousand years”—that the Russian security services had gotten their hands on real political power. Even Beria, I said, did not manage to do this, because he had been held back by Stalin for decades (and then swiftly dealt with in a palace coup by Stalin’s successors). Not only that, but Putin’s ascension to power also came with a reassertion of state economic power; these guys, I remarked, were not only intent on ruling Russia, but they were also intent on actually *owning* Russia. Strobe did not exactly embrace my counterargument.

Fast forward a decade, to November 2014. I remember visiting Strobe and his wife with our Parliamentary Speaker, Dato Usupashvili, and I found him to have become extremely anti-Russian and anti-Putin, as all of us were after Russia’s intrusion in Ukraine. In that conversation, I recalled our “belt of democracy” exchange. In the early 1990s, it was natural for the

West to believe, Strobe explained to me, that Russia could be transformed into a more cooperative regime.

Alas, the time for choices for the West had come and gone—to the detriment of countries like Georgia and Ukraine. The difference is that the United States can learn from history. We do not have this luxury.

In our diplomatic reality, there is little benefit to historical hindsight other than absolving ourselves from guilt. I am somewhat glad Strobe edited out from his memoirs the Rosencrantz and Guildenstern allusion. At the very least, it would have been bad luck. But his choice of allusions shows that we were broadly on the same page. By virtue of my academic training, I prefer allusions taken from literature rather than from history—not least because I find them more appropriate for a Georgian diplomat.

After all, when history can teach us something, the time for choices has elapsed. Hindsight dresses the responsibility of the moment with the aura of the historically inevitable. It is indeed all very much like Edmund said in *King Lear*:

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that when we are sick in fortune (often the surfeits of our own behavior) we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars, as if we were villains on necessity; fools by heavenly compulsion; knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance; drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. An admirable evasion of whoremaster man, to lay his goatish disposition on the charge of a star! **BD**

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