

# GREAT DECISIONS

*GDTV 2010 Transcript*

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Fall 2009

**We covered Russia two years ago with some of your colleagues, and at that point Russia was flushed with a lot of money and really able to swing its weight around in the region. Is that true today?**

Well things have been very interesting for Russia over the last year or so. You certainly saw in the summer of 2008 a country that was feeling extremely confident. Oil prices were at an all time high. They were feeling as though they were back on the world stage, they needed to be taken seriously that major issues of world politics couldn't be resolved without Russia and then you had the financial crisis and you also had the drop in oil prices and its made for a situation where Russia is much less confident than it was in 2008 and it has shown that it has more limitations than perhaps it had felt previously when it went to war with Georgia in August of 08. It was extremely confident, that war, although it ended with Russia being able to declare the independence of the two break away provinces in Georgia; it was a difficult war for Russia, militarily. Perhaps it didn't perform as well as it thought it might and so there was a definite sense by the end of 2008 and into the beginning of 09 that Russia had more constraints and limitations than it had perhaps felt of spring and summer of 08.

**And how might that impact its current situation in the Northern Caucasus that it currently faces?**

Well for Russia, certainly under President and Prime Minister Putin the major hallmark of Russian policy has been control. Control over Russia and insuring that you wouldn't have break away regions.

Control over the states of the former Soviet Union and the North Caucasus is the most dangerous place for Russia it's the place for the most potential for break away regions, secessionist movements, lots of violence. So its an area that's going to continue to give Russia trouble as it seeks to make sure it controls not only its territory but the region surrounding its territory but that's also true

because of Russia's interest in oil and controlling oil and so for a whole host of reasons, that regions important and extremely difficult for Russia to handle.

**What are some of the underlying regions that these regions are so keen on breaking away from Moscow?**

Well, the problem is that you just have a lot of different ethnic groups you have a lot of different historical rivalries and you saw how important nationalism was back in the 80s and 90s as the Soviet Union itself was falling apart and a lot of those same forces are still present in Russia. That's why for Putin when he came into the Presidency in 2000. First he was acting President and then he was elected President. His focus was to really make sure that he could put an end to those forces [inside Russia], centrifugal forces, sort of fearing that what happened to the Soviet Union when it broke apart in 1991 could happen to Russia and that's been one of the major emphasis of first his Presidency and now his Prime Ministry.

**I read that this week Russia conducting some joint military exercises with Belarus. Aside from Belarus, what are some other countries in the regions that are strongly allied with Moscow?**

Well Russia doesn't really have a lot of allies. There are states that are more or less dependent on Russia certainly like Armenia has had a great deal of dependence on Russia because Armenia faces both its problems and its relations with Turkey although there has been some thaw there and its relations with Azerbaijan and so normally where Russia has an influence in places that are dependent on it where leaders feel like they need Russian support but in terms of allies in the World, Russia has very few and in fact when Russia declared the independence in 2008 of the break away provinces in Georgia the only country that supported was Nicaragua.

**Russian relations with the Ukraine have been strange to say the least in the past few years and obviously the oil issues doesn't affect the Ukraine as much as other European countries as well, could you talk a little bit about that, the current state of that affair?**

Russia relations with the Ukraine are very tense and that's been true ever since five years ago, the orange revolution swept into power, a group that Russia had not supported and there was fear from Russia that that orange revolution would signal a move by the Ukraine to move closer to the west and away from Russia and there are problems within Ukraine in terms of differences from east to west. Russian speakers versus Ukrainian speakers. Politically Ukraine has had a very difficult time putting together a stable government and Russia also maintains a naval base in Crimea and that lease is up in 2017 and the Ukrainian are saying that they might not renew the lease which would mean that Russia would no longer be able to base its fleet there. So there a lot of very difficult issues and of course unresolved are Ukraine attitude NATO and the EU doesn't want to be a member, its unclear. Of course Russia does not want it to move closer to the west so

one of the tools at Russia disposal showing its displeasure with Ukraine is that its able to cut of energy supplies to Ukraine which then because of pipeline go to

other parts of Europe, impacts other parts of Europe so that's been a tool that Russia has used and highlights Ukraine's dependence on Russia.

**You brought up Russian relations with the west have been relatively strained and recently Obama said something to the affect of pressing a reset button with Russia. Great rhetoric, but what exactly does he mean when he says that?**

I think the President coming in really wanted to renew the relationship with Russia he knew that the relations with Russia at the end of 2008 were as bad as they've been since the Cold War since the Soviet Union existed and President Obama coming in wanted a fresh start and suggested that the US and Russia could push the reset button. The problem is that the US is looking for both sides trying to adjust their policies so that they can take greater account of the other but each side has to put something in to this reset.

And the problem is that from the Russian stand point, the period since the Cold War has just been one unending policy after another of the UD humiliating Russia and to the Russians "reset" means the US will accept everything the Russians have said about US policy over the last 15= yeas and the UD will change everything its doing and the US and Russian relations can be better. And that's not exactly what the US has in mind so there is still quite a difference of view on how to move forward in the US-Russian relationship.

**And when you mentioned that they were at the lowest levels at the end of the Bush administration, what were some of the major driving forces behind that?**

The two biggest issue emerged in 2008 that negatively affected the US and Russian relations was first the question of NATO enlargement further into Eastern Europe and whether or not NATO would move further in Ukraine and Georgia. This was something that the Bush admin was rhetorically supporting and this was causing tremendous amount of anxiety in Moscow. Now even the Bush administration at the end of Dec 2008, had put in place a process by which Ukraine and Georgia would be reviewed annually by NATO so it had really taken off the table this so called Membership Action Plan, just because of the name Membership Action Plan had really upset the Russians. And the second issue was missile defense. The bush admin had declared its intention to deploy 10 missile interceptors in Poland and radar in the Czech Republic to defend against the Iranian Nuclear missile threat and the Russians took this as a deployment that would negatively affect their own security and their own nuclear deterrent and they were tremendously anxious about that as well. When President Obama came in, he faced having to deal with these two lingering issues of one of which NATO enlargement to Ukraine and Georgia has really been put aside for sometime and the other issue of how to figure out if the US thinks it needs to defend against an Iranian threat, what's the best was to go about doing it? Deployments to the Czech Republic make sense.

**And then finally, going back to sort of the reset issue. It seems the default position on that is whenever the US and Russia want to come to sort of some objective its nuclear disarmament.**

**That seems to be an issue that President Obama made a dramatic statement about I think when he was visiting over there. Where do we stand on this issue?**

Well arms control is probably the easiest thing for the US and Russia to agree on because the numbers of nuclear weapons on both sides are still so high there is no reason not to go lower. It is also helpful because the Russians for financial reasons will have to go lower so they wanted and agreement with the US for the US to go lower, also the value for the Russians in arm control is that their the other major nuclear power so opposed to most other issues in the World where Russia is just one of many and doesn't particularly stand out.

In the Nuclear area it's the US and Russia. So an arms control agreement makes Russia look like a major power and I think that really when you think about sort of what Russia wants out of the reset, my own view is that they like the idea of resetting to 1972 or 1973 that was period when the US was weakened by war and recession, it was period when the UD wanted to, was willing to accept Russia as a great power, and arms control was the center piece and it seems to me that was the atmosphere that Russia wants to recreate. That effort to recreate a period when Russia was really a great power to be taken seriously and when arms control was the center piece.

**What tools does Russia have today at its disposal to thwart US efforts to expand NATO or any US objectives that Russia doesn't agree with?**

With respect to NATO enlargement, NATO doesn't want to take in any countries that are going to decrease security in Europe and the disputes that Russia has with Ukraine and Georgia make it hard for NATO to really think about moving to include those countries. Most other issues in the world it's very hard for Russia to stop the US from doing something it wants. It can play a role a the margins for example, the US would like Iran not pursue and nuclear weapons program, Russia can play a role in helping to make...support stronger sanctions at the UN. It may through its relationship with Iran be able to do something at the margins. But on most issues, Russia just doesn't play the kind of central role that it played during the Cold War.

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