

The Ambassadorial Series

A Collection of Transcripts from the Interviews



Ambassadorial Series

COMPILED AND EDITED BY THE MONTEREY INITIATIVE IN RUSSIAN STUDIES
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Introduction

At a time when dialogue between American and Russian diplomats is reduced to a bare minimum and when empathy and civility fall short of diplomacy between major powers, we are pleased to introduce the Ambassadorial Series. It is a compilation of conversations with eight outstanding American diplomats who served at various points of time as U.S. ambassadors to the Soviet Union and, after its dissolution, to the Russian Federation.

The Series provides nuanced analyses of crucial aspects of the U.S.-Russia relationship, such as the transition from the Soviet Union to contemporary Russia and the evolution of Putin's presidency. It does so through the personal reflections of the ambassadors. As Ambassador Alexander Vershbow observes, "[t]he Ambassadorial Series is a reminder that U.S. relations with Putin's Russia began on a hopeful note, before falling victim to the values gap." At its heart, this project is conceived as a service to scholars and students of American diplomacy vis-à-vis Russia. The interviews, collected here as transcripts, form a unique resource for those who want to better understand the evolving relationship between the two countries.

We would like to express gratitude to our colleagues who collaborated on this project and to the Monterey Initiative in Russian Studies staff members who supported it. Jill Dougherty is the face and voice of this project – bringing expertise, professionalism, and experience to the Series. Floyd Yarmuth at Rockhouse is a tireless partner – guiding the ambassadors through laptop adjustments and lighting tweaks – all over a Zoom call. Robert Legvold endowed our project with deep knowledge and provided the framework for the interview questions. Jarlath McGuckin provided expert support and good humor throughout the enterprise and kept us all on track while sourcing photographs and providing the voiceover for the podcast credits. We would like to thank Alina Kazakovtceva for her help with the project's implementation. Mollie Messick edited the transcripts for accuracy and punctuation and formatted them into this e-book. David Gibson and our colleagues at Middlebury College provided guidance and support on design and branding, as well as promotional assistance for the launch. Thank you to our new friends at Bluecadet (Kelly, Alyssa, Siji, and Andy) for their creativity and professionalism. Most of all, we would like to thank the former U.S. ambassadors to Russia and the Soviet Union who took part in this project for their time and their service to the United States: Jack F. Matlock, Thomas R. Pickering, James F. Collins, Alexander Vershbow, John Beyrle, Michael McFaul, John F. Tefft, and Jon Huntsman, Jr.

Special thanks to our colleagues at Carnegie Corporation of New York, whose support throughout the evolution of the project was crucial.

The Ambassadorial Series is dedicated to the memory of Dr. Vartan Gregorian – our lodestar in bringing this project to fruition.

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Ambassador Jon Huntsman, Jr. (2017-2019)

We missed the one element of diplomacy that is absolutely critical in balancing some of these very sensitive relationships, and that's a level of connectivity and dialogue that allows both sides to frame the priorities and to get working toward some shared outcomes and solutions. So, in that empty environment, Russia and China came together, each having different interests in coming together.

INTERVIEW

Jill Dougherty

So, Ambassador Jon Huntsman, thank you very much for being with us. I think the last time I actually saw you was in Moscow. It was at Spaso House, the beautiful residence of the ambassador there, and it was for a cultural event with your family. It was really wonderful, a lot Russian guests. And so, thank you for that, and thank you for joining us today.

Ambassador Huntsman

Well, thank you, Jill. It was a pleasure then and it's a pleasure now. Thanks for bringing your great professionalism to the table.

Jill Dougherty

Thank you. Well, today we have kind of a broader historical perspective, I think, because what - in this series - we are trying to do is have ambassadors look at the time that they spent in Russia, and some of them have very long careers. You certainly have a very long diplomatic career. Russia, China, Singapore, and a lot of experience, two big countries, Russia, China, that are in the center of attention. So we're going to try to get to that perspective, and I'm just putting myself back into the time that you arrived in Moscow. I believe you've described it as a historically difficult period in bilateral relations. Could you describe, what was it like when you arrived? What were your expectations of what I think you'd have to say was a pretty fraught relationship, even at that point, and do you have any vivid memories from that period?

Ambassador Huntsman

Well, thank you, Jill. It was, in a sense, managing adversity, if I could just put it in a phrase, managing downside risk. There were some who felt optimistic that we could strike up a new dialogue with Moscow. I was less sanguine about that possibility just because I've tracked big power relationships and I followed resets and redos by both Republicans and Democrats from administrations past and had studied Vladimir Putin and his style of leadership and tried to understand his aspirations for the country, the region, and Russia's place in the world.

So, I was less sanguine about the ability to strike up, maybe, new and optimistic lines of communication. And then, the events leading up to my arrival in Moscow were absolutely

terrifying from a diplomatic standpoint. Of course, we had the election meddling in November, the run-up to November of 2016, and the assessment by the intelligence community, which was uniform – it's very rare that you'd get a uniform assessment from the intelligence community because you've got so many players who make up that community – was that the Russians were behind it and certain elements of the Russian security services, and the evidence was pretty clear.

I remember one of the first things I did once I got my security clearances back was to read the consensus by the intelligence community. In the aftermath, of course, as you'll remember, Washington responded by booting out about 35 Russian diplomats. This would have been December of 2016. Then the aftermath was in the spring and summer of 2017 – this was while I was in training, preparing to ship out to Moscow. Congress came up with a package of sanctions that were quite punitive, but I would say appropriate, given Russia's role in the election of 2016.

That was signed off on by the president. I remember getting a call from the president the morning that Congress voted on this package, saying, "Your job just got a whole lot more difficult," and, in fact, it did. Well, in the aftermath of that congressional sanctions package, Vladimir Putin announced that he was cutting 755 people from the United States Embassy, effectively capping our overall staffing at about 455.

You'd really have to go back, Jill, to 1986, I'm guessing, where, in the aftermath of the Gennadi Zakharov-Nicholas Daniloff affair, the Embassy was basically capped at about 251, 252. It was a devastating hit then, as it was in the follow-on to 2016 and the sanctions of 2017. So, my arrival was literally weeks after that cut announced by Putin, and it was a very difficult, very solemn time for the staff in Moscow.

Of course, you had all kinds of people who were packing their bags, getting their personal effects organized. The impact on families, on kids in school, on the overall operations of the Embassy and our consulates, which we were managing. So, that's where it fell to me. So, how do you take a much slimmed-down staff, slimmed-down by 70% if you want to put it in numerical terms, and try to keep the same output going for the consumers in Washington and those who rely upon your work, whether it's movement of people, whether it's political reporting, whether it's the commercial side of our relationship? There's just so much that goes on between the United States and Russia and, of course, that all had to be reorganized under a much smaller footprint, which was a very, very difficult thing to do.

So, that's what I walked into, early on, which is something that I had not experienced before. I had experienced big power relationships, certainly with China, and I've spent decades involved in the U.S.-China relationship and, of course, was first exposed to Russia in early visits to the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, even worked on a joint venture there. So, I had a perspective of Russia pre-'91, and of course it followed in government and business work had visited there, and of course found a new reality, at least diplomatically, in 2017 when I arrived. So, it was difficult.

But what I remember most from that period were the personal aspects within the U.S. mission of how this played out, because I watched some of the finest men and women in diplomacy and in other aspects of international affairs work, who had dedicated their lives to Russia, to language, to regional studies, to politics, economics, and history, who were being booted out and probably would never have an opportunity to return. So, for them, it was quite catastrophic, and for the mission, it was something that caused us to reel for weeks, if not months, trying to find the right management structure, such that we could basically keep the lights on.

Jill Dougherty

Yeah. Very difficult challenge. You know, if you back up and look at the policy that seemed to be implemented at that period, there are some who say that there were actually three different policies in play with the Trump administration. One was what we heard from President Trump himself, which was, "We should be able to get along," or "Wouldn't it be nice to be able to get along with Vladimir Putin?"

Then you had officials in his administration who took, in some cases, a much harsher view, and then you also had Congress. You mentioned sanctions. Congress doing its thing, often very critical and introducing sanction upon sanction. I want to talk about sanctions later, but just that policy, do you agree that there actually, in reality, were three different policies? And do you agree that the Russians were confused? How would you describe how the Russians looked at American policy?

Ambassador Huntsman

I think the Russians read us pretty well. Those who I worked with at the top levels of the Foreign Ministry and beyond, they're professionals; in fact, they're some of the best I've ever worked with, from a professional standpoint. They read the United States well, they stay year after year, they understand Congress, the executive branch, even local government, to some extent. So, I'm not sure they were terribly confused by it, particularly when you experience what I have, and what many others have, which is to say, it's not uncommon for a newly elected president of either party to try to rebalance a difficult relationship. I certainly saw it in China where a newly elected president will try to warm up and to offer an embrace and to look forward to engagements of various kinds, and I think that's been the case in Russia as well.

If you look back, at least certainly back to President Clinton, and if you were to bring it current, newly elected presidents try to throw a bouquet out to get the relationship on an optimistic and solid footing, and then the reality of the relationship begins to set in. So, in this case, we had the carry-over from Russia's invasion of Ukraine back in 2015 and their regional geographic meddling, trying to expand or solidify their sense of regional security. And then you overlay that with, of course, the election meddling and what we thought to be very bad behavior in other regional conflicts around the world. No one would have thought that it would be anything other than very difficult at a professional level, and certainly, for those of us who were working it on the ground, day-to-day, I found more of a unified approach to dealing with

Russia, which is, we have to address, we have to answer, on some of these egregious and outrageous policies coming out of Moscow.

And we were all unified behind that. The president was unified behind the congressional sanctions, which were extremely punitive sanctions. I don't remember a time where the White House or the National Security Council was not in favor of what came later, and it only exacerbated with the poisoning of Sergei Skripal in 2017 along with his daughter Yulia, when then we, along with 29 other countries, worked to kick out Russian intelligence operatives. So we had the first election meddling row, and that was followed up shortly thereafter by the Skripal poisoning and we booted out probably sixty intelligence operatives from the United States, ended up closing two consulates, Seattle and then San Francisco, and, of course, the response, on top of what we already had the year earlier, was sixty more that were booted out of the Embassy, and the closing of St. Petersburg.

So, there was no way in this milieu, in this environment, that anything good could come. It was, again, managing adversity and managing downside risk, for me, almost the entire two years. But all the while, you had to establish a rapport, relationships. We had to communicate on things that represented our ongoing shared interests, whether that was space or whether it was Syria, Libya, Venezuela, Afghanistan, or just a lot of things that we were in discussions on, where we didn't agree, obviously, but we had enough in the way of shared interests to keep us together at the table. For me, it was really a combination of managing our shared interests where we had them, which wasn't a very a fulsome menu of things, and at the same time, trying to manage the degradation of our diplomatic presence, which was really unprecedented,

When you look at the election meddling and its aftermath, the Sergei Skripal poisoning and its aftermath, and the effect that it had in terms of personnel and diplomatic properties overall in the U.S.-Russia relationship, trying to make sense out of a much-reduced footprint and ability to do what needs to be done to protect U.S. interests and to get a better understanding of where Russia was, in terms of their own decision-making, and where they were likely headed, that became a very, very difficult task for the much slimmed-down staff that we had in Moscow.

Jill Dougherty

You mentioned China, and as everyone knows, you were the ambassador to China, also Singapore, so you have a lot of Asia experience, and I think you're uniquely positioned to help us understand that relationship between Russia and China. Based on that experience, how would you describe it? What *is* this relationship?

Ambassador Huntsman

Well, it's a marriage made of convenience, based upon shared interests. It's a marriage that is fueled by an antipathy toward the United States. It's a relationship that should not exist, I would argue, if the United States had played its diplomatic cards a little more adroitly. But we

provided a huge opening for Russia and China to come together, and to my mind, there really was no excuse for that, but...

Jill Dougherty

Could you go into that just a little bit more because that really would be interesting. What was wrong with the previous policy?

Ambassador Huntsman

Well, it was wave after wave of sanctions with inadequate dialogue. So, sanctions, if they're targeted, if they're focused, if they achieve a foreign policy outcome, is something that I believe should be part of your arsenal of weapons as a country, but while you're managing sanctions, you have to have some sort of thoughtful dialogue that is ongoing, that speaks to the sanctions and speaks about how, ultimately, we get away from sanctions, which aspects of the relationship need to be focused on. But, almost in both cases, both in Russia and China, we've been punitive without the ability to communicate and to connect, and so, it's an incomplete relationship, and I think it, therefore, begins to drift, and the drift in both cases can become strategically very dangerous.

So, while both countries are punished and sanctioned for the things that are perfectly understandable, and, I think, absolutely in America's interest, we missed the one element of diplomacy that is absolutely critical in balancing some of these very sensitive relationships, and that's a level of connectivity and dialogue that allows both sides to frame the priorities and to get working toward some shared outcomes and solutions. So, in that empty environment, Russia and China came together, each having different interests in coming together. Certainly in the case of China, which does not have a lot of trust toward Russia. I know that from my decades of experience there. All you have to do is pull up to the *Renmin Dahuitang*, the Great Hall of the People, which is right next to Tiananmen Square, which was a gift by the Soviets on the tenth anniversary of their friendship, after liberation in 1949, so, this would have been 1959.

The relationship between Russia and China was so strained a year or two thereafter, 1960, 1961, that the Russians left China and left this building unfinished. It was a Stalinesque piece of architecture from the bottom all the way to the roof. There was no roof, of course, because the Russians weren't there long enough to finish it, so the Chinese put a Chinese roof on the Stalinesque building and, every time I'd pull up there for meetings, I'd be reminded of the difficulty in that relationship between Russia and China. It was never meant to be, certainly, an easy one. They've got a shared border, probably one of the longest shared borders between any two countries in the world. They had, at that time, of course, late '50s, early '60s, an ideological disconnect between Mao's interpretation of Marxism-Leninism and what Khrushchev expected him to follow.

So, it was a very, very bitter rivalry that took them all the way to almost a nuclear encounter by the late 1960s. So, all you have to do is trace back a few decades to see where the Russia-China relationship goes if left to its own devices, but we, somehow, gave them reason to come

together. The Chinese, of course, were looking for an energy relationship from the Russians. They signed big ambitious contracts. I don't think much of those have come to fruition. And, of course, the Russians were looking for legitimacy, being seen as something other than the junior partner in the game of superpowers. They were also looking for funding from Chinese banks and Chinese sources for their oligarchs and for business expansion and development which, of course, really didn't happen because of the lack of trust between them.

But what I'm most concerned about is the fact that you've got Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin actually meeting together; their teams are sharing intelligence. They actually have started, two or three years ago, engaging in military exercises together, which would be a first, not that they're integrating or inter-operating at all – they're really watching each other more than anything else – but the fact that they're on the same playing field, doing that kind of thing, should set off alarm bells in Washington.

Jill Dougherty

I think we got into sanctions, but just one more point about that. You know, I've talked with a lot of Russians about sanctions, and right now there seems to be the conclusion in Moscow that sanctions will never end. This is going to be a fact of life forever, and so, some people say that the Russians interpret that as, we might as well do what we were going to do because we will just be punished with more sanctions, ergo onward. Do you agree with that? Is that a correct analysis of what's going on?

Ambassador Huntsman

Well, I think... so, I'm all in favor of sanctions that have a specific target, a specific life and an intended outcome that is understood by both sides but, when you get into the hundreds, if not thousands of sanctions between two countries targeted toward individuals and entities without fully understanding why they are there, as opposed to just punishment or punitive measures, then you see the market begin to correct in ways that build around sanctions, where black markets are created, where access to capital is available through the non-traditional sources and means, and you find new alliances that grow out of that kind of environment, like the one we just talked about between Russia and China. So, there are sanctions, and sanctions do play a foreign policy role.

And I do believe that, without some understanding of why they are there, which gets right back to the importance of dialogue – sanctions plus dialogue really would be the most appropriate approach – then you do, probably, run the risk of countries engaging in more audacious behavior because there's nothing to lose at the end of the day. What will a couple 100 more sanctions do that 1,000 haven't done already? So, sanctions with a cause, with a target, with an intended foreign policy purpose, sign me up for that. But when they become watered down and ambiguous and less defined and just part of the landscape – and then of course the Foreign Ministry in Moscow was smart enough to conclude that there probably aren't a lot of people in Congress on Capitol Hill who were going to want to, anytime soon, stand up and say, "Okay, time's up. We ought to take away these sanctions and get on with a more normal bilateral relationship."

That isn't exactly a politically intelligent thing to do, and because of that, we are stuck, just because it is not a politically expedient thing to do to lift sanctions. It's very politically expedient to apply sanctions. That'll get an applause line every time you talk about it at a town hall meeting, but you'll get things thrown at you at a town hall meeting if you talk about lifting sanctions.

Jill Dougherty

I'm intrigued very much by your take on Vladimir Putin and I was just thinking in China, you have seen Chinese leaders, historic movements of leaders and then also in Singapore with Lee Kuan Yew, a great leader, actually internationally. You've had a chance to really watch three men in operation. What's your take on Vladimir Putin? I know this is almost unfair because it's a common question. But what would you say is driving him? Is there an aim? Does he have a strategic aim in mind for Russia?

Ambassador Huntsman

Jill, I think he's fueled by a sense of inferiority, in where Russia finds itself today versus where it was pre-1991. He was very active, of course, in the intelligence services after finishing college in Saint Petersburg. He went on to work for Mayor Sobchak in Saint Petersburg, actually doing economic development work before he went on to the security services in Moscow. So, it's often been said that Vladimir Putin's worst day was the dissolution of the Soviet Union, and he's yearned all the while to recreate that sense of empire. I think it was a catastrophic event in his life. And, so, he's fueled, therefore, by the Russia that is today versus what was yesterday's Soviet Union.

It has half the population, it has half the geographic mass, it has half the economy. It doesn't have the sense of unity, of course, that existed under the old system. So, I think what drives him is to rebuild empire, to ensure that he keeps Europe and NATO weak, because there's no way that he can begin to rebuild an empire and, at least, weaken the nation states around him that would represent the old Soviet geography with a strong NATO and a strong Europe. Therefore, he's fixated almost maniacally on disrupting events in Europe, on engaging in all kinds of policies that will destabilize countries that are fairly weak in Europe, and doing what he can to stand in the way of a strong U.S.-NATO relationship.

What I find unique about Vladimir Putin is he's been in office for over 20 years. He's seen every head of state come and go. He knows every negotiating style. He brings to the negotiating table his intelligence and operations background, and he runs the country with a very small clique of elites, mostly from the security services. When you take defense, when you take two or three of the security services, that's pretty much the decision-making body right there. You might throw in a few oligarchs, but it's a very simple system for him to use, as compared and contrasted to the system in Washington, which has endless checks and balances and, of course, is transparent and open to the media.

So, he's able to meddle in ways that no one can compete with. He does it on the cheap, he does it with a very simple plan, but he doesn't need much in the way of sign-offs to get it done. And he's able to come into countries, let's just say Venezuela, for example, just to take one in our hemisphere, with a menu of things that he can provide. Whether it is intelligence support, whether it's oil, whether it's logistics support, whether it's funding for different things, he can operate in ways that I've seen no other head of state be able to operate. He is singular and unique in his power, and Russia, today, is where it is and absolutely reflective of one man, and that is Vladimir Putin, and I would argue that the prevailing ideology in Russia is Putinism, and it's heavy on Russian Orthodox Church; it's heavy on being a proud Slavic, and it's heavy on supporting and standing behind Vladimir Putin and his desire to want to recreate greatness in a lost empire.

Jill Dougherty

Yeah, there's a sense of frustration, I think, among some Russians, when you get to the side that should be a natural - business, and that's, your family comes from that background, public service certainly, but a lot of business and experience in business. I have noted, over the years, President Putin is always coming up with new ideas: Russia projects, build the economy, make it a modern country with the IT industry, et cetera. I'd be interested in your perspective on that as well. Is it that he's just, kind of, talking a good game but he's never going to do it? Or how do you square what happened to him in the beginning when he was doing some economic reform before you came?

Twenty years ago, he was doing some economic reform. Then he stopped, and now it would be very hard to find any evidence of true reform. So, I guess, my question boils down to, how do you evaluate his quandary as a person who needs to develop business in Russia, talks a good game, but he's not doing it?

Ambassador Huntsman

Well, it's a great question, and you could spend the rest of the day talking about economic development, say, for example, in the early '90s when there was a brief moment of euphoria under Yeltsin. I know because I was part of that, working on a joint venture in Moscow, and then the reality of Putin taking over. What's also interesting, and we ought to note this, Jill, is that we and the rest of the world did not see the collapse of the empire coming, nor did we see the rise of Vladimir Putin, and he's been there for over 20 years. So, what does that say about our own analytic capabilities and where we might have some deficiencies and holes? But there was a moment of euphoria when there was capital and brainpower moving into Russia in the '90s. That came to an end when, I think, Putin argued that too much openness and giving away too much to the outside was going to threaten their hold on power, and that all came to an end.

Meanwhile, you had a lot of friends of his who were buying state assets at pennies on the dollars, and they became billionaires overnight, and that remains the cadre of oligarchs that he turns to for advice and who actually have a seat at the table of power. So, we talked about Vladimir Putin versus Lee Kuan Yew, versus Xi Jinping. So, Lee Kuan Yew's approach was just

the opposite: If we don't have policies that bring in brainpower and capital and technology, we will lose. We're surrounded by, sometimes, unstable countries, we're a small island population with no natural resources, and we have to rely on inputs from the rest of the world. If we can't manage that, we're done. So, he's managed that openness, even with an authoritarian hold on political power, now with his son Lee Hsien Loong, who's been a long-time prime minister.

In China, I think China looked very closely at the Singapore model and, of course, they looked at the Russia model along about 1991 and what happened internally to cause that failure, that implosion, and then since, Russia's economic journey, which has not been a happy one. I think China learned a lot of lessons from that, and I think their takeaway was, at the end of the day, we have to have enough capital, technology and brainpower associated with our economic development, but in the end, we must own these national winners so that we have our own Google, our own Apple, our own Disney, our own AT&T, you name it, and that has taken them more toward a much different economic model today than they had just a few years ago.

What is disconcerting for Vladimir Putin, and what I used to comment on regularly is, here's a country of 150 million people, spread out across eleven time zones, from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok. Brilliant, beautiful, capable people, some of the great entrepreneurs of the world, and, as I used to tell some very senior people in Moscow, "Thank you for giving us a few Sergeys in the United States because they've added enormously to our own economic wellbeing." But what you find in today's Russia, based upon the policies of Vladimir Putin, which have not been friendly to economic development, with the exception of those immediately around him, is that you have brainpower now moving outward.

So, the young, tech-savvy, smart entrepreneurs are leaving, they're going to Europe, they're going to Israel, they're going to the United States and moreover, when you look at the capital outflows, I think that most people would be surprised at the dollars or the rubles that are leaving Russia in pursuit of investments elsewhere. So, these are exactly the things that you don't want to have happen if you want a strong, stable, 21st century economy, yet that's exactly what's happening in today's Russia. So, as that happens, you really look more and more, as Putin I'm sure does, at your balance sheet, and your balance sheet says you have a lot of oil and gas, which is most of the balance sheet, and you've got some capacity to sell arms on the open market, even on the black market; that brings in revenue.

But, in terms of economic diversification, like you've seen in China, for example, where there's been enormous economic diversification, you don't see that in Russia, and this bodes, I think, very poorly for the future of the Russian people. I think it's, in large part, why Putin's numbers continue to creep downward, because people get that in Russia. They get the fact that they're on the losing end of economic development and the winning aspects of economic development in Russia are going into the pockets of just a handful of the oligarch elites, and that's called corruption. I think most people are onto it, and hence you have the rise of Navalny and the many tens of thousands, if not millions, across the country who are very open and sympathetic to what he's trying to do.

Jill Dougherty

You were the ambassador from 2017 to 2019, and I'm just thinking, in the midst of all these diplomatic problems with staff, et cetera, did you have a chance to travel outside of Moscow, Saint Petersburg, the big cities, and get across that gigantic nation?

Ambassador Huntsman

I did, and I traveled from end to end and top to bottom and never ceased to be amazed by the beauty and the brilliance of the Russian people. I was captivated by Russian literature and history and music. I mean, I've heard Tchaikovsky for years from my daughter, who's a piano player, and I've read Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn in the past, but it takes on new meaning when you're actually there in the areas where they actually lived or may have suffered at one point. The country is just so magical in so many ways, and I really do miss it in deeply profound ways. The government, of course, is holding it back. It's holding back the aspirations and the power of its very people who, I think, are some of the smartest, most ingenious and creative people on the face of the earth.

There's so much in the way of human power that once unleashed... I think that's what gave the world a sense of optimism in the post-'91 period, for at least a part of the decade of the 1990s, is, wow. This is a country that no one was paying, could not pay any attention to under communism that now is freeing up its natural capacity, and people liked what they saw, and I think the Russian people liked the ability to engage with the outside world when it did last. There's a sense of serious suppression of the aspirations, the yearnings, and the talents of the Russian people, and I find that terribly unfortunate.

Jill Dougherty

Yeah. I remember one encounter that I had in a town that you might have gone to - it's right on the border of Russia and China - called Blagoveshchensk. It's like the river divides China and Russia. Talking to a Russian businessman, he said with kind of a big grin on his face, "Moscow is very far away." His reality was the workers on the other side of this river, from China, who would come over and do construction and not Moscow, which was thousands of miles away. I think that reminds me, you reminded me of that because he had a lot of entrepreneurial spirit. He was really a doer, but he seemed very frustrated because in order to do what he wanted to do, he literally had to import Chinese workers, which he didn't want to do. He wanted to use his own Russians. Please, go ahead.

Ambassador Huntsman

No, I was reflecting on your comments, and I was thinking about how porous that border has become between Russia and China. In fact, a natural marketplace has been created between China and Russia. People crossing the border, people trading. It's not regulated of course, so it's hard to know what passes the border, but, you know, in a state where people are going to be entrepreneurs, where they're going to build things, where they're going to want to trade, that activity is going to go on. You may as well harness it and use it for good and build it into a legitimate marketplace, because I would find corners of Russia where these markets had been

created, where borders had become porous, and people just started trading on their own, without any sense of direction from an overall economic development strategy.

Jill Dougherty

You know, in the beginning of our conversation, you were talking about when you arrived, and you were the ambassador from 2017 to 2019, so two years. Is there anything in the positive column on this? Do you feel that you accomplished something?

Ambassador Huntsman

Jill, that's a very good question, and I think about that a lot, and I also reflect back on a very difficult time in China. My answer is always, I'll let the diplomatic historians make sense of it because a lot of things that you do and a lot of the programs that are done are not necessarily apparent at that moment in time. That's just the nature of diplomacy. It's slow, it's incremental. You build and make decisions for the long term, but listen, for me, it was managing adversity. It was managing the downside risk in the relationship, and we kept lines of communication open at the highest levels of the Russian government. We protected our diplomats and all of those affiliated with the Embassy. We transitioned hundreds of people out who had catastrophic events befall them with the PNGs [persona non grata] that occurred, unprecedented in history.

So, if you look at all of that and you say, okay, it could have been worse. It could have been truly catastrophic on a number of fronts, but we kind of held the foundational framework together such that we could not only deal with the people side, the management side, the bilateral relationship side, but we were also able to get out and talk to people and engage in social media that, I know, impacted many people who otherwise wouldn't have had access to it. I was able to get around and see groups of Russians to give speeches, to get in different forms of media; that, I think, was important. But it was a difficult, difficult couple of years, and I'm not sure that we're going to see that again anytime soon just for a number of reasons, one event after another. But I'm proud of what we were able to do.

I'm particularly proud of the professional staff at Embassy Moscow and our consulates that survived, Yekaterinburg, of course, and Vladivostok. We had to close St. Pete's, which, of course, was a very historic property, and one that many Americans had experienced on their trips to Russia. The professional staff were just absolutely outstanding, and I know what a blow it was to them. For me, I knew my time would be up eventually. For them, they were in it for the long term as professionals. But we all pulled together as an embassy family and made the most of it, and we were able to get many of our professionals on their feet as Russia watchers in countries in the region, some of our best and brightest, and that gave me great joy, to see some of our great men and women who really are the best in the business. They were able to get through it all, rebalance, and find really important positions doing similar work on the periphery. So, that was good.

Jill Dougherty

Is there advice that you would give to future American ambassadors or diplomats dealing with Russia?

Ambassador Huntsman

We have to deal with Russia in circumstances that are less politically charged. So, having a long-term strategy is always a good thing. We don't do strategy very well as a country, and sometimes, when we have tried, the strategies are short-lived. We're up against countries like Russia and China, which I would consider to be the two great powers in the world today. They develop strategies, they stick to them. They've got very few people who are involved in developing and executing strategies vis-a-vis the bilateral relationship with the United States, and they're very good at it.

We, in turn, are very episodic and up and down and inconsistent, and, as it relates to both Russia and China, we need to bring to bear a sense of consistency. We need a better understanding of what our national interests are, and we need an overlay that allows us to articulate and put forward our traditional American values because, although they're not liked in Moscow and they're not liked in Beijing, I think they still represent the yearnings and the aspirations of so many people in both countries, and that is to have a greater say, a greater ability to participate in the political affairs of their countries, a greater respect for human rights.

So many more things that need to be part of our agenda, and oftentimes it's crowded out in the cacophony, the yelling and screaming that goes on based on the *politics* of the bilateral relationship. So, a strategy plus a level of strategic dialogue that we are committed to, even when times are tough.

What I used to reflect on and tell members of Congress and others is, even in the very difficult days of the Soviet Union, we were able to carry on meaningful dialogues, specifically, I would point out, in arms control where, now, the Biden administration has made, I think, the correct call to extend the New START agreement another few years, which is probably the most important issue we have between the United States and Russia.

So, a strategy and ability to connect, to carry on important, delicate but strategic discussions in a consistent way that keeps us at the table. We've been estranged for too long, and the very thought of doing what we did in the Soviet days is almost anathema. It's almost like you're a Russia apologist if you even make such a recommendation. But this is just simple diplomacy as it's been carried out for hundreds of years. You can't rely on technology and algorithms to solve your diplomatic problems; that takes people. There's a human element and a human dimension that relies on relationship building, understanding one another, and staying consistently at the table, even when you're not agreeing to a whole lot.

Jill Dougherty

That reminds me, and perhaps this is the last question. You're summing this up so well, the focus on diplomacy and the importance of sustained dialogue, and I actually found a quote from you. I'll read it. You said, "No set or restart with Russia is going to help, just a clear understanding of our interests and values and a practical framework for sustained dialogue."

I was thinking of a person whom you may know, and I had the luck and honor to meet, Harold Saunders, Hal Saunders, who was the Assistant Secretary of State who actually created a system for sustained dialogue, and part of that was not only talking but listening. So, I think a lot of us will take encouragement from your words about the process, and that we do not know always where it's going to lead, but in the midst of it, you have to do it.

Ambassador Huntsman

Hal Saunders was a legend, and several in his generation were mentors to me coming up. They understood diplomacy from the post-World War II period, how we rebuild the world, how we engage with our rivals and our adversaries, and it's traditional diplomacy as envisioned hundreds of years ago when diplomacy was created along with the advent of the nation state. It's no different today.

We sometimes let tweets and social media get in the way, and political speeches that are driven by emotion and passion stand in the way of our dialogues. But we need to remember that the work of diplomats is extremely important. If diplomacy fails, heaven forbid, war then becomes an option, and that should never be the case. You should never be in a situation where diplomacy has failed.

It means we have not been creative or strategic enough or engaged enough in our dialogues around issues that really need to be resolved. And shame on us, but we've gone way too many years without simple aspects of diplomatic engagement playing out in ways that... You don't need to agree on everything, you don't need to come up with sound bites and smiling photo ops in the aftermath. But you do need to stay consistently engaged for purposes of understanding one another and confidence building and having a broader understanding of where the relationship wants to go, and we, unfortunately, have failed at some of those basic elements.

Jill Dougherty

Well, Ambassador Jon Huntsman, thank you very much for reminding us of that. It was an inspiring talk, even though I think we began with a very difficult job that you had when you arrived in Moscow. But thank you very much for this interview.

Ambassador Huntsman

Thank you, Jill. Great pleasure to be with you, and keep up the good work.