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The Strange Putin-Kissinger Friendship

Marcel H. Van Herpen

A Kissinger-Putin friendship? The reader will rub his eyes. It is difficult to imagine a kind of secret understanding between Nixon's Secretary of State and the leader of the Kremlin. A world of difference seems to exist between America's leading geopolitical thinker and the former KGB agent, who rules Russia. However, when one takes a closer view of their relationship some interesting facts emerge: not only personal, but also political, and, possibly, even financial.

Let us first take a closer look at their personal relationship. In "First Person," a book with interviews published immediately after Putin's appointment to Acting President on December 31, 1999, Putin told about the strange kind of mutual understanding he developed with Kissinger in the beginning of the 1990s, when Kissinger came to Saint Petersburg to participate in the Kissinger-Sobchak Commission, set up to attract foreign investment. "Once I met him at the airport," told Putin, "we got into the car and went to the residence. On the way, he asked me where I was from and what I was doing. He was an inquisitive old fellow." Kissinger soon found out that Putin had worked for the KGB. Kissinger then said, reassuringly: "All decent people got their start in intelligence. I did, too." Putin continued:

“Then he said something that was completely unexpected and very interesting. “You know, I am very much criticized for the position I took regarding the USSR back then. I believed that the Soviet Union should not abandon Eastern Europe so quickly. We were changing the balance in the world very rapidly, and I thought it could lead to undesirable consequences. And now I’m being blamed for that position. People say, “See, the Soviets left, and everything’s normal. You thought it was impossible.” But I really did think it was impossible.” Then he thought a while and added, “Frankly to this day I don’t understand why Gorbachev did that.” I had never imagined I might hear something like that from the lips of Henry Kissinger. I told him what I thought, and I will repeat it to you right now: Kissinger was right. We would have avoided a lot of problems if the Soviets had not made such a hasty exit from Eastern Europe.”

In that car in Saint Petersburg we could witness the meeting of two minds: on the one hand the former secretary of state of Richard Nixon, who, as an admirer of Count Metternich, seemed to prefer the stability of a repressive and totalitarian empire to a rapid decolonization and democratic change, and, on the other hand, the former KGB agent, who regretted the loss of empire and would make it his life’s vocation to repair “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century.” The mutual admiration between Putin and Kissinger was still intact twenty years later, when, in February 2012, Putin, in an article in the *Moskovskie Novosti* wrote: “Not long ago I spoke with H. Kissinger. We meet him regularly. And I share completely this great professional’s thesis that in periods of international turbulence, a close and trusting collaboration between Moscow and Washington is required.”

Putin and Kissinger, indeed, met regularly – at least fifteen times. Once Putin was even invited for dinner at Kissinger’s home in New York. A “close and trusting collaboration” seemed in particular be established between the Kremlin and *Kissinger Associates*, Kissinger’s consulting firm. In July 2007 – one year before the Russian invasion of Georgia – Kissinger formed with former Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov a Russian-US working group to improve relations. This “private” initiative gathered for a whole day behind closed doors in Putin’s presidential residence near Moscow. There was no doubt who was the initiator. “Addressing the panel’s first meeting,” one could read in a press release, “Putin thanked its participants for their quick response to the idea to set up such a high-level group,

first aired during his April meeting with Kissinger and Primakov.” Apart from Kissinger, the American group consisted of former secretary of state George Schulz, former treasury secretary Robert Rubin, former senator Sam Nunn, Chevron CEO David O’Reilly, and Thomas Graham, head of the Russian department of Kissinger Associates.

In particular the role of Thomas Graham is interesting. In 2009 he was the author of the report *Resurgent Russia and U.S. Purposes*. This report was full of good advice for the new Obama administration. Graham started with an attack on Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. He criticized Saakashvili’s “vitriolic anti-Russian rhetoric” and mentioned “Georgia’s reckless military operation last August as one of the reasons for the new administration to “cease U.S. pressure for the near-term expansion of NATO.” Graham also advised the Obama administration to react positively to Medvedev’s proposal for a new European security architecture, adding, “If this ultimately leads to the subsuming of NATO into a larger structure over the long term, we should be prepared to accept that. America’s essential goal is not securing NATO’s long-term future as the central element of our engagement with Europe, no matter how valuable an instrument of U.S. policy in Europe NATO has been in the past.” Thomas Graham seemed not only to be ready to give the Kremlin a veto over NATO decisions, but was even prepared to sacrifice NATO for an illusory entente with the Kremlin bosses. It came as no surprise, then, when on the next page he declared himself to be in favor of “Finlandizing” Ukraine. The report could have been written by Vladislav Surkov, the Kremlin’s chief ideologist. The question, therefore, arose whether there were also financial interests at stake. On March 31, 2009, Dmitry Sidorov wrote on this in *Forbes*: “We also know that Kissinger’s consulting firm is believed to provide advice to the Kremlin.”

Kissinger is the ideal lobbyist for the Kremlin, because he abstains from asking annoying questions about democracy and human rights. In his book “On China” he writes: “Western concepts of human rights and individual liberties may not be directly translatable ... to a civilization for millennia ordered around different concepts.” This value relativism is highly appreciated by the Kremlin. After the rigged presidential elections of 2012, which led to huge demonstrations in Moscow, Kissinger defended Putin, saying that Putin was a “Russian patriot.” Putin returned the favor. On October 29, 2013, Kissinger received the title of Honorary Professor of the Diplomatic Academy of Russia. In his laudatory speech Putin

praised Kissinger for having been over the years “very generous with your time, to explain your thinking ... to me.” Also the annexation of the Crimea and the Russian aggression in Ukraine did not negatively impact the Kissinger-Putin friendship. In May 2014 Kissinger declared that “Putin was not Stalin,” and, instead of defending the sovereignty of Ukraine, he, once more, spoke out in favor of Ukraine’s “Finlandization.” Kissinger once famously said “to prefer stability over justice.” However, it could rather be that his cosyng up to the Kremlin promotes neither the former, nor the latter.

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