



## **Crisis in Russian-American Diplomacy: Boris Yeltsin, Bill Clinton, and the 1998 Bombing of Iraq**

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### **Abstract**

This article is an attempt to investigate the growing challenges in Russian-American diplomacy in the post-Soviet environment. To this end, the study focused on the crisis of Iraq and, more specifically, the US-British bombing of Iraq in 1998 as a source of tension in bilateral relations. In doing so, declassified communications between US President Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin were reviewed following a discussion of American and Russian foreign policy towards the Iraq crisis. The review of communications demonstrated that both leaders actively attempted to avoid further divergence by keeping friendly and consensus-building communications while insisting on their differing positions. The Yeltsin-Clinton correspondence also showed that they tried to avoid unilateral action and develop their strategies within international frameworks such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM), and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In this regard, Bill Clinton ostensibly sided with UNSCOM, whereas Boris Yeltsin supported the UNSC framework, where Russia could exert more influence. The study concluded that, despite these efforts, the US-British bombing of Iraq further alienated the Russian government and affected the post-Soviet world order. These conclusions are significant in that they demonstrate challenges to American diplomatic hegemony and show the earliest roots of divergence in the Russian-American presidential diplomacy.

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## Introduction

This article is an attempt to examine the impact of the 1998 Iraq crisis and the US-British bombing of Iraq on Russia-US relations. In doing so, the article will refer to declassified correspondence and telephone calls between Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin. By reviewing these documents, this study places the aforementioned crisis in the context of emerging disputes between the Russian Federation and the United States towards the end of the 20th century. It suggests that these relations were gravely tested in the post-Soviet era, which ultimately led to the coldness of strategic relations between the governments. The review of these documents can be significant in that they highlight the divergence between the United States and Russia with regard to the Iraq crisis and how it set the grounds for later developments.

With respect to the subject of this study, the choice of the 1998 bombing can be relevant in several ways. Soon after the bombing campaign, Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin arranged a telephone call during which Yeltsin reminded his American counterpart that in the aftermath of the military action, what was at stake “was not just the person of Saddam Hussein but also our relations with the US” (Helfont 2022). Before the air strikes, the media had quoted him as saying that bombing Iraq might even bring a “World War” (Specter 1998). Yeltsin’s remarks suggested the significance of the Iraq crisis as a factor in recalibrating Russian foreign policy. In fact, this event had significant implications and outcomes for Russia-US relations and global strategic relations. Firstly, it renewed the debate among different states about the legitimacy or practicality of military action in dealing with Iraq or other states that would violate the UN resolutions. Second, the subject was a significant case of military action against Iraq after the end of the Gulf War in 1991 and before the invasion of the country in 2003. In the United States, the military campaign and its preceding developments paved the way for further military action and perhaps removed some legal obstacles to such campaigns. Third, when considered in the context of communications between Clinton and the other heads of state, the case study demonstrates the importance of international institutions and UN frameworks. It may also serve as an example of their effectiveness or inefficiency in avoiding global escalations. Finally, the US-British bombing of Iraq further alienated the Russian government and challenged the American diplomatic hegemony in the post-Cold War environment. Regardless of its primary goals, this military action failed to resolve the issue of Iraq and its alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD) program.

One can note that, initially, Russia-US relations embarked on a different path following the dissolution of the USSR. On June 18, 1992, Boris Yeltsin delivered his address to the US Congress with symbolic words that assured the beginning of a new era for Russians and Americans. With words filled with optimism, Yeltsin praised the will of the Russian people and finished his speech in a way that may seem naïve and simplistic today:

Today, free and democratic Russia is extending its hand of friendship to the people of America. Acting on the will of the people of Russia, I am inviting you, and through you the people of the United States, to join us in partnership in the quest for freedom and justice in the 21st century. (Yeltsin 1992)

However, Yeltsin’s promises did not remove the vague landscape that the collapse of the Soviet Union had created for American foreign policy officials. In a similar way, the new landscape brought tremendous challenges to the newly established Russian Federation and its first democratically elected leader. These challenges included a wide range of economic, social, and political problems that initially led Boris Yeltsin’s government to expand relations with the West

and especially the United States (Donaldson 1999; Felkay 2002). On the home front, Yeltsin's government experimented with controversial economic reforms and promoted Russian nationalism after decades of Soviet rule over Russia's economy, politics, and social life.<sup>2</sup>

In another direction, following the imperatives of a seemingly unipolar world, the United States also committed itself to returning a democratic Russia to the world stage. However, these efforts that appeared in the form of financial assistance and loans often fell short of expectations and were below the minimum required to cover the country's communist-era debts and address the severe economic crises in its transition to capitalism. In the midst of such campaigns, the Clinton-Yeltsin contacts laid the foundations of a critical but unstable relationship between the two nations that, despite its promising beginnings, took a reverse course during the 1990s. Shortly after the fall of the Soviet Union, US foreign policy urgently sought a mechanism to promote political stability in Russia and curb the threats of nuclear proliferation in the former Soviet bloc. In what was controversially labelled an "American Eurasian geostrategy," Washington also endeavoured to exploit opportunities that appeared in these territories. Therefore, this era also demonstrated a myriad of passionate writings in support of an interventionist Eurasian strategy. A prominent example is Zbigniew Brzezinski's "The Grand Chessboard," which linked the US global supremacy to "how long and how effectively its preponderance on the Eurasian continent is sustained" (Brzezinski 1997, 17). A similar but more assertive advocacy of this primacy is found in Samuel P. Huntington's writing. In what seems to be a euphoric post-Soviet atmosphere, Huntington (1993) argued that the US influence is crucial "to the future of freedom, democracy, open economies and international order in the world" (83).

However, recent reviews of Russia-US relations in that period also emphasize common interests such as nuclear security, nuclear arms control, and counter-terrorism cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Thus, in 1993, President George H. W. Bush and Boris Yeltsin managed to finalize the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START II), the aim of which was to prevent the use of intercontinental ballistic missiles. In essence, it was a continuation of the work between the two Cold War superpowers. Here, the first sign of a clash appeared in earnest. Geopolitical tensions, global security crises and the US government's approach drew criticism from Moscow officials and created a gap in Russian-American diplomacy. In this respect, some scholars point to the failures of Boris Yeltsin's domestic reforms, which were based on Western models, as a factor in alienating the Russian elites from the West in general and the United States in particular (Donaldson 1999; Felkay 2002). Some also point to insufficient investment or economic support from the US government. For instance, key among such scholars is Strobe Talbott, the former deputy secretary of state in Clinton's administration. In his widely read memoir, *The Russia Hand*, Talbott (2007) praises the instrumental and friendly relations between Clinton and Yeltsin, arguing that these relations "either resolved or alleviated disputes over Russia's role in the post-Cold War world" (9). Nevertheless, he also questions the wisdom of Russia's rapid transition to a liberal capitalist economy, which was largely encouraged by Washington (Talbott 2007, 189–213). As the records show, the Clinton administration's criticism of Yeltsin's leadership and especially his handling of the First Chechen War (1994–1996) also led to some resentment. The Russians were also deeply troubled by security threats such as the enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in Eastern Europe, which, according to Boris Yeltsin, had no justification after the end of the Cold War. What complicated the dispute even further were NATO's air strikes against Yugoslavia in the context of

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<sup>2</sup> See Desai 1995, 2000 for more discussion.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, Orlova 2020 and Parker 2019.

the Kosovo War in 1999. These challenges eroded Russian-American foreign policy achievements. For instance, the Russian State Duma did not ratify the START II treaty until 2000, and Russia eventually withdrew from START II in 2002 due to the US withdrawal from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty of 1972 on June 13, 2002. In other areas, the relations suffered due to the growing conflict of interests around the world.

In sum, the countervailing priorities of the United States and the Russian Federation soon weakened the initial optimism invested in bilateral relations, even though, as will be discussed below, Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton continued their maneuvers to curb these tensions. Nevertheless, apart from the military tensions in the Balkans, a major twist in Russia-US relations had its roots in the Middle East. It grew from the conflicts between the US and Saddam Hussein's regime after the 1991 ceasefire agreement. In this respect, the current study is an attempt to examine some aspects of this difference in the historical context of the US military campaign and the 1998 bombing of Iraq. In what follows, the study will focus specifically on the conversations between Boris Yeltsin and Bill Clinton. However, first, it is important to discuss Russia's complex relations with Iraq and how they contradicted US interests in the region.

### **Iraq: A Bone of Contention in Russia-US Relations**

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation tried, where possible, to maintain the previous alliances that Moscow had developed during the Cold War. This policy became increasingly relevant from 1996 to 1998 with Yevgeny Primakov as the new Minister of Foreign Affairs.<sup>4</sup> Primakov replaced Andrei Kozyrev, who had faced criticism for failing to defend Russian interests, particularly with regard to the question of NATO expansion and critical developments in Iraq. Yeltsin's new foreign minister enjoyed a solid reputation among Soviet and Russian diplomats and was also well-known in academic circles as an Arabist and Middle East scholar. As a pragmatist, he supported Russian strategic autonomy, regional integration, particularly in the former Soviet bloc, and multilateralism with an emphasis on cooperation with China and India. The sum of these strategies was later regarded as the "Primakov doctrine" (DeLong 2020; Rumer 2019). As will be discussed later, another key but problematic aspect of this doctrine was non-intervention, which highlighted Russia's opposition to US military campaigns in the Middle East.

Historically, the Arab World was an area of friction in Soviet-US and later Russia-US relations. More specifically, Russia's long-standing relations with Saddam Hussein's regime, which were a legacy of Soviet foreign policy, became a bone of contention in the Kremlin and Washington interactions. Indeed, these relations and their ramifications drew the attention of many scholars throughout the 1990s (Freedman 2001; Nizamedden 1999; Rumer 2000; Shaffer 2001; Vassiliev 1993). These scholars debated the reasons why the Soviet officials had tried to form a strategic relationship with Iraq that was geographically (and sometimes politically) closer to the USSR compared to other Arab countries. Of course, these analyses were not without precedent. Writing in 1980, Francis Fukuyama discussed the relevance of factors such as Iraq's growing military and political influence in the region, its oil revenues, the consolidation of the Ba'ath Party and the need for Soviet weapons. He then concluded that Iraq was indeed "an ideal location for the expansion of Soviet influence" (Fukuyama 1980, 5). Fukuyama's research gave realistic prominence to the

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Simha 2015.

“considerable weakness” of Soviet influence in Iraq between 1968 and 1980, and Primakov’s firsthand account of such difficulties may corroborate this view (Primakov 2009, 301–324). With its energy and economic resources, Iraq remained an important sphere of influence in Russian foreign policy. Therefore, with the end of the Cold War, the Kremlin continued to support Baghdad while the Western governments adopted an increasingly aggressive approach to contain Saddam’s provocative ambitions.

The support for Iraq was sometimes coupled with Yeltsin’s direct opposition to US policies, especially the unilateral sanctions, which limited Russia’s economic ties with Baghdad. Historically, one may argue that Yeltsin had inherited a complex legacy in foreign policy in which Iraq was a problematic aspect. Early in the 1990s, his government openly supported the United States in its efforts to pressure the Iraqi regime. Nevertheless, foreign policy priorities and internal pressure from the parliament ultimately forced Yeltsin to revise his policy and, where possible, act independently of the United States regarding the crisis in Iraq (Zlobin 2004). Simply put, during this transition, post-Soviet Russia became aware of its fundamental differences with the western camp. This change was accompanied by explicit criticisms of the US’ occasional military actions in Iraq, even when these actions were retaliatory or seemed justified to western observers. However, as some scholars have noted, Russia’s relations with Iraq were subject to a more complex logic. For instance, in 1996, Yevgeny Primakov addressed the question of the Iraqi debt to the former Soviet Union, which came to seven billion USD. With regard to this logic, some political analysts have argued that the Kremlin saw this debt essentially as an instrument to influence the Iraqi regime (Zlobin 2004, 91). The economic necessities and the urgent need to support Russian businesses and companies, where Western and International Monetary Fund (IMF) aid seemed insufficient, encouraged Primakov to recalibrate the relations with the Cold War allies. From this point of view, the Russians thought that the US unilateral foreign policy and military actions were illegal, counterproductive, and dangerous. On this subject, Western media frequently quoted Yeltsin’s warning that “Clinton might run into a world war” (Williams 1998). In fact, the Kremlin and Washington dealt with a multitude of differences in the 1990s, but what is relevant here is the role of Iraq in intensifying the differences and particularly the case of US-British air strikes in 1998.

After the ceasefire agreement, which ended the Gulf War in 1991, the Bush and Clinton administrations orchestrated or supported destabilizing insurgencies against Saddam Hussein’s regime. This was a strategy that conflicted with Russia’s interests in Iraq. In addition to sanctions and embargoes, which the Kremlin intended to lift, the US government used every opportunity to undermine Saddam Hussein. CIA assessments showed that the Ba’athist regime was still a threat to American interests after the 1991 ceasefire (Ignatius 2003). Consequently, Washington resorted to covert actions that mainly included support for insurgents and sabotage operations in Iraq, even though they did not overthrow the Iraqi regime. These actions were finally made official on October 31, 1998. On this date, the President of the United States signed the congressional statement known as the “Iraq Liberation Act.” This Act, which later served as the rationale for the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, clearly stated that the US policy should “support efforts to remove the regime headed by Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Iraq Liberation Act of 1998.” Pub. L. No. 105–338, 112 Stat. 3178. <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/PLAW-105publ338/pdf/PLAW-105publ338.pdf>.

Thus, in 1998, regime change became Washington's official policy towards Iraq. During such developments, Yeltsin and his foreign minister, Yevgeny Primakov, were committed to preventing military tensions in the region. In his memoir, *Russia and the Arabs*, Primakov has allocated a considerable part of his writing to revisit "the Phenomenon that was Saddam Hussein" (Primakov 2009, 301–324). Drawing on his close familiarity with Saddam's personality, he recalled Russia's unsteady influence in Iraq and reached this conclusion:

But without meaning to belittle the influence that Russia had, it has to be said that Saddam continued to believe in his lucky star, in his own foresight, and ultimately in Allah, who would save him from harm. What sustained his belief was not blind hope, but his realpolitik certainty that, given the prevailing sentiment in the Arab world—and indeed the Americans' own interests—the United States had nothing to gain from bringing about his downfall. (Primakov 2009, 318)

Primakov has noted that Russia did everything in its power to keep Iraq from the brink. Nevertheless, in spite of some success in de-escalating the tensions in 1997 and 1998, Russia ultimately failed to avert the US-British attack against the Iraqi targets in December 1998. As a consequence, the military campaign deepened the differences in Moscow-Washington relations.

### **Diplomatic Crisis: The 1998 Bombing of Iraq**

The bombing of Iraq in December 1998 was a major source of disagreement between the presidents of Russia and the United States. Despite Moscow's efforts to prevent military action in Iraq, from December 16 to 19, the US and Britain carried out "Operation Desert Fox" to target sites related to Iraq's weapons programs. Bill Clinton justified these attacks by referring to Iraq's lack of compliance with UN resolutions and refusal to allow the UN inspectors to access targeted sites.

On December 16, Clinton explained his administration's objectives and rationale for striking military targets in Iraq. The main targets of bombings were nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons in Iraq. In a statement that other US government officials parroted later, Clinton claimed that the strikes were designed primarily to "degrade Saddam's capacity to develop and deliver weapons of mass destruction, and to degrade his ability to threaten his neighbors" (Clinton 1998a). To justify this military campaign, Clinton (1998) referred repeatedly to Iraq's refusal to cooperate with the United Nations Special Commission (UNSCOM) weapons inspectors. He asserted that the use of force in Iraq was the last option, which came inevitably following "Saddam's last act of defiance in late October" and claimed that this option was considered after "intensive diplomatic pressure on Iraq" failed to bring cooperation from Baghdad (Clinton 1998a). The speech, which served as a justification for the military strikes, was based on UNSCOM reports and emphasized Iraq's violation of its commitment. In fact, to support his claims, the president quoted the UNSCOM conclusions that "Iraq's conduct ensured that no progress was able to be made in the fields of disarmament" and "the commission is not able to conduct the work mandated to it by the Security Council with respect to Iraq's prohibited weapons program" (Clinton 1998). Additionally, Clinton reiterated the US government's official policy towards Iraq, which had been anticipated by the Iraq Liberation Act. In his speech, the US president indicated the administration's regime change policy:

The best way to end that threat once and for all is with a new Iraqi government—a government ready to live in peace with its neighbors, a government that respects the rights of its people. Bringing change in Baghdad will take time and effort. We will strengthen our engagement with

the full range of Iraqi opposition forces and work with them effectively and prudently. (Clinton 1998a)

As noted earlier, tensions between Iraq, the United States, and the UN Special Commission had begun in 1997, and there were concerns about an imminent attack. In one case, the US government went as far as authorizing operation “Desert Thunder,” which was ultimately averted by diplomatic efforts. In that particular case, apart from criticisms from the Russian government, the records show that there was also opposition from some Arab states such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). With concerns about the consequences of a possible military campaign, these states announced that their territorial facilities should not be used for such an operation. As for “Operation Desert Fox,” political analysts considered this four-day military campaign to be consistent with the US government’s efforts to topple Saddam Hussein’s regime. Additionally, Bill Clinton had already signed the Iraq Liberation Act, which could be used to legitimize the strikes.

On December 19, Bill Clinton announced the end of the operation. He pointed to its success and described the way forward in dealing with the Iraqi regime. While repeating the objective of this military action, which was “to degrade Saddam’s weapons of mass destruction program and related delivery systems,” he assured his US audience that the controversial operation had achieved this goal (Clinton 1998b). What was similar in both speeches was the determination of the United States to undermine and possibly overthrow the Iraqi government. In this regard, Clinton once again emphasized his administration’s consensus:

As long as Saddam remains in power he will remain a threat to his people, his region and the world. With our allies, we must pursue a strategy to contain him and to constrain his weapons of mass destruction program, while working towards the day Iraq has a government willing to live at peace with its people and with its neighbors. (Clinton 1998b)

The US President also elaborated on his administration’s strategy to curb Saddam Hussein’s weapons program. In principle, this strategy constituted the US policy towards Iraq until 2003, when the George W. Bush administration authorized the invasion of Iraq. In Bill Clinton’s speech, the elements constituting his strategy were the following:

- Maintaining a strong US military presence in the region and readiness to use this force again in Iraq
- Maintaining a no-fly zone in the northern and southern regions of Iraq near the Kuwaiti border
- Continuing the oil-for-food program and sanctions against Saddam’s regime
- Enforcing pressure for the return of UNSCOM and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to Iraq to pursue their mandates

However, the points mentioned in Clinton’s speech were contested internationally. To be understood, the bombing of Iraq can be placed in its historical context and then in the specific context of Russia-US relations. At the international level, the Russian Federation, along with China and France, had called for an end to the oil embargo against Iraq (Gellman 1998). These governments also criticized the UNSCOM mechanism, which was a key aspect of Bill Clinton’s discourse about Iraq. This special commission was formed in 1991 to handle the case of Iraq at the United Nations. However, the performance of this commission and particularly its Australian chairman, Richard Butler, became the target of criticism from Russia and China. In retrospect, Primakov noted the difficulties of working with the UN commission from Iraq’s standpoint:

In all fairness, it should be pointed out that while Richard Butler was head of UNSCOM—a time when the Iraqis were demanding that it should not be allowed to inspect Saddam's palaces or replace members of its team, and so on—the commission was not impartial and was acting outside its remit. (Primakov 2009, 318)

In this respect, the US government's military campaign did not enjoy the support which President Clinton had stressed in his remarks. On December 17, President Jiang Zemin of China sent a message to President Bill Clinton urging him to consider a "halt to military action against Iraq," noting that this attack would destabilize the Persian Gulf (MIIS 1998). Zemin's response was consistent with that of the Chinese Foreign Ministry, which had condemned the bombings "as a violation of the UN charter and the principles of international law" (MIIS 1998). In a more subtle manner, the French also criticized the US-British military campaign. On December 17, Hubert Vedrine, the French Foreign Minister, said that his government was "not convinced" that the military campaign would bring about tangible positive effects but concluded that the Iraqi president was to blame for the escalations (MIIS 1998). Similarly, some non-aligned governments such as India, Pakistan, South Africa, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia criticized the use of force and demanded a halt in military strikes to allow for diplomatic solutions (MIIS 1998). At the same time, the Kremlin's official reaction is of particular interest. In this connection, Boris Yeltsin asked the US and UK to "put an immediate end to the military actions, show restraint and prudence, and not allow a further escalation of the conflict" (MIIS 1998). Earlier, Yeltsin had asserted that the bombings violated the UN charter, and his position was in line with that of the new Foreign Minister, Igor Ivanov, who similarly insisted that the US air strikes must stop. One should note that Russia's disagreement with military action had started well before the US-British campaign. In the Security Council meeting of December 16, which was held specifically to deal with this issue, the representative of the Russian Federation expressed Russia's position clearly. The Security Council press release (SC/6611) summarizes this position:

The representative of the Russian Federation asked what right had the United States and the United Kingdom to justify the use of force to enforce Council resolutions or mandates; no one could act independently on behalf of the United Nations or assume the functions of a world policeman. While there were problems between Iraq and UNSCOM, the current crisis was artificially created. The Executive Chairman of UNSCOM, Richard Butler, had presented a distorted picture of what was taking place in the country. (UN 1998)

At that time, Russia's chief representative at the UN was Sergei Lavrov, who had worked since 1994 to present a more assertive Russian foreign policy. However, his anti-UNSCOM position was rooted in the consensus among the Russian diplomats, some of whom had been working closely with the Iraqis since the Soviet times. On the other hand, Richard Butler had been appointed chairman of the special commission a year earlier in 1997 and had already received poor assessments from the UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan. While Butler was convinced and often stated publicly that the Iraqi regime was in possession of undisclosed weapons of mass destruction (WMD), Saddam's top diplomat, Tarik Aziz, who had close relations with the Russians, accused the organization of spying for the United States. On the diplomatic front, however, Russia's choice was clear. In this sense, Russia was critical of the US-British military action from the outset and, along with China, regarded it as a violation of the UN charter. Accordingly, the Kremlin recalled its ambassador from Washington after the US president announced the decision to use force in Iraq. Even after the end of this campaign, Boris Yeltsin asserted that the air raids "crudely violated the UN charter" and would only worsen the weapons crisis in Iraq (CNS 1998). In this case, only

traditional allies supported the US-British bombing of Iraq in December 1998, which was perhaps an early sign of a challenge to the US hegemony in the late 1990s. As stated previously, the crisis was also a twist in Russia-US relations, which was set to persist in the next century.

### **Presidential Diplomacy: Clinton-Yeltsin Contacts**

Declassified documents containing Bill Clinton's telephone conversations and correspondence about the bombing of Iraq show that he made several attempts to gain international support and, if possible, align world leaders with his military campaign. According to these documents, Clinton contacted Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, French President Jacques Chirac, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, British Prime Minister Tony Blair, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, King Hussein of Jordan, and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan. In all these contacts, he reflected his administration's view of the unfolding crisis of Iraq within the context of regional issues, which concerned each of these governments. Of these cases, the contact between Bill Clinton and Boris Yeltsin was exceedingly important. This can be inferred from the transcripts of letters and telephone conversations that indicate serious differences between the two presidents. The transcripts also demonstrate that, despite their differences, Clinton and Yeltsin tried to express their positions in a conducive manner, often emphasizing the value of bilateral relations. Unlike Western and Middle Eastern governments, the Russian government traditionally had the benefit of closer relations with Baghdad and Moscow was potentially in a position to influence Baghdad's agenda. As stated earlier, though with some fluctuation, Iraq was considered an ally of the Soviet Union in the Middle East and, after the founding of the Russian Federation, Moscow continued to work with Saddam Hussein on matters of mutual interest. In what follows, considering the above discussions, the study will approach the text and transcript of Yeltsin-Clinton communications about the case study.

On November 23, 1998, Bill Clinton sent a message (through the US embassy in Moscow) to Boris Yeltsin about the situation in Iraq. In this letter, he emphasized the importance of international cooperation in forcing Iraq to comply with its obligations and cooperate with UN weapons inspectors. In doing so, he also claimed that Saddam Hussein was unreliable due to his previous actions and, using consensus-building language, insisted that "we must now concert our efforts to ensure Iraq fulfills its obligations" because, according to Clinton, "the coming weeks will provide a real test of Saddam's intentions" (NSC 1998, 29).<sup>6</sup> It seems that Clinton's message served to clarify the US position on gaining the support or acknowledgement of the Russian government and open the way for the use of military force in the event of Saddam's violation of UN obligations. To do so, as discussed previously, Clinton needed some support from Russia, as conducting operations unilaterally without international consensus was not a favourable option for Washington. A review of the records concerning Iraq shows the emphasis of the US government on UNSCOM and the IAEA as instruments to pressure the Ba'athist regime. On the other hand, the discourse of some other governments, including Russia and China, indicates skepticism about the role of these organizations. In this context, the US President acknowledged Boris Yeltsin's key role in exerting pressure on Baghdad:

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<sup>6</sup> This author has taken the quotations used in this part of the article from the Clinton Presidential Records used as an administrative marker by the William J. Clinton Presidential Library Staff. National Security Council and Records Management Office. 1998. "Declassified Documents Concerning Iraq." Clinton Digital Library. Accessed August 4, 2023. <https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/16192>.

You have played a very important role in your communications with Saddam. I hope you will send him a clear message about the importance of full disclosure and full compliance and the consequences if he does not. While I am ready to see if Saddam lives up to his word this time, the United States remains prepared to act if Saddam once again interferes with UNSCOM's ability to operate or refuse to disclose all information needed by UNSCOM and the IAEA. (NSC 1998, 29)

Boris Yeltsin's reply summarizes the Russian government's position regarding the Iraq crisis. In his reply, while referring to Russia's diplomatic efforts to soften Iraq's positions, Yeltsin sought a common framework to act:

I would like to reaffirm that we continue exerting heavy pressure on Baghdad to compel it to fulfill its obligations to fully restore cooperation with the UN. With respect to your letter, we have once again addressed the Iraqi leadership with an urgent request not to allow any backslides in the interaction with UNSCOM. (NSC 1998, 79)

However, being aware of the US intentions to intervene militarily, Yeltsin also emphasized that none of the parties should "overdramatize" the situation and that a structure should be made in the Security Council to monitor Iraq's weapons programs (NSC 1998, 79). Considering the records, Russia preferred non-intervention in handling these developments. In this sense, diplomatic records may suggest that Russia considered the Security Council holistically as a lever to prevent escalations and coordinate efforts in response to other international conflicts. What was similar in the Yeltsin-Clinton correspondence was the emphasis on maintaining Russia-US relations and a joint and collective effort to control Saddam's weapons program. However, despite Yeltsin's diplomatic efforts and his warnings against the use of force in Iraq, Operation Desert Fox ultimately brought the crisis to a climax. This divergence called for renewed efforts to maintain bilateral relations. Therefore, on December 30, 1998, Clinton and Yeltsin arranged a telephone conversation that focused predominantly on the US airstrikes and their impact on their two countries' relations. According to the documents, the purpose of this contact was to "set a framework for bilateral contacts that will get the relationship on track after the Iraq crisis" (NSC 1998, 36).

Prior to the telephone conversation, Clinton's advisers had briefed him on the important points to be made in that dialogue. Accordingly, these points were sustaining the relationship, agenda for 1999, the economy (which was then supervised in Russia by Primakov as prime minister), and, most importantly, the issue of Iraq, which involved more details (NSC 1998, 38). Specifically, Clinton was advised to clarify these points because they were important to both governments. Among other things, the president was asked to acknowledge that recent events had seriously tested and strained Russia-US relations. He was also to confirm that he had received Yeltsin's letter through Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov (who had held the role since September 11). According to the documents, the team of advisers had recommended that Clinton emphasize maintaining relations to "ensure that U.S. and Russia enter next century as partners" (NSC 1998, 38). The second point that Clinton needed to make was the agenda for 1999. In the conversation, the US president was to emphasize three key issues for 1999. These issues were "getting Russian economy back on track, stemming proliferation and strengthening arms control via START II and START III" (NSC 1998, 38). One should note that all of these actions had been delayed due to international disagreements, including the Iraq crisis. In this regard, the president was supposed to indicate the timing of the meetings between Russian and American officials. The third point was related to the Russian economy. To address this subject, which was particularly important to

Yeltsin, Clinton was advised to emphasize the US government's support for the "Russian economic reform program" in his telephone conversation. Finally, and more importantly, the fourth point was about the bombing of Iraq. Here, the president was to reassert that the air strikes were only conducted as a last resort after giving "Saddam every opportunity to keep his word on cooperation" (NSC 1998, 39).

In order to justify this attack, Clinton had been advised to assign the blame to Saddam and his lack of commitment to the obligations of the UN Security Council. Accordingly, it was recommended that Clinton insist that only Saddam was responsible for the military response of the US. This was partly to support UNSCOM and its chairman, Richard Butler, who had been criticized by the Russians. In the same document, in case Yeltsin said that "Butler has abused his authority and must be replaced," Clinton was advised to defend Butler and UNSCOM by adding that the accusations against Saddam were based on "unambiguous facts" (NSC 1998, 39–40). These behind-the-scenes recommendations, along with the points discussed openly in the media at that time, demonstrate that the administration regarded UNSCOM, headed by Butler, as a key player in the implementation of their strategy. Regarding the Iraqi crisis, Clinton was to acknowledge the deep differences between Russia and the United States and remind his Russian counterpart that the relations between the two nations were too important strategically to be overshadowed by Saddam Hussein's adventurism. In anticipation of Yeltsin's complaints that the US government had not tried hard enough to find a political solution or had not consulted with the Kremlin in advance, Clinton was advised to say two things. First, he needed to stress that the US had waited weeks before the decision to launch the airstrikes and, second, insist that secrecy was necessary to protect the US forces in the region and avoid giving Saddam the opportunity to "disperse his forces and equipment." Therefore, the US team had made a list of the points to be made in the telephone conversation. Additionally, they had anticipated Yeltsin's complaints and recommended the appropriate response to them (NSC 1998, 38–40).

In the telephone conversation recorded on December 30, Yeltsin indicated the implications of the US-British attack for the future of relations between Russia and the United States. In this regard, he asserted that what was at stake were indeed the relations with the US, as the impact of the bombings could go beyond Iraq and Saddam Hussein (NSC 1998, 72). Yeltsin's words suggest that, historically, the bombing of Iraq had presented yet another challenging turn in Russia-US diplomacy to such an extent that it could change the extent of bilateral relations. In the phone conversation, Yeltsin insisted on the same point that he had made in his message to Clinton. Once again, he put emphasis on finding a multilateral solution within the Security Council framework. In his talk, the Russian president stressed "unity of action" and "joint and agreed action" in the future. Since the Iraq crisis had pushed the US administration toward arbitrary measures, emphasizing joint action through the UN mechanisms was, in Yeltsin's view, the best way to avoid further unilateralism. The Russian president indicated that he attached particular importance to the quality of Russia-US cooperation, not least because he himself had tried hard to form constructive relations with Bill Clinton. Although by that time, Russia had begun to adopt a more assertive foreign policy, Yeltsin still saw cooperation with the United States as something necessary in the revival of the Russian economy and the return of Russia to the world stage. Consequently, Yeltsin indicated that Russia was willing to disregard this controversial act of the United States. Referring to his consultations with Primakov regarding the crisis in Iraq, he concluded that "we have to turn what has not been the best page in Russian-U.S. relationships" (NSC 1998, 73).

However, Yeltsin's talk went beyond the question of Iraq. It was important for the Kremlin to restore relations to a level where Russia-US economic and security cooperation could continue smoothly based on previous agreements. Yeltsin briefly mentioned the negotiations with the International Monetary Fund and the long-expected support from the US government. One should note that, at the same time, the close negotiations (from 1997 to 1999) between Primakov and Secretary of State Madeleine Albright served as a background to Yeltsin-Clinton communications. While the focus of these negotiations was often Russia's economic hardships, on many occasions, security issues and particularly the NATO issue overshadowed the negotiations. In this context, Yeltsin raised the question of "rapid transition from START II to START III." At that point, Russia-US strategic goals had been interrupted due to NATO enlargement, the Balkan crisis and the US military action in Iraq. Hence, Yeltsin and Primakov were not able to advance these security agreements as an anti-American atmosphere had formed in the Russian Parliament. In sum, Yeltsin's words were indicative of a crisis in bilateral relations that overshadowed his foreign policy achievements. Nevertheless, regarding START III, Yeltsin reassured Clinton that he had at least made the effort: "I, myself, and Primakov, did everything we could to assure prompt and early ratification of the agreement. You are fully aware of that. Regrettably, at this point in time, prospects for passing this agreement have deteriorated" (NSC 1998, 73).

This telephone conversation was recorded in late December as both men looked ahead to 1999. They wanted to leave a positive foreign policy legacy in the final year of the century. For this reason, Yeltsin ended his speech in the following way: "1999 will be a very important year in terms of the development of the Russian-U.S. relationship. In the foundation underneath that relationship, we must leave behind a very good inheritance."

Historically, Yeltsin's optimism may seem ironic and naïve. Precisely a year later, in December 1999, he announced his resignation six months early to improve the election chances of his chosen successor. Yeltsin left a mixed legacy in foreign policy, and his successor, Vladimir Putin, steered the Russian Federation towards a different direction both domestically and externally. However, on another level, Clinton's utterances were also worthy of attention. His points were based on the recommendations of the White House advisory team. Like Yeltsin, Clinton was aware of the significance of relations, and he therefore endorsed bilateral achievements. As mentioned above, Clinton addressed the question of Iraq, the agenda for 1999, and the Russian economy. Regarding the Iraq crisis, he reasserted that his administration took military action out of necessity and that he did not want this crisis to hamper bilateral relations. He reminded Yeltsin that in March, October, and November 1998, he had called off the attacks in the hope that the crisis could be resolved through diplomacy. Clinton also stated that the possibility of further military conflicts still existed due to the retaliatory acts that Iraq was showing against coalition aircraft in the no-fly zone (NSC 1998, 80). Turning to the agenda for 1999, he indicated that the US support for Russia's negotiations with the IMF depended on progress in the ratification of START II and the results of economic reforms that the Primakov government had promised. This subject was important because the Russian government felt an urgent need to attract foreign investment. In short, strengthening ties with the United States was of great value to Boris Yeltsin, even though he encountered pressure on the home front for being too close to the West. That being said, both men emphasized their resolve and initiative to overcome obstacles. In other words, the significance of Russia-US relations was the underlying theme of the Yeltsin-Clinton conversation. However, despite their efforts to advance friendly and conciliatory actions, the Iraq crisis dealt yet another

blow to these relations, with intermittent courses of cooperation and conflict that continued into the twenty-first century.

## **Conclusion**

The demise of the Soviet Union created many uncertainties and ushered in a new level of diplomacy and engagement. This unusual situation led to extensive diplomatic efforts to maintain old allies and strengthen relations with newly established governments in the 1990s. In such a framework, the current study approached the above-mentioned aspects of Russian-American presidential diplomacy in the post-Soviet world order. In June 1992, at the beginning of this trajectory, the president of a free and democratic Russia stood before the American lawmakers in Congress and invited all Americans to partnership and friendship that was meant to continue into the twenty-first century. Towards the end of this chastening trajectory, in December 1998, both Yeltsin and Clinton sought to maintain what had remained of their achievements.

In this case, the review of Yeltsin-Clinton contacts demonstrates that, while the Iraq crisis was yet another major setback in Russia-US relations, both presidents attempted to continue their cooperation with a sense of respect and transparency that reflected each side's national priorities. In other words, they both tried to arrange productive talks to maintain the relations which they had formed despite pressure and criticism from within. This was more relevant in the case of Yeltsin, who had grappled with a multitude of domestic challenges. The question of Iraq may also highlight Yeltsin's strategy to control the perceived unilateralism of the Clinton administration in favour of a multilateral structure. The emphasis that the Russians put on the UN Security Council was perhaps linked to their evolving foreign policy strategy at that time, one which gave prominence to multilateralism and non-intervention. Internationally, the Clinton administration employed the same mechanisms to legitimize the military campaign against Iraq. In this case, the Yeltsin-Clinton correspondence shows the importance of foreign investment, financial aid, and IMF support for Russia, which Clinton's advisers saw as an instrument to influence the Kremlin's policies. While the Russians could communicate their demands to the Iraqi regime directly, and often did at the request of Americans, Washington's main instrument was UNSCOM, which had attracted a great deal of criticism. On the other hand, Yeltsin's communications with Saddam had not brought the intended results, and this was indicative of the disappointment that both presidents felt with diplomacy. On a larger scale, the international reactions to the US-British air raids also demonstrated that the US hegemony was seriously challenged, but not in a way that Russia could exploit to resolve the problem of Iraq. In this way, the Iraq crisis of 1998 can be considered as one of the early signs of the next order to come. The records show that the United States only received support from its traditional allies, while a considerable number of governments came out against the use of military force. This being said, the above discussions reveal only one point of friction in Russia-US relations. This is particularly true when these relations are considered in the broad context of challenges which preceded or coincided with this case, including the question of NATO enlargement, the Balkan crisis, and the growing conflict of interest in Eastern Europe, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. In a narrower sense, what makes the December 1998 bombing of Iraq important is the fact that it was one of the last causes for direct presidential diplomacy, less than a year before Yeltsin's presidency came to an abrupt end.

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