

Exchange With Reporters Prior to Discussions With President Boris Yeltsin of Russia in Helsinki

March 21, 1997

Russia and NATO

Q. President Yeltsin, do you consider NATO a threat to Russia, or are you convinced otherwise by now?

President Yeltsin. Well, I'm not convinced otherwise.

President Clinton. We'll have a press conference later, guys.

Q. You guys always give us a surprise when you meet, Mr. President. Do you expect any surprises today?

President Yeltsin. Perhaps through the course of the discussions we may have some surprises. We won't have any surprises at the end of the discussions.

NOTE: The exchange began at 9:43 a.m. at Mantyniemi, the residence of President Martti Ahtisaari of Finland. President Yeltsin spoke in Russian, and his remarks were translated by an interpreter. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this exchange.

The President's News Conference With President Boris Yeltsin of Russia in Helsinki

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President Clinton. Please sit down, everyone. Don't make me all alone. *[Laughter]* Let me say that President Yeltsin and I will have opening statements, and then we'll begin alternating questions, first with a question from the Russian press and then the American press and then back and forth.

I would like to begin by thanking President Ahtisaari, Prime Minister Lipponen, all the people of Finland for their very gracious hospitality to President Yeltsin and to me and for the extremely constructive role that Finland plays in a new era for Europe.

This is my first meeting with President Yeltsin in each of our second terms, our 11th meeting overall. At each meeting we have strengthened our nations' relationship and laid a firmer foundation for peace and security, freedom and prosperity in the 21st century.

Here in Helsinki we have addressed three fundamental challenges: first, building an undivided, democratic, and peaceful Europe for the first time in history; second, continuing to lead the world away from the nuclear threat; and third, forging new ties of trade and investment that will help Russia to complete its remarkable transformation to a market economy and will bring greater prosperity to both our peoples.

A Europe undivided and democratic must be a secure Europe. NATO is the bedrock of Europe's security and the tie that binds the United States to that security. That is why the United States has led the way in adapting NATO to new missions, in opening its doors to new members, in strengthening its ties to nonmembers through the Partnership For Peace, in seeking to forge a strong, practical partnership between NATO and Russia. We are building a new NATO, just as the Russian people are building a new Russia. I am determined that Russia will become a respected partner with NATO in making the future for all of Europe peaceful and secure.

I reaffirmed that NATO enlargement in the Madrid summit will proceed, and President Yeltsin made it clear that he thinks it's a mistake. But we also have an important and, I believe, overriding agreement: We agreed that the relationship between the United States and Russia and the benefits of cooperation between NATO and Russia are too important to be jeopardized.

We didn't come here expecting to change each other's mind about our disagreement, but we both did come here hoping to find a way of shifting the accent from our disagreement