

The Kremlin Embankment, Moscow
(photo by Dmitry Azovtsev)

BY RONALD MEYER

ALEXANDER VERSHBOW

IN PROFILE

In April 2014, Alexander Vershbow (Russian Institute '76), deputy secretary general of NATO, delivered a speech on "A New Strategic Reality in Europe" to the twenty-first International Conference on Euro-Atlantic Security (Krakow, Poland) that opens with the statement, "For twenty years, the security of the Euro-Atlantic region has been based on the premise that we do not face an adversary to our east. This premise is now in doubt." Vershbow has devoted much of his distinguished career to the goal of building an inclusive, integrated European security system that not only put an end to Cold War divisions, including opening NATO to new members in Eastern Europe, but also provided a central role for a democratic Russia. As Vershbow points out, however, "Russia's recent actions against Ukraine have been a wake-up call for everyone in the Euro-Atlantic community. They follow a pattern of behavior that we already observed in Transnistria, South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The pattern is to influence, destabilize and even intervene in countries on Russia's borders, to prolong 'frozen' conflicts by supporting corrupt, separatist groups, and to thereby deny sovereign states the ability to choose their own security arrangements and to chart their own political destinies." Vershbow, an expert on issues related to missile defense and nuclear arms, notes in the same speech that even before the recent crisis, the scope of NATO-Russia cooperation had narrowed as "Moscow assumed an obstructionist, zero-sum stance on virtually all major

issues"—including missile defense cooperation, nonstrategic nuclear weapons, and military transparency.

Vershbow traces his expertise in arms control back to a graduate seminar at Columbia taught by Marshall Shulman, whom he characterizes as "one of the all-time great experts on Soviet foreign policy." At the time of Vershbow's tenure at the Russian Institute in the mid-1970s, the subject of arms control was relatively new—the first Strategic Arms Limitation Agreements (SALT) were signed in 1972, amid fears that advances in U.S. and Soviet technology would outpace the ability of negotiators to produce verifiable agreements to limit the nuclear arms race. In his paper for Shulman's class, Vershbow examined the emerging cruise missile, whose tiny size and versatility made it difficult to verify with satellite imagery. The paper, which argued for unilateral renunciation of the system in order to save the arms control process, appeared in *Foreign Affairs* in the summer of 1976, just before Vershbow joined the U.S. Foreign Service. The fledgling Carter administration did not adopt Vershbow's radical proposal, but the article did pave the way for him to work on nuclear arms issues in his first State Department assignment, which included several stints as an adviser to the SALT talks in Geneva (a rare experience for a first-tour officer) and facilitated a Moscow assignment for his second tour. Vershbow maintains that his political-military expertise helped prepare him for his many NATO postings, including U.S. ambassador to NATO (1998–

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Ambassador Vershbow and his wife Lisa attend the Pushkin Ball. Below, North Atlantic Treaty Organization countries highlighted in blue (Patrick Neil / CC-BY-SA-3.0).



2001), service on the START delegation, as well as his more recent assignment to the Department of Defense (2009–11), where he served as assistant secretary of defense for International Security Affairs.

Vershbow credits the expertise on Russia and Eastern Europe that he gained at Columbia for equipping him for the broader responsibilities he shouldered as director of Soviet Union affairs in the late 1980s, and as U.S. ambassador to Russia from 2001 to 2005. His interest in Russian affairs, however, dates from when he was in the tenth grade at the Browne and Nichols School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and opted for Russian over chemistry. (When he returned to his high school as U.S. ambassador to Russia in 2003 and delivered a serious lecture on U.S.-Russian relations, his twelve-year-old nephew, sitting in the audience, said that he had convinced him “to choose chemistry.”) With a 1969 summer language program in the USSR under his belt, Vershbow went on to major in Russian and East European studies at Yale, where he focused on language and history, and wrote his thesis on “The Party and Soviet Music” in the late Stalin period. The decision to pursue a career in diplomacy and public policy brought him to Columbia’s School of International and Public Affairs.

From his days at the Russian Institute, Vershbow remembers most vividly his “outstanding professors”—Marshall Shulman, Zbigniew Brzezinski, Seweryn Bialer, John Hazard, Edward Allworth—each of whom presented “a different slant on how to understand the USSR and the Soviet bloc, the influence of Russian history, and the role of ideology.” He learned then how the Soviet system, “while brutal and oppressive, was weaker and less monolithic than it ap-

peared.” Lessons from the Russian Institute stuck with Vershbow. Twenty-five years after he finished his studies, when he was State Department director of Soviet Union affairs and charged with “the unraveling of the USSR and the emergence of conflicts in hitherto unheard of places like Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Chechnya,” he was reminded of Allworth and his pioneering course on Soviet nationalities, which seemed a bit esoteric at the time. To quote Vershbow, “Some of the issues I learned about from Allworth are with us today, including the fate of the Crimean Tatars.”

With more than thirty years in the Foreign Service and three major ambassadorships (Russia, NATO, Republic of Korea), Vershbow candidly admits that he did not pass the Service’s exam on his first try while a Columbia graduate student. His advice to prospective candidates is “take the Foreign Service exam as many times as necessary till you get in!” The Service, according to Vershbow, is looking for both generalists and specialists, but he recommends “developing a particular regional expertise in order to get a leg up on your peers, but branch out a bit once you’re in the Service.”

Vershbow did indeed “branch out”: after his post in Moscow, he took on the ambassadorship in Seoul. Even though he had no experience in Asian affairs, there were several connections to his previous work: for example, the Korean peninsula is the last front in the Cold War, with North Korea posing a nuclear and missile threat to the region, as well as a human rights challenge; the U.S.–Republic of Korea military alliance is almost as important to stability in Asia as NATO is in Europe; and the experience he gained in Moscow working on trade issues equipped him to play a major role in the negotiation of the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement. Moreover, the assignment allowed Vershbow and his wife Lisa to savor the contrasts of Korea’s ancient traditions and today’s high-tech culture and experience the “ambitious, brash but wonderful people” in one of the “most impressive countries, both economically and culturally.”

In addition to the diplomatic contributions made during his three ambassadorships, Vershbow proudly points to his work as a cultural ambassador—hosting concerts and art exhibitions (with the help of his wife, a professional artist). And he has personally contributed in his own small way through frequent performances as a rock-and-roll drummer with Russian and Korean bands, and as a member of Coalition of the Willing, “with other national security wonks.”

Vershbow retired from the Foreign Service in 2008, but this was not the end of public service. Former colleagues recommended him to the Obama administration, and he was offered the post of assistant secretary of defense for International Security Affairs (ISA), part of the (mostly civilian) Office of the Secretary of Defense. ISA has been dubbed the Pentagon’s “mini State Department” and has been headed by senior diplomats in the past, so the assignment was not as much of a culture shock as it might seem. The ISA’s focus on security policy toward Europe, Russia, the Middle East, and Africa proved to be a challenging portfolio indeed. The assignment, Vershbow says, gave him greater understanding of the military as the U.S. wound down the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and an opportunity to renew his engagement in NATO and Russia policy, including the “reset,” NATO’s new Strategic Concept, and the operation to protect civilians in Libya.

Vershbow has received numerous awards for his service, including the

Department of Defense’s Distinguished Civil Service Medal (2012) and the State Department’s Cordell Hull Award for Economic Achievement for his contributions to negotiations on the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (2007). He singles out, however, for particular mention the Anatoly Sharansky Freedom Award (2009), for his work in freeing the hundreds of “refuseniks” denied the right to emigrate from the USSR; the American Bar Association’s Ambassador’s Award (2004), for his promotion of democracy and outspoken criticism of Putin’s rollback of media freedom and civil society; and the Department of Defense Joseph Kruzel Award (1997), presented to Vershbow when he was at the National Security Council, named after one of three close colleagues who were killed in Bosnia at the start of the 1995 diplomatic initiative that led to the Dayton Peace Accords.

Vershbow’s experience in the Foreign Service and Department of Defense seems to have been ideal preparation for his work today as NATO deputy secretary general, since he arrived with an understanding of of the issues, the culture and working methods of NATO, and the complexities of taking all decisions by consensus. “I’ve also acquired a lot of experience, at NATO and in Washington, dealing with military strategy, defense capabilities, and intelligence—all part of my portfolio as deputy secretary general,” he said. At the same time, firsthand experience dealing with Putin’s Russia as ambassador from 2001 to

2005 has helped him to enable colleagues to better understand the challenges posed by the current crisis in Ukraine. Moreover, as NATO expands its partnerships to countries in the Middle East, North Africa, and the Asia-Pacific region, Vershbow’s work at the Pentagon, which had a major Middle East component, and as ambassador to South Korea has given him the necessary global perspective. It is as if all the different threads of Vershbow’s distinguished professional career have been drawn together as deputy secretary general of NATO.

Right now all eyes are on Russia and Ukraine. NATO, Vershbow states, will continue to engage in dialogue with Moscow in the NATO-Russia Council but will have no choice but to treat Russia as an adversary rather than a partner until it de-escalates the crisis and abandons its efforts to restore hegemony over its neighbors. NATO is redoubling its efforts to support Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, and other former Soviet states—both politically and through assistance to their defense sectors—to uphold the principle that all states should have the freedom to choose their security relationships. In Vershbow’s opinion, NATO will not be the main player—the bigger challenge is for the United States and the European Union to come up with an effective strategy to help these countries politically and economically. □



From left to right: Vershbow and President Putin (© Presidential Press and Information Office / www.kremlin.ru / CC-BY-SA-3.0); Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel, NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen, and Vershbow; Vershbow delivers farewell speech at the ambassador’s Moscow residence.