

This is AS IT IS! I'm Katy Weaver.

On the show today ... We talk about the debate in the United States about targeted killings of American terrorism suspects overseas. The Obama administration is defending its policy after the release of a document that supports such attacks.

We also explore relations, past, present and future, between the United States and Russia. VOA's Andre de Nesnera spoke about the issue with some former American officials. He answers some questions for us.

Three former United States officials recently discussed relations between America and Russia with VOA reporter André de Nesnera. Kelly Jean Kelly has Andre's report from Washington.

During President Obama's first administration, efforts to change America's relations with Russia produced important results. There was a major arms control treaty to reduce the number of long-range nuclear weapons.

In another example of cooperation, Russia

voted at the United Nations for stronger restrictions on Iran over its suspected nuclear weapons program. That policy had long been supported by the United States and other western nations, but resisted by Russia.

William Cohen served as defense secretary for President Clinton. He says the international community must continue to pressure the Iranians to give up their nuclear weapons plans.

“Otherwise we are going to continue to see the kind of instability in the region and questions about whether or not there will be any kind of military action in the future.”

Experts say another sign of improved relations includes military cooperation. Russia decided to let American forces move through the country as they travel in and out of Afghanistan and also provided availability to a Russian military base.

Former United States National Security Adviser Brent Scowcroft served in the administration of two presidents. He says Russia and the United States are no longer enemies, as they were during the Cold War.

“If you look around the world, we don’t have areas of inevitable confrontation and conflict either with the Russians or with the Chinese. And we have to try to take advantage of that.”

Russia and the United States remain divided on several issues, including the crisis in Syria. The Obama Administration has called for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to resign. But Russia has objected to a change in leadership.

Another disagreement concerns the Obama Administration’s plan to deploy a missile defense in Europe. And Russian President Vladimir Putin has been accused of repressing civil society. Critics say the Obama Administration has not condemned this strongly enough. One of those critics is John Bolton, former United States ambassador to the United Nations in the administration of George W. Bush.

"It's a measure of Putin's confidence that he

can basically act without fear of retaliation from the United States. That has helped embolden him to crack down: crack down on political dissents, crack down in the economic sphere, really trying to establish authority - not in a communist sort of way, but in the traditional fashion of a very, very strong central government."

It will be interesting to see if during his second term in office, President Obama spends as much time on relations with Russia as he did during his first term. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

Andre de Nesnera agreed to join us in the studio to answer some more questions.

"Hello, Andre."

"Hi Caty."

"So you talked to John Bolton and he said the Obama administration isn't doing enough to affect President Putin's crackdown on civil liberties, free expression, political dissent. And I was wondering if you could comment on what the Obama administration is doing. What steps it is taking."

"Now one has to remember that John Bolton is from the other side the political spectrum being a Republican former Ambassador to the United Nations. He has a stake, if you will, in criticizing the Obama administration."

"But having said that, I've been following the Soviet Union and Russia for many, many years now, and when I compare the way the US is handling the whole issue of human rights, now and then, there is a difference. The big difference is that when the Soviet Union was part of the global world, at every step of the way, whether there were negotiations between the United States and the Soviet Union on other issues, human rights always came up. The United States always brought up human rights."

"And it seems that now that Russia is a democratic, or moving towards a democratic government, there is less of that. Remember, we are having a new secretary of state, John Kerry, who just took over a few days ago and he has stated that human rights will be an important part of going forward in US and Russian relations. The Russians will always say you are interfering in internal affairs, but the United States, I think, will be a stronger advocate for human rights."

"So John Kerry may change the approach?"

"May change the approach or may suggest to the president to change the approach."

"Well, thank you very much."

" My pleasure."

You are listening to AS IT IS.

The Obama administration is defending its policy of targeted attacks on Americans overseas suspected of terrorist involvement. The defense comes after the release of a Justice Department memo. As we hear from Steve Ember, the document justifies the attacks as part of America's war on terrorism.

Attorney General Eric Holder defended the policy in a meeting with reporters earlier this week.

"(Our) primary concern is to keep the American people safe, but to do so in a way that is consistent with our laws and consistent with our values."

But the appearance of the document has raised concerns about the policy in Congress. Among those concerned about the administration's justification is Congressman Jim Moran, a member of the president's party.

"I think we have come right up to the edge of a serious threat to Americans' civil liberties. What troubles me is that there is no judicial review."

Legal experts say the Justice Department memo suggests a wider definition of an imminent terrorist threat. Jeffrey Rosen teaches law at George Washington University.

“One of the most troubling aspects of the Obama administration’s legal analysis is its vast expansion of the idea of what kind of imminent threat can justify a targeted assassination.”

Concerns about targeted killings grew after a drone strike in Yemen in September 2011. That attack killed two Americans whom officials said were involved in terrorist activities.

Presidential spokesman Jay Carney says the use of drone aircraft to target American terrorism suspects is legal, ethical and wise. He notes that Congress has approved of the war against al-Qaida. He says it is being carried out in a way consistent with the Constitution.

I’m Steve Ember.

And that’s AS IT IS for today.

I’m Caty Weaver.



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