When members of the Aspen Strategy Group assembled this past August at Aspen Meadows, we returned to a familiar if troubling topic—America’s “long, twilight struggle,” as President Kennedy so memorably called it, with the Kremlin.

During four summer days of debate and discussion, our co-chairs, former National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft and Harvard Professor Joe Nye, led us through an in-depth, spirited, and very frank conference on how the Obama administration should cope with Russian President Vladimir Putin’s annexation of Crimea and destabilization of Eastern Ukraine.

Around the table was an extraordinarily interesting collection of Republicans, Democrats, and independents. The largely American group spent our time in meetings, over lunch and dinner, and on the hiking trails in pursuit of one overarching question: What are the vital American interests at stake with Moscow, and how can we best defend and advance them?

Brookings President and long-time Russia expert Strobe Talbott opened with a penetrating and insightful Ernest May Memorial Lecture on the roots of Russian policy under Putin. Russia watchers, such as Georgetown’s Angela Stent, provided insights into Putin’s mind-set and worldview. Current Assistant Secretary of State Victoria Nuland presented the Obama administration’s policies and perspectives. Harvard’s Meghan O’Sullivan and former World Bank President Bob Zoellick delved into the energy and economic consequences of a new time of tension with Moscow. Former Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd offered insights on Russia’s growing partnership with China. The United Kingdom’s Shadow Foreign Secretary Douglas Alexander described European attitudes in a new era of competition with Russia. Senator Dianne Feinstein hosted the group for dinner and lent her long congressional experience to all these questions.

We also benefited from the unique experience of former Secretaries of State Condoleezza Rice and Madeleine Albright and former Secretary of Defense Bob Gates. In our only public forum at Aspen, I interviewed the three before an overflow audience in the Greenwald Pavilion about the extraordinary challenges the United States faces from Russia, the Middle East crises, and China. Behind closed doors, we had the benefit of their advice on how to cope with Putin and his “back to the future” outlook.

It is safe to say that all of us emerged from this year’s discussions with a palpable sense of just how complex these challenges will be for the United States and its NATO allies. Putin’s aggression toward Ukraine is, without doubt, the most serious crisis in Europe since the end of the Cold War. Having won a democratic peace in Europe a quarter-century ago with the collapse of the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact and the achievement of a unified Germany, dividing lines are once again reappearing to separate parts of Eastern Europe—Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia—from the West. I came away from the conference with the view that President Obama and
that the group would be resolutely nonpartisan. They set in place a framework of private, off-the-record discussions to which we still adhere today. We believe this is a key reason for our success and why we continue to attract to Aspen the most senior former government officials from both parties as well as top journalists, businesspeople, and academics.

During its first years, the Strategy Group focused principally on defense strategy, arms control, and the US-Soviet debate at the height of the Cold War. After the Soviet Union and Warsaw Pact disintegrated, the Strategy Group took on a more global focus, looking, for instance, at the lessons of the 1991 Gulf War. We refocused on establishing close relations with a newly independent Russia in 1993 and again in 1996. In that year, the Strategy Group launched a five-year project known as the US-Russia Dialogue to promote an opportunity for Americans to sit down regularly with Russian counterparts and to take on the toughest issues that separate the two countries.

This type of “Track Two” dialogue is often most valuable when governments find it difficult to have honest and open conversations with each other. Finding a way to establish more direct personal contacts is one of the objectives. That occurred in June 2000, when American participants met for the first time a little-known Russian official with a seemingly innocuous title—deputy head of the presidential administration in Moscow. That man was Dmitry Medvedev, who later became Russian president and who, today, serves as Putin’s prime minister.

We would like to think that many of our members have also found the Aspen Strategy Group to be a training ground for leadership positions in the US government. Ash Carter and Michele Flournoy, who would later both serve as under secretary leadership positions in the US government. Ash Carter and Michele Flournoy, who would later both serve as under secretary

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of defense for policy, were young members of the group when we examined Russia policy in the 1990s. Steve Hadley, President George W. Bush’s national security advisor, and Condoleezza Rice, who went on to become secretary of state, both participated in Aspen Strategy Group meetings as far back as the 1980s. And we have always benefited from the participation of members of Congress, from former Senators Richard Lugar and Sam Nunn to currently serving members Senator Jack Reed and Senator Feinstein. Many of these same people were around the table with us this summer as we discussed the latest challenges with Russia.

Part of our mission is to identify young leaders who will play a role in the senior levels of our government a decade or two hence and to introduce them to our nonpartisan proceedings. We will publish a book in November on this summer’s conference on Russia. We hope it will be of use to students, citizens, and policymakers alike for how the United States should work to shape America’s complicated relationship with Russia in the years ahead.

As the Aspen Strategy Group reflects on the last thirty years, we are more convinced than ever that it is our nonpartisanship that makes us unique and that is so badly needed in our national discourse, particularly in Washington. That is the mission we look forward to continuing for many years into the future.

Nicholas Burns is director of the Aspen Strategy Group and professor at Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government. aspeninstitute.org/asg