

50 Years Later, U.S.-Moscow Hotline Still Relevant

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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HAGERSTOWN, Maryland — The Washington-Moscow Hotline is not just a Cold War relic. It's a system for top-level crisis communications that remains a useful tool for U.S. and Russian leaders at odds over their relations with Syria and Iran, experts say, as U.S. officials mark the 50th anniversary of the hotline's first transmitted test message.

The next crisis could be just around the corner, said Roald Sagdeev, a former director of the Soviet space exploration program and now a professor of physics at the University of Maryland.

"It's very important to make sure we can keep this, especially at the time of what's happening in Syria," he said Wednesday.

Sagdeev is among Thursday's scheduled speakers at Fort Detrick, a military installation where the Army maintains a satellite link for the hotline.

Despite popular myth and movie lore, the U.S. president does not use a red phone to talk with his Russian counterpart. In fact, the connection established in 1963 was for written communications only. A voice component was added decades later as the system evolved from an undersea telegraph cable to today's exchange of data by both satellite and fiber optics.

The link was set up after the 1962 Cuban missile crisis to avert the accidental outbreak of war. It went live Aug. 30, 1963 with the U.S.-generated message, "The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog's back 1234567890."

Presidents had used the text-only hotline more than 15 times by 1990, according to Fort Detrick's spokesman at the time, Norman Covert.

Starting with President George H.W. Bush in the 1990s, telephone calls have replaced written messages as the preferred mode of communication between the nations' leaders, said Michael Bohn, a former White House Situation Room manager and author of "Presidents in Crisis: Tough Decisions from Truman to Obama." He said that when the link was created, written messages were seen as a safer way of expressing oneself.

"In a tough situation, you have to be careful what you say. The process of sitting down and writing it out clears your head a little bit and makes you slow down a little bit and think twice," Bohn said.

President Barack Obama now speaks by phone with President Vladimir Putin. They spoke as recently as March, when Obama phoned Putin to welcome Russian cooperation on international efforts to confront Iran's nuclear ambitions.

"You know, 50 years ago was a long time ago, and the abilities to communicate — it just wasn't as easy as it is today," said James Goldgeier, dean of the American University School of International Service. "We just take it for granted now that we can text and we can Skype and we can communicate immediately with anyone over a variety of different mechanisms, and even that we can see the people we communicate with."

Craig Bouma at Fort Detrick manages the twin satellite dishes and a staff of 16 civilian Army employees: eight technicians and eight linguists who work around the clock. The station also handles secure communication lines for the Defense Department and the State Department, Bouma said.

Bouma said the workers have daily interaction with their Russian counterparts in written exchanges that sometimes reveal cultural differences.

"The Russians express themselves in very flowery text: 'Dear esteemed colleague, greetings. Welcome to the shift,'" Bouma said.

Bouma would not say if the system could also carry video, citing national security concerns.

Goldgeier said video capability should be added if it does not already exist.

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