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President Clinton and Boris Yeltsin embraced before their meeting.

Clinton, Yeltsin Meet, Agree to Mend Fences

Leaders pledge to reopen nuclear arms talks

By Bob Deans
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COLOGNE — Before heading for a two-day swing through the war-torn Balkans, President Clinton agreed with Russian President Boris Yeltsin yesterday to rekindle their nations' long-stalled efforts to reduce their nuclear arsenals.

The two men met during a day of personal diplomacy that wound up the annual summit of the leaders of the Group of Eight industrial powers. They pledged to mend U.S.-Russia relations — worn threadbare by disagreements over Kosovo.

"It was a meeting of renewal," said Sandy Berger, the White House national security adviser. "The two countries are back in business."

Clinton travels today to the former Yugoslav republic of Slovenia, to showcase democratic and economic reforms in that tiny Balkan state and to spotlight plans for huge foreign aid to help rejuvenate a region reeling from nearly a decade of war.

Tomorrow, he is scheduled to visit Aviano Air Base in Italy to address

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U.S. pilots and air crews that participated in the NATO air campaign and to make a hop across the Adriatic to visit refugee camps in Macedonia, along its border with Kosovo.

On a day when the last of Serbia's armed forces pulled out of Kosovo, Yeltsin invited Clinton to Moscow and agreed to reopen a Nixon-era treaty that limits missile defense systems. The offer satisfies a months-old Clinton request.

"Now that the fighting is over, we need to make friends again," Yeltsin told reporters as he arrived to attend the G-8 summit and to meet separately with Clinton. "This is the most important thing."

Clinton reciprocated by consenting to reopen talks on the START III treaty, a potential road map to the next generation of nuclear weapons cuts.

Yeltsin surprised Clinton with an unexpected gift: a thick report, in Russian, on Soviet-era intelligence reports on former President John F. Kennedy and his 1963 assassination.

Clinton beamed as the two leaders sat across from each other at a rectangular table, aides at their sides, and said, "You know, this is the 17th meeting that we've had."

As Yeltsin urged that a high-level U.S.-Russia commission be revived, after three months of Kosovo-related dormancy, Clinton nodded enthusiastically.

Clinton told Yeltsin that the Kosovo conflict had sorely tested U.S.-Russian ties and that the relationship "survived the test," said Berger, who called the hourlong session "one of the best," ever between the two leaders.

Yeltsin — who has battled heart trouble, a bleeding ulcer and nervous exhaustion in the past year — clung tightly to his wife's hand as he made his descent from his plane yesterday and stumbled slightly as

he reached the bottom. He walked stiffly most of the day and seemed to have trouble hearing questions from reporters.

Clinton, however, defended the Russian leader's performance, telling CNN: "He was strong, forceful and looking toward the future. He was clear, concise and direct and strong."

Yeltsin did appear in fine spirits. He grinned broadly and shook hands with gusto — even swinging his arm backward over his shoulder in an awkward but playful handclasp with Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien.

Clinton and Yeltsin met following the adjournment of the annual summit of leaders from the G-8 countries. Besides the United States and Russia, the group includes Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy and Japan.

The U.S.-Russia thaw has not completely melted months of contention over NATO's 78-day air war against the Serbs. Moscow bitterly opposed the military strikes by an alliance formed half a century ago to defend Western Europe against the former Soviet Union.

"Kosovo has left some scars," Berger said, "presumably on both sides."

Clinton and Yeltsin, however, deliberately avoided talk of the Kosovo disputes, including Russia's precipitous troop deployment to the airport at the provincial capital of Pristina in advance of NATO peacekeepers. That incident threatened to pit Russian forces against NATO's and raised still unanswered questions about Yeltsin's control over his military.

"It simply would have diverted this meeting into a rehash of recriminations on both sides," said Berger. "The president was determined . . . to focus on rebuilding the relationship."

The meeting appeared to have broken the ice on what many U.S. analysts regard as the single most

critical area of the relationship: the reduction and safeguarding of Russia's nuclear arsenal. How far the thaw goes toward bringing about actual change, however, remains dependent upon domestic politics.

Yeltsin agreed to reopen the Anti-Ballistic Missile, or ABM treaty, originally negotiated by President Richard Nixon. The treaty, as later amended, permits each country to have only one site, with no more than 100 launchers, for missiles capable of knocking down attack rockets from the sky.

The pact flies in the face of a plan making its way through Congress for the United States to build a broad-based anti-missile defense system, which could deploy thousands of weapons from sites around the country for protection against incoming missiles.

Clinton and Congress are looking toward developing the details of such a system by next June.

For his part, Clinton agreed to move forward with working-level talks over START III (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) before the end of the summer. But the White House was vague on the import of the talks.

Berger said decisive negotiations on the treaty would remain on hold until Russia's legislature ratifies the START II treaty. Later, though, Clinton said he and Yeltsin expected to engage in START III negotiations before the end of the year, "even as we work to get START II ratified."

That appeared to raise the prospect that the next treaty could be prepared, if not formalized, before Duma ratification of START II.

Signed by the Bush administration just two weeks before Clinton took office, START II was ratified by the Senate in 1996.

Three years later, the Russian Duma has yet to ratify the treaty, which some Russians believe would cost the country money while reducing its security.
