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The Outlook For Russian Foreign Policy:

Great Power Restoration

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Conclusions

- Moscow's erratic attempts to defend Russia's "vital interests"--while still clinging to the goal of global integration--have not worked. Even reform-minded politicians and officials in Moscow question whether the United States will ever allow Russia a place in the international community.
- The perceived failure of Moscow's quest for global integration, coupled with the ongoing shift in Russian politics to the nationalist and conservative end of the political spectrum, is increasing the appeal of a clear-cut alternative: Great Power restoration.
- Great Power restorationists--including retired General Aleksander Lebed's Congress of Russian Communities, the Communist Party, and various "national patriotic" groups like Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's LDP--have never been reconciled to Russia's loss of Great Power status. Although most do not harbor hopes of regaining the military superpower status of the USSR, Great Power restorationists see America's emergence as the single superpower as destabilizing and want Russia to serve as a counterweight.
- Great Power restorationists see regional integration--consolidating Moscow's domination of other Soviet successor states--as a basic step toward rebuilding Great Power status and carving out an international role for Moscow based on Russian strength, not weakness.
- Even if a conservative sweep in the December parliamentary elections is averted and Boris Yeltsin manages to hold onto the presidency after the presidential elections currently scheduled for next June, Moscow will likely adopt some elements of the Great Power approach. We can therefore expect Moscow to increase its efforts at some sort of regional integration even if it means antagonizing the major international powers.

Yeltsin's Initial Foreign Policy

Russia's initial foreign policy--most closely associated with Foreign Minister Andrey Kozyrev--viewed foreign policy primarily as an extension of radical economic reform. The main goal of Kremlin foreign policy was full integration into existing Western international organizations--both financial and defense.

A key assumption undergirding this approach was that the only way a weakened Russia could integrate into the international community was through close cooperation with the U.S. and other Western powers.

Indeed, Moscow harbored strong hopes that the West would reward Russia for withdrawing from Eastern Europe and repudiating Cold War Soviet aggression, by welcoming Russia into the international community and footing the bill for Russian economic reform. This initial policy approach also involved accepting the other Soviet successor states as equal partners, resolving differences with them through diplomacy, and disengaging from them militarily.

By late-1992, however, it was clear that the initial Kozyrev strategy--relying on the United States to help Russia integrate into the global community and transition to a democracy and market economy--was running into trouble. Disengaging militarily from the other Soviet successor states proved difficult. Many of these states proved to be little more than contiguous pieces of real estate racked by ethnic strife and clan warfare. Russia repeatedly found itself intervening militarily, sometimes (as in the case of Tajikistan) at the request of an embattled host government.

Relations with the United States were also disappointing. The hoped-for economic assistance was slow in coming and much less than expected. Moreover, Moscow's efforts to protect what it saw as its legitimate security interests in the other Soviet successor states prompted charges of Russian neo-imperialism from a suspicious West.

Defending Russia's "Vital Interests"

By the end of 1993, Moscow had finally abandoned Kozyrev's pro-Western policy in favor of the notion that Russia could entrust its security and place in the international community only to itself. Russia's "vital interests" became the watchword, as did the idea that Moscow should pursue a foreign policy more independent of the United States.

One key corollary of this approach was that maintaining exclusive Russian influence over the other Commonwealth countries was one of Russia's vital interests. Another was that Moscow's former Warsaw Pact allies must remain either friendly to Moscow or neutral. This was clearly confirmed in the fall of 1993, when--after some initial confusion--President Yeltsin came out in strong opposition to any move by NATO to incorporate the Central European states.

Trying To Have It Both Ways

Beyond these general goals, however, there was no consensus on how to translate the principle of "vital interests" into action. Moreover, official Moscow--while it may have lost hope in its earlier expectations for cooperation with the United States--never really abandoned the goal of global reintegration. The implicit hope was that the United States would accept Russia's more assertive defense of its national interests, without denying Moscow a place in the international community.

Two developments have coincided to discredit the Yeltsin regime's inconsistent defense of Russia's vital interests. First, Russian politics have moved decidedly toward the more conservative and nationalist end of the political spectrum. Second, developments in the international arena--in particular Moscow's marginal role in the Balkan crisis and the continuing threat of NATO expansion--have convinced even reform-minded politicians that official Moscow's rather schizophrenic approach has little hope of winning Russia a respectable place in the international arena.

"Great Power Restorationists"

Great power restorationists have a very different set of priorities than those who hoped to see Moscow

integrate into the global community. The highest priority of the Great Power restorationists is to assert what they see as Russia's rightful role in the world. They see regional integration--consolidating Mos-cow's domination of other Soviet successor states--as a basic step toward rebuilding Great Power status and carving out an international role for Moscow based on Russian strength, not weakness. The assumption behind much Great Power restorationist thought is that America's emergence as the single superpower is destabilizing and that Russia can serve as a counterweight.

Among the more moderate of the Great Power restorationists is the Congress of Russian Communities (KRO). KRO's program is relatively dispassionate, including only vague suggestions for implementing its top national security priority: "to secure the restoration of the status of Russia as a world power." However, the statements of KRO's co-chairman Lebed, a charismatic, retired general who achieved instant popularity through his blunt public attacks on Yeltsin and Defense Minister Pavel Grachev, are much more forthright. For instance, Lebed (who earlier affirmed that he still sees NATO as a threat to Russia) recently accused NATO of behaving like "a big drunken hooligan in a kindergarten." Lebed warned that NATO expansion would force Russia to form its own military bloc and denounce treaties with the West.

The program of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, one of the current frontrunners in the upcoming Duma elections, goes much further than that of KRO. The CP states bluntly that "the foreign political roots of our misfortunes lie in the country's subordination to the West's interests, the illegal and violent dismemberment of the Soviet Union, and the loss of strategic allies." Its program advocates recreating a single union state "on a voluntary basis" and renouncing all treaties that "encroach on Russia's dignity and interests."

The Communists' close ally--the Agrarian Party--has incorporated many of these same themes in its program, which reflects a similar condemnation of Yeltsin-era reforms and the role of certain circles in the West in destroying Russia's economy. The Agrarians, like the Communists, advocate establishing a "single union state in accordance with the democratic will of the people."

Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) also traces many of Russia's current troubles to "sweet-sounding flatterers bewitched by the latest mannerism from the West." The LDP promises a foreign policy independent of the West that will "decisively rebuff interference in (Russia's) internal affairs" and will resist American efforts to elbow Russia out of the international arms market. He would strive to minimize the United States role in Europe (in part through a possible strategic alliance between Russia and Germany), while revitalizing Moscow's relations with pariah states like Iraq and Cuba.

The main foreign policy priority of the hardline Derzhava party, led by former Vice-President Alexander Rutskoy, is to restore Russia as a Great Power in its "natural boundaries," that is, the USSR's borders in 1975. Derzhava's program denounces Russia's quest to achieve acceptance in the inter-national community and promises to counter U.S. attempts at world domination. Derzhava, for instance, would not only unilaterally denounce the blockade of Serbia, it would send surface-to-air missiles to the Serbs to use against NATO warplanes.

Although many of the measures that Great Power restorationists advocate would be distasteful to Washington, their approach is not necessarily either anti-Western or isolationist. Most of the more moderate of the Great Power restorationists (like the Communists and KRO) would prefer friendly relations with the United States, but they will be much less willing than the current Kremlin to sacrifice Russian equities in the other Soviet successor states or on other issues (like arms sales and arms control) where they feel that the United States is trying to push Russia around. However, if the West responds to

this increased assertiveness by, for instance, accelerating NATO expansion, Great Power restorationists would likely strengthen Russia's western borders militarily while reorienting Russia's foreign policy away from Europe.

Russia's U.S. Policy at a Crossroads

How likely is it that Moscow will adopt the goal of Great Power restoration and totally abandon its current attempts to combine defense of Moscow's national interests with continued efforts to integrate into the global community? It would be tempting to argue that Moscow, badly in need of Western economic assistance, really has no viable alternative to cooperation with the West. In the early months of independence, Westernizers like Kozyrev argued that Russia's relative military and economic weakness left it with few realistic options to continued cooperation with the United States as a way of gaining acceptance as a responsible member of the world community and economic assistance in the form of IMF loans, debt relief, and foreign investment.

That argument may still seem valid to American observers, but most members of the Russian political elite (including reformers) have long since rejected it, as has the Russian public. Even Russia's Westernizers concede that economic disincentives to disengagement from the West no longer have an effect. Conservatives would go much farther; they are convinced that Western "help" is a deliberate ploy to exploit Russia's natural resources and further weaken an old adversary. It is doubtful whether the promise of Western economic aid and investment will stem the shift toward the conservative end of the political spectrum and the associated Great Power policies.

In fact, most political observers in Moscow are convinced that some movement toward the policies advocated by the Great Power restorationists is inevitable, regardless of who's running the Kremlin. The only issue, they say, is how far the foreign policy pendulum will swing.

Do Leaders Matter?

This does not mean, of course, that Russian elections (in particular, the presidential elections currently scheduled for June) will have no relevance to Moscow's foreign policy behavior. Clearly, the replacement of Yeltsin by a hardline politician, like retired General Lebed, would bring with it a very different set of challenges to the United States, if for no other reason than most conservative alternatives to Yeltsin would likely be more active leaders, pursuing a more coherent program--although not one that we in the West might find congenial.

Yeltsin's political demise--whether it comes as a result of medical problems or a defeat at the polls--would remove the last of the three architects of the breakup of the USSR. (The other two--Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk and Belarussian leader Stanislav Shushkevich--have already been voted out of office.) Most realistic alternatives to Yeltsin would pose much less of a brake on reintegration efforts, to bring selected Soviet successor states back into some new economic and/or political entity.

Indeed, Moscow under several of the possible conservative alternatives to Yeltsin would likely pursue a very active policy to promote a new union or confederation, encouraging popular referenda to build legitimacy for such a move. They would also be far more ruthless than the Yeltsin regime has been in employing economic and military pressure on the other former republics to acquiesce to Russian regional dominance.

At the same time, Yeltsin--should he remain president after June of next year--is likely to adopt many of the policy objectives of the Great Power restorationists. Of course, Yeltsin would be reluctant to pull out of the power circles established by the major Western powers--that would amount to renouncing his major claim to success in foreign policy. However, Yeltsin's primary concern has always been to retain his position of power at home. Faced with the ever increasing resentment of his foreign policies, however, it is likely that Yeltsin will try to coopt many of the positions advanced by his opponents.

Summary

The Yeltsin regime's erratic response to Washington--angry threats and broken commitments followed by renewed dialogue and cooperative gestures--might be construed as providing some hope for a return to the pro-U.S. actions of Russia's early independence days. Such expectations, however, should be relinquished. As one reformist official has noted privately, the brief period of euphoria in Russian-American relations was an aberration, a time when Russia was weak and hence extremely compliant toward Washington. Moscow's increasing assertiveness since that time, he cautioned, represents a natural correction to that earlier period of pro-Western euphoria.

There will also be a strong temptation over the coming months to assign much of the blame for Moscow's decreasing interest in pleasing the United States to the vagaries of an election year. The Yeltsin regime faces a legislative election in December and a presidential election in June; talking and sometimes acting tough toward the United States is a convenient maneuver for an increasingly unpopular leadership in an election year.

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that Moscow's increased willingness to counter U.S. international initiatives is a temporary phenomenon. As popular and elite sentiment continues to shift against Western-style reforms (as it almost surely will, considering the deleterious effects of these changes on the lifestyles of most Russians), the whole panoply of foreign policy priorities associated with these reforms will become increasingly discredited. As a result Moscow's turn towards Great Power restoration will continue after the polls close.

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