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"Bosnias" on Russia's Borders?

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President Yel'tsin's relative success in the recent four-part referendum has been widely welcomed for reasons that are valid and self-evident. However, no public attention has been devoted to the down payment that he appears to have made earlier in a probably futile effort to appease Russian "patriotic" (chauvinistic/imperial) forces, civilian and military. This attempt took the form of (at least two) new foreign policy blueprints and a revised military doctrine (awaiting formal promulgation) that foreshadow developments "a la Bosnia"--with Russia potentially extending military aid to fellow Russians "deprived of their rights" in several successor republics to the USSR.

Foreign Minister A. Kozyrev--widely attacked by Russian ultra-nationalists for "servility" toward the West--was used as a postman earlier this year to present one of the new foreign policy concepts to the Russian Supreme Soviet. In its section on "The Former Republics of the USSR" this document refers to a "complex ongoing process ... the outcome of which will depend largely on our capacity through persuasion, and in extreme cases also through the use of force, to affirm the principles of international law, including the rights of minorities ..." Another paragraph spells out these "rights" as applying to "human and minority rights in the nearby foreign countries, and especially the rights of ethnic Russians and the Russian-speaking population." This amounts to a new "post-Brezhnev doctrine" under which Russia considers itself entitled to use armed force to "protect" Russians wherever in the former Soviet republics they may be living. Moreover, another paragraph pre-emptively states that "Russia will actively oppose any attempts to increase the military-political presence of third states in the countries contiguous with Russia."[our emphasis]
Considering that Russian forces continue to be stationed in many of the former Soviet republics and could implement the new document at any time, this paragraph in effect warns the international community to refrain from any attempt to protect the independence of such new UN member states as Latvia, Estonia, or Ukraine. Under these circumstances, it is hard to understand the lack of any Western reference or reaction to this blueprint (which is surely antithetical to the "new order" and to the UN charter that forbids the threat or use of force as well as interference in the domestic affairs of UN member states). It should be recalled that, in the case of the Baltic Republics, agreements to withdraw Russian troops have been ignored repeatedly on the grounds that the Russian military presence is linked to the protection of the Russian minority.

The revised Russian military doctrine--first published in draft form last summer--if implemented unaltered spells out the grave military implications of the new foreign policy document. In Section I, Subsection "Possible Causes of War and its Sources," it states that "A serious source of conflicts may consist of the violation of the rights of Russian citizens and persons who identify themselves ethnically and culturally with [Russia] in the former republics of the USSR." This expands even further the definition of "minorities" contained in the foreign policy document. [our emphasis]

Moreover, the warning to the international community to refrain from any effort to protect the newly independent states is worded even more menacingly: "Russia will consider as an immediate military threat the introduction of foreign forces into the territory of contiguous states ... In this case it reserves the right to take the necessary measures in order to guarantee its own security." [our emphasis]

In the Subsection "The Mission and Formation of the Russian Armed Forces," the military document gives operational reinforcement to its revised doctrine by stating that "A particular task of the Armed Forces may consist of ... the defense of the rights and interests of Russian citizens and of persons abroad linked to Russia ethnically and culturally."
It transpires that a second foreign policy blueprint (still classified but the subject of inspired leaks in the Russian press) was produced by Yuri Skokov, then secretary of the Russian Federation Security Council and chairman of its Interministerial Foreign Policy Commission (of which Foreign Minister Kozyrev is a mere member). Skokov's statement apparently constitutes a harsher version of the text of the document transmitted by Kozyrev. Skokov, to whom Yel'tsin gave extraordinary powers--including the right to represent the president during his absence--has long been associated with the old military-industrial complex and is viewed as a patron of the group that drafted the military doctrine. While, some weeks ago, Skokov's dismissal from his Security Council post was reported, it would be premature to take solace from this fact since it was also announced that his foreign policy document had been ratified by President Yel'tsin himself (although its precise text remains unpublished). Parenthetically, Yel'tsin's stance failed to endear him to Russians in the Baltic States, since, anyway, 71.3 percent voted against him in Estonia and 78 percent in Latvia!

Current Western views concerning the foreign policy and defense implications of the post-Soviet era are linked to a fundamentally reduced threat assessment, based in part upon the territorial shrinkage of Russia to its current dimensions (no less than its economic decline). A reassessment might be required were the independence of other republics containing ethnic Russians to be endangered, particularly the Baltic States and Ukraine's Black Sea coast. To be sure, some observers (see G. Zhavoronkov's article in this issue of Perspective) point out that the draft military doctrine is in the process of legislative approval behind closed doors, so that its final formulation remains unknown, and that there is a gap between doctrine and actual military capability. However, the concepts and intentions reflected in the foreign policy and military documents are disturbing and cannot simply be brushed aside, particularly in view of the potential creation of new Bosnias wherever sizable Russian minorities are situated in proximity to Russia's borders.