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Punctual Pullout: An Overture?

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The festivities marking the withdrawal of the last Russian troops from Germany on August 31, 1994, had barely come to a close when Russian Defense Minister Gen. Pavel Grachev stated that "...the optimum period for withdrawing...would have been 15 years."(1) He considered the decision to pull out the Western Group Forces (WGF) within only four years "...the crudest political blunder."(2) In light of these statements, and their reference to social problems in the Russian military such as the housing shortage for returning troops, it is remarkable that the withdrawal of the WGF from Germany was completed four months ahead of the original schedule set in the "Two-Plus-Four Treaty" of 1990.

One explanation for Russia's scrupulous fulfillment of the withdrawal schedule is the substantial compensation of DM 7.8 billion agreed to by the Federal Republic in 1990. In December 1992 Helmut Kohl agreed to supplement the original sum with DM 550 million if Boris Yeltsin moved the deadline from the end of 1994 to August 31, 1994.(3) The Russian observation of this agreement allowed the chancellor to take credit for the completed withdrawal under his auspices about six weeks before the critical Bundestag elections.

Even though Germany's considerable financial support of the withdrawal was a strong incentive for Moscow to meet the August 1994 deadline, other factors also may have motivated Russian compliance. One such factor may have been the Russian intention to leave open the door for the possibility of close economic and political cooperation
with Germany, a relationship with historical precedent despite stark ideological differences.

The observation "...that the West as political reality has become a fiction..." and that "...the system of Western alliances...continues to exist more by virtue of...inertia than because of political necessity" encouraged Igor Maksimychev, departmental head of European security at the Europe Institute of the Moscow Academy of Sciences, to recommend a Russian foreign policy focused on cooperation with the Federal Republic. (4)

Maksimychev's conclusion that the establishment of a European security system "...is a challenge first and foremost for the Germans and the Russians,"(5) constitutes a Russian reaction to Western European disunity, NATO's difficulties in defining its post-Cold War mission, and the prospect of weaker trans-Atlantic ties. The suggestion of a Russo-German inspired security system indicates a Russian interest in Germany's return to its pre-World War II *Mittellage*--the free-floating position between East and West.

Given the Russian Federation's preoccupation with the "Near Abroad" for the last two years, the relations between Moscow and Bonn have encompassed mostly economic issues and the withdrawal of the WGF. In other words, the reassertion of Moscow's dominance over the newly independent republics impeded a proactive foreign policy towards Central Europe.

As Russia, encouraged by Western complacency, approaches the goal of consolidating its control over the CIS, Moscow's foreign policy is likely to devote more attention to the "Far Abroad." Should such a policy shift be directed at Germany along the lines suggested by Maksimychev, then the conscientious withdrawal of the WGF could be interpreted as a preparation, during Russia's preoccupation with the "Near Abroad," for close Russo-German cooperation. The view of the WGF withdrawal as a precursor for a qualitative change in Russo-German relations was expressed by President Yel'tsin on
the day before the completion of the pullout: "There are no big unresolved issues...between Russia and Germany.... Our joint effort has helped to set up a solid groundwork for taking bilateral co-operation on a new level."(6)

For Russia the attractiveness of pursuing close bilateral ties with Germany is not only based on the promise of economic benefits, but also on its compatibility with the current Russian foreign policy. At least since September 1993, when Yel'tsin reversed his position on tolerating the NATO membership of Poland and the Czech Republic, Moscow's foreign policy consistently aimed at the prevention of NATO's expansion into East-Central Europe. If Russia, in cooperation with Germany, took on the challenge of establishing a European security system, as Maksimychev recommends, the "containment" of the North Atlantic Alliance would be realized, since NATO would have to be diluted to a degree where it would lose its effectiveness.

Even though the punctuality of the Russian withdrawal from Germany may indicate an open door for Bonn to establish a close relationship with Moscow, it is unlikely that the Federal Republic will follow such a path. Only nine days after the withdrawal of the WGF, German Defense Minister Volker Ruehe expressed his resistance against NATO's dilution by stating: "Russia just doesn't qualify...to be integrated into the Brussels structure... [I]t would blow NATO apart, it would be like the United Nations of Europe...." In contrast to the repeatedly asserted Russian opposition against NATO's expansion, Ruehe stated on the same occasion that he could envision the NATO membership of some or all members of the Visegrad Group (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia) before the year 2000.(7)

This bold statement by Defense Minister Ruehe in September 1994 was of great significance not only because it underlined Germany's role as a strong proponent of the Visegrad Group's admission to NATO, but also because it constituted a challenge to the American leadership of NATO on a fundamental security issue: Ruehe's comments, which revived the discussion on NATO's admissions policy, put into question the Partnership for Peace (PfP) Program.
This program, devised by the Clinton Administration late in 1993 after Moscow's open resistance to NATO's expansion, was intended to appease the states interested in NATO membership without alienating Russia. In order to achieve this task, PfP offered its members military cooperation with NATO states and an oblique hint at eventual NATO membership. The result of this compromise was dissatisfaction on both sides: Moscow assailed the view of "...the Partnership for Peace program as a kind of preparatory program for joining NATO," as Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev put it,(8) while the countries interested in NATO membership complained about the lack of clear criteria for full alliance membership and insufficient Western commitment.(9)

Given Russia's stern opposition to NATO's eastward expansion, Bonn faced the prospect of a lasting security vacuum along its eastern border. In such a situation Germany would remain indefinitely "...the eastern frontier state of the western zone of prosperity [which] ...feel[s] the effects of instability most immediately," as Ruehe put it in October 1993.(10) The desire to end the "frontline status" of the Federal Republic, combined with an open ear for the concerns of the Visegrad Group, may have motivated Ruehe's challenge of the NATO admissions policy.

A noteworthy aspect of Ruehe's initiative is the date of his statement (September 9, 1994): nine days after the WGF withdrawal and one day after the pullout of the Western Powers. This date suggests that the time of his comments was carefully chosen to prevent a disruption of the symbolically important withdrawal ceremonies. Considering that these high-profile ceremonies took place during Kohl's campaign for the October 16, 1994 Bundestag elections, any critical reaction from the withdrawing powers had to be prevented (especially after having paid half a billion marks for the Russian withdrawal in August 1994).

Since Ruehe's initiative conflicted with Moscow's foreign policy and constituted a challenge to the American PfP concept, critical reactions had to be expected. Therefore, the safest time for his statement was after the conclusion of both withdrawal ceremonies. The fact that Ruehe's revival of the discussion on NATO admissions...
occurred at the first opportunity which could no longer affect the ceremonies, that is, the
day after the Western withdrawal, indicated a considerable degree of urgency in Bonn
about this issue.

Ruehe's denial of Russian NATO membership and his support for the admission of the
Visegrad states by the year 2000 triggered a reserved American reaction. Defense
Secretary William Perry, who was present during Ruehe's statement, was neither
prepared to reject Russia's entry into the alliance nor able to foresee NATO membership
of the former Warsaw Pact in the near future.(11) Although the American reluctance
regarding Ruehe's position continued to be displayed at least until early October 1994, a
reconsideration of the US standpoint on the alliance's admissions policy was underway.

By the end of October the Clinton Administration openly acknowledged the insufficiency
of the PfP in addressing the security concerns of East-Central Europe. To remedy this
situation, for the December meeting of NATO's Foreign Ministers, a working group
under Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke is preparing a discussion of the
political and military criteria for the admission of the East-Central European states into
NATO within three to five years. With a simultaneous boost of the CSCE in the area of
conflict resolution and peacekeeping, Washington intends to calm Moscow's objections
to a NATO expansion which excludes the Russian Federation.(12)

Although the American policy shift largely reflects the content of Ruehe's statement in
early September, it is doubtful that Washington's abandonment of the PfP was a direct
result of the German action. Such a course correction by the Clinton Administration
away from one of its major foreign policy programs probably was being contemplated in
Washington already before Ruehe expressed his concern.

Thus, the German leadership in the revived discussion of NATO's expansion may have
consisted primarily of testing the Russian reaction to a highly sensitive issue before the
US would follow. At the same time, Bonn's impetus signaled to Moscow the German
dedication to an undiluted Atlantic Alliance. That is to say, Bonn indicated that it has no
intention of returning to the Mittellage—a policy which may have motivated an aspirant for the position of Russian Defense Minister, Lt. Gen. Lebed, to flatter the German Chancellor by calling him a "...wise person both as a theoretician and as a man of action: in our country only Lenin was as capable as Kohl."(13)

Notes:
1 "Russia Needed 15 Years to Quit Germany--Grachev," Reuter Textline, Reuter News Service--CIS and Eastern Europe, 1 September 1994; in NEXIS Information Service, a trademark of Mead Data Central (hereinafter NEXIS).
7 Erik Kirschbaum, "Germany's Ruehe Sees No Chance of Russia in NATO," Reuter European Community Report, 9 September 1994, in NEXIS.