1997-11

Moscow's Multipolar Mission

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http://hdl.handle.net/2144/3544

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By winning a diplomatic coup in the crisis over Iraq, Russia's foreign minister has decisively proven Dale Carnegie wrong. You don't need to "change your thoughts" to "change the world." You just need to change everyone else's.

Six years ago, as a special envoy of then-Soviet president Michael Gorbachev, Primakov arrived in Baghdad on the eve of the first Western attack. So hopeful was he of spinning out an international agreement to avoid the war that he remained in the Iraqi capital until the bombs began to fall, and had to be driven hastily out of the country, peace proposals in hand.

Since then Primakov has fashioned his own vision of the "new world order," one specifically designed to lure the disenchanted of the world to Russia's side. His efforts have paid off. When Saddam Hussein expelled United Nations observers from Iraq in late October, it was Primakov, not the West, that determined the outcome of the crisis. As Washington fumed on the sidelines, Primakov held court in Moscow, promising, according to The Washington Times, an end to American military threats if Hussein agreed to allow an altered inspection team back into his country. (1)

There is good reason to fear that Primakov's initiative has derailed the weapons-inspections program that victory in the Gulf War guaranteed. As William Safire has written, American agreement that the inspections teams be modified will "remove the element of surprise from the U.N. Special Commission's searches for long-concealed germ warfare facilities." (2)
Such aid to a rogue regime is, sadly, entirely consistent with a recent turn in Russia's foreign policy, which is itself indicative of a new mood in Moscow--one Primakov has helped to create.

Filling the Void
Although largely successful in implementing dramatic economic and political reforms, the Yel'tsin administration has failed to provide Russia with an identity to replace the void left when the ideology of Communism crumbled.

"Russian society craves the elaboration of its central purpose, an idea that animates and directs us in the new epoch," Nugzar Betaneli, a Russian sociologist, told The Hindustan Times. (3)

The hunger for a new national identity is prompted in part by the profound sense of dissatisfaction with the imported "Western" order, particularly among intellectuals. Writing in Rossiyskaya gazeta, Roy Medvedev decried calls for a fascist regime, but claimed that "no less dangerous are the attempts to turn Russia into a commonplace country of the Western type, thrusting upon it Western values and American-model capitalism, which are alien to our people."(4)

The key to national restoration, Medvedev wrote, lay in a new assertiveness on the world stage. "Neither 'humility' nor the position of a client of the West will help change the situation. We must stop the country's decline, including by means of foreign policy."

Primakov has taken up this challenge with relish. In his speeches and actions, he has reconstituted Soviet-style hatred of the West in a new doctrine of "multipolarity." The United States ought to view this ideology warily, since Primakov and his minions are promulgating a vision of the world that has once again set Russia on a course towards international adventurism.
Weaving a Web of Contacts

A look at the biography of Primakov reveals a man utterly devoted to the enhancement of Moscow's prestige and, more ominously, one well-prepared to win his adopted nation accolades once again as a powerful alternative to the West.

Born on October 29, 1929, in Tbilisi, Primakov spent his childhood in a cosmopolitan section of the city, and thus speaks Georgian and Armenian well. (5) He has assiduously air-brushed all references to his childhood and natural family out of his official biography. "Zheyna did not care to talk about [his family]," Primakov's classmate at the Moscow Institute for Oriental Studies told Argumenty i fakty, "and had a fierce abhorrence of those who attempted to question him about anything." (6)

After marrying the daughter of KGB official Mikhail Gvishiani (and sister of Dzherman Gvishiani, subsequently the son-in-law of Premier Aleksei Kosygin), Primakov abandoned his graduate studies at Moscow State University, where he had been focusing on the economics of Arab countries. He moved into the workforce with a series of reporting and editing jobs at the State Committee on Radio and Television Broadcasting.

It was as a journalist that Primakov first began to weave the web of reporting contacts and political affiliations, at home and abroad, that was to lay the foundation for his future career. He advanced swiftly through the ranks of state radio and joined the Communist Party in 1959. (7) Three years later he won a post as a deputy editor of Pravda and became a foreign correspondent in the Middle East.

Primakov's posting abroad almost certainly introduced him to the intelligence game. "Because virtually no Soviet citizen lived abroad without being vetted by the KGB, one can assume that Primakov became an intelligence asset early in his career," an American analyst has concluded. (8) Arguing that rumors of Primakov's early spying were "not groundless," Moscow News pointed out that a retired KGB general, Oleg Kalugin, believed that two-thirds of Soviet correspondents working abroad were agents.
(9) Even others more circumspect maintain that he was at least "a man of the KGB First Main Directorate, whose business was intelligence, and a good dozen further organizations, in which science, journalism, diplomacy and intelligence were interwoven into a single whole." (10)

Primakov cultivated the big names of the Middle East, including Mustafa Barazani, later leader of the Democratic Party of Kurdistan, Hosni Mubarak, future Egyptian president, Jordan's King Hussein, and a young Iraqi Ba'athist leader named Saddam Hussein. (11) Upon returning to Moscow, Primakov took up a number of positions within the USSR Academy of Sciences, including directorship of both the Institute of Oriental [i.e., Middle Eastern] Studies and the prestigious Institute of World Economy and International Relations. From these postings he supervised "brainstorming" sessions on problems of Soviet foreign policy, inviting not only scholars, but also experts from the Central Committee, the intelligence community and the foreign ministry. Transcripts of these seminars were "taken down in shorthand, then summarized, and ultimately converted into a concise document containing practical recommendations which ended up on the desks of certain members of the Politburo," Argumenty i fakty notes, "usually Gromyko and Andropov." (12) Moreover, Primakov was able to extend his network by supervising, for example, the doctoral theses of Saddam Hussein's cousin and of the daughter of Azeri premier Geidar Aliev. (13)

Primakov's politicking at home earned him the dubious reward of a first-class cabin on a sinking ship--the Communist Party. An alternate member of the party's Central Committee in 1986, and head of one chamber of the USSR Supreme Soviet in June 1989, Primakov watched his career come apart together with the Soviet Union itself. He hedged his bets. On the one hand, he sought out the liberal reformers. In the spring of 1989, he had the audacity not merely to attend the first meeting of the Interregional Group of Deputies along with Boris Yel'tsin and Anatoli Sobchak, but even to stride confidently to the lectern and deliver an impromptu speech. (14) Primakov nevertheless continued to do the Party's bidding, no matter how brutal. As the informal supervisor of troubled Azerbaijan, Primakov at first negotiated with the country's Popular Front, but as
the threat of general strikes loomed, clamped down. On January 19, 1990, he warned participants at a meeting of the Azerbaijani Communist Party that Moscow would tolerate no more unrest.

"The militia, troops of the MVD, the KGB and the Procuracy--these additional forces have arrived from Moscow," he said. "Everything is being done to restore order. Additional measures will be necessary. Additional measures will be taken. But, we can tell you firmly, order will be restored." (15) In the subsequent crackdown, 130 Azeri protesters were killed. 700 more were wounded.

Primakov's fence-sitting paid off. He slipped into Mikhail Gorbachev's inner circle as a member of the new Presidential Council. From his seat in the Kremlin he was finally able to turn his long-nurtured ties to leaders in the Middle East into tools of an assertive foreign policy. His long-standing friendship with Saddam Hussein, for example, allowed him to insert himself briefly as a self-appointed mediator between Iraq and the West on the eve of the Gulf War. Although his initiative failed, it won him a reputation among Moscow's old guard as an apostle of "new thinking" who could nonetheless "maintain Moscow's old influence in Iraq and the Middle East." (16) Forever straddling camps, Primakov was able to win a key post from Gorbachev--head of the Soviet Foreign Intelligence Service (successor to the KGB's 1st Directorate)--and hold on to it even as the Soviet Union crumbled and Boris Yel'tsin began fashioning the new Russian state.

It should not surprise Primakov-watchers that the man for whom foreign policy and personal ambition were so intertwined should hold fast only to the idea that the new Russia must remain a great power. The moderate policies vis-à-vis the West that Andrei Kozyrev pursued as foreign minister in the early 1990s not only appeared to diminish the influence of the state Primakov had unswervingly served; they also reduced the role of members of Primakov's personal cadre, who retained ties to rogue regimes. A policy of accommodating the West could only frustrate the ranks of soldiers, foreign policy experts and intelligence officers in Primakov's own inner circle, who knew far less of, say, Denmark, than they did of Iraq and other former client states of the Soviet Union.
As intelligence chief Primakov inspired his extensive network of journalists and apparatchiki into rebellion against their own foreign minister, e.g., by publishing a review in December 1993, arguing that Kozyrev's tacit acceptance of NATO expansion ran counter to Russian interests. (17) In the end, Primakov won his appointment as Kozyrev's successor by waging a campaign of disinformation of the kind that an aspiring ideologue would once have turned against a foreign power, according to a review of his career by Duma deputy Konstantin Borovoi.

Throughout 1995, Yel'tsin was bombarded by reports that a Western diplomat had found Russia's response to US foreign policy to be surprisingly passive. "Under the heading 'Top Secret,' the President received the same piece of misleading information from the intelligence service, the counterintelligence service and then from military intelligence," Borovoi wrote. By the time that it was revealed that the diplomat had been speaking of France--not Russia--the damage to Kozyrev's reputation had already been done.

Primakov has also manipulated public opinion, which today is hostile to NATO expansion (while only 18 percent of Russian citizens had any comment on the issue two years ago). Primakov orchestrated his campaign, Borovoi writes, by leaking information to pliant Russian journalists. "A careful reader may have noticed," Borovoi comments, "that in the past two years perfectly independent papers have run stories with matching paragraphs." (18)

It is a tribute to Primakov's deftness that he should have been appointed by Yel'tsin to assuage a new mood of national assertiveness--reflected in the electoral success of the Communists and neofascist "Liberal Democrats"--that Primakov himself helped to create. When both Gennadi Zyuganov and Vladimir Zhirinovsky praised his appointment as foreign minister, they may well have merely been repaying the compliment that Primakov's promulgation of their ideas had extended to them.
The 'Multipolar' Mission

Primakov is not a field commander in some new "Clash of Civilizations." He is only interested in the trappings of traditions, such as the Russian Orthodox Church, as a means to an end. When, for example, it is time to pressure a NATO member such as Turkey, or a Western ally in the Muslim world such as Azerbaijan, Primakov's ministry will sign a defense alliance with Armenia, or overlook arms shipments to "Christian" allies in hotspots like Nagorno-Karabakh or Greek Cyprus. The point is simply to destabilize Western allies, not to enhance ancient cultural ties. There is no traditional Orthodox empathy for Turkey's Kurds. But Primakov's ministry was happy to help host a conference on their plight in Moscow in March, at which delegates pledged to pressure Turkey by establishing a Kurdish radio network within its borders.

Indeed, a forthright expression of good old Slavophil paranoia is likely to earn a minister nothing but Primakov's wrath. Last December Igor Rodionov, then Russia's defense minister, gave a rousing call to arms among his counterparts from other countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States, in which he added Iran and China to a long list of common foes. Primakov's ministry publicly scolded him the next day, calling the list "purely hypothetical." Within six months, Rodionov had been dumped. Rodionov was out of step with Primakov's "multipolar" agenda. Unlike Slavophils, Primakov does not see a "Yellow Horde" riding out of Beijing, or an army of Allah massing along Mother Russia's underbelly.

In effect, "multipolarity" has been little more than a rallying cry for every regime with a chip on its shoulder about the hegemony of the United States. It is a doctrine steeped in cultural relativism; under the guise of tolerance of "differences," Russia is free to cozy up to rogue states and movements especially in its Eurasian backyard.

Take, for example, the "Joint Russian-Chinese Declaration About a Multipolar World and the Formation of a New International order," signed in Moscow on April 23. While nominally tolerant, the declaration is particularly opposed to the liberal democratic order. There is a hint of the old anti-imperialist rhetoric in the document which makes
reference to the "numerous developing countries and the Non-Aligned movement" that will be "an important force assisting the formation of a multipolar world and new international order." (19) The full implications of this declaration and of Primakov's address at July's meeting of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) were spelled out by Obshchaya gazeta's Anna Perfilyeva. Perfilyeva hailed Primakov's "brilliant maneuver" and applauded the "wonderful way" he had of "giving vent to the irritation about the unceremoniousness of American foreign policy which has been building up deep inside ASEAN..." which "warmed the feelings of religious solidarity among the ASEAN choir leaders, Indonesia and Malaysia, the majority of whose populations profess Islam." Perfilyeva wrote that "Behind the dissatisfaction expressed by their ministers over American moves in the Middle East one could distinctly read: Do not interfere and teach others how to live if you cannot cope with the role of peacekeeper yourself." (20)

The doctrine has also proven quite popular with other regimes resentful of US dominance. One Chinese diplomat described the joint declaration as an expression of "common opposition to any country's taking tyrannical actions in the international arena. The earth is colorful and cannot be artificially changed into one single color," (21) as if free elections and imprisonment of political dissidents were merely different shades in a splendid rainbow. The Tehran Times said that "Russia, China, and the Non-Aligned countries combined can contain US expansionism. They should not allow the US to change the contour of the world into a unipolar order...." (22)

In recent months the appeal of Primakov's doctrine has spread beyond the usual collection of disgruntled regimes to some of America's closest allies. At a Council of Europe meeting in October, Russia decried America's insistence that France drop its plans to finance an oil pipeline in Iran. In a thinly-veiled reference to "Uncle Sam," Primakov's boss called on his colleagues to forge a new pan-European foreign policy. "We do not need an uncle from elsewhere," Yel'tsin said. "We in Europe can unite ourselves." (23) These statements must have struck a chord: French premier Lionel Jospin has now adopted Primakov's line on a new "multipolar world." (24)
The New Axis
The ideology of "multipolarity" has given new caché to Russian foreign policy initiatives that, in a time of less Western self-doubt, might merely be condemned as mischief-making. In particular, Primakov has returned to his old stomping grounds in the Middle East with a panache he seems to have stolen from the actual winners of the Cold War.

The Tehran Times hardly needed to convince Primakov to rally the wretched of the earth in a new anti-American alliance. Building a strong alliance with Iran has been a critical element of the foreign minister's game plan, for two reasons.

As the two most powerful players on the shores of the oil-rich Caspian Sea, Russia and Iran can cooperate to bully the three smaller littoral nations into signing exploration and pipeline deals that suit them. Iran has been particularly helpful, for example, in agreeing with Moscow that the sea should be defined as a lake and therefore not be divided into zones of equal standing under international law. In August, Tehran secured a promise from Turkmenistan to adhere to "previously concluded treaties between the USSR and Iran" until the legal status of the Caspian Sea has been established. (25)

In exchange for such assistance, Russia is more than happy to provide Iran with the technology to produce powerful weapons. Israeli intelligence has reported that Russia is helping Iran to build long-range missiles that could be fielded within three years, according to The Washington Times. Iran, according to the report, is constructing two systems based on a North Korean model that have a range of 1,200 miles, and which could therefore threaten both the state of Israel and US troops based in Saudi Arabia.

Primakov has denied that Russia is aiding Iranians at all, but the sheer number of firms and institutes implicated implies that he is being disingenuous. Among the Russian firms accused of helping the Iranians are Rosvooruzhenie, the Russian arms-export agency; the Bauman Institute, a leading Russian technological institute; and NPO Trud, a rocket-motor builder. (26)
Such assistance is not merely compensation for support on Caspian questions. On his most recent tour of the region, Primakov's ties to Iran gave him an opening with Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad, who in turn entrusted him with a message to Israel, following which Primakov hinted that he had reopened the "Syrian-Israel" track of the Madrid accords. "There are people who think that one can proceed along only one track, for example the Palestinian one," Primakov said. "But if the Syrian track is blocked, the whole peace process in the region will be stopped." (27) Only Israeli fortitude prevented Primakov from gaining a foothold at the talks.

For all the dangers inherent in a new Axis on the Caspian, no Russian gesture better illustrates the effectiveness of Primakov's message and "personal diplomacy" than Moscow's coddling of Iraq. In Saddam Hussein, Primakov has a friend of nearly thirty years, one whose intransigence guarantees that he will always be available as a foil to the West.

To be sure, Russian business has much to gain from standing by the Baghdad regime. Analyzing international business deals with Baghdad, the newspaper Rossiyskaya gazeta concluded that Russian oil firms are "now ahead of their competitors in reestablishing ties to Iraq." (28) A Russian consortium, for example, has concluded a $3.8 billion contract to develop the Western Qurnah oil field.

But Saddam also presents Primakov with free advertising for his relativistic worldview. By defying an international embargo since the end of the Gulf War six years ago, Hussein has demonstrated that he has no intention of dropping his chemical weapons programs. His very inflexibility prompts doubts about the wisdom of American resolve: Why should the world postpone doing business with Iraq until the fall of Saddam's regime, when Primakov's "multipolar" vision offers an alternative by which the Baghdad regime is merely recognized as one of the colors in politics' colorful mosaic?

The appeal of such a tolerant "multipolar" resolution to the crisis was visible in the reactions of the other members of the UN Security Council. The first vote to tighten
sanctions after Saddam expelled UN weapons inspectors was 10-0--because Russia, China, France, Egypt and Kenya all abstained. In a later vote, however, the United States was forced to drop a proposed threat of military action as it became clear that Primakov had sown up enough abstentions to block its passage.

Speaking on CNN, Undersecretary of State Thomas Pickering said the earlier abstentions "at least were a contributing factor, perhaps, to enticing Saddam or maybe encouraging Saddam with the feeling that the unity of the Security Council had fallen." (29)

NOTES


3 The Hindustan Times, 27 August 1997 (via Johnson's Russia List).

4 Rossiyskaya gazeta, 4 September 1997, pp. 4-5; cited in FBIS-SOV-97-254.


6 Argumenty i fakty, no. 3, January 1996, p. 4; cited in FBIS-SOV-96-039-S.

7 Ibid.


10 Argumenty i fakty, no. 3: January 1996, p. 4.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.


19 ITAR-TASS in English, 1153 GMT, 23 April 1997; cited in FBIS-SOV-97-079.


21 Voice of Russia World Service in Mandarin, 1300 GMT, 2 July 1997; cited in FBIS-SOV-97-188.

23 Reuters, 8 October 1997.

24 The Straits Times (Singapore), 1 November 1997; cited in Johnson's Russia List.


27 ITAR-TASS, 1458 GMT, 26 October 97; cited in FBIS-SOV-97-299.


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