

THE WEST'S RESPONSE TO PERESTROIKA AND POST-SOVIET RUSSIA

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Ten years after the birth of *perestroika*, the Western world has still not come to grips, either intellectually or in policy terms, with the historic multiple revolutions it unleashed: the end of the Cold War global political-military confrontation, which Gorbachev, Shevardnadze, and his associates sought; the collapse of the Soviet state, which they did not; post-Soviet Russia's embarkation on the complex, uncharted path of post-Communist transformation; and the reconfiguration of the international system into one in which the major powers no longer confront each other, but in which most of the rest of the world has become more unstable and dangerous than ever before.

The changes came much too swiftly, one following on the heels of the other before new conceptual frameworks for assimilating and digesting them could jell. In this new, radically transformed environment, complexity, ambiguity, and thorny dilemmas have replaced the old verities of the Cold War and the Soviet imperial dictatorship. Disoriented Western statesmen and publics have found even their most basic interests hard to calculate in the new circumstances and they remain confused about priorities and uncertain how to make tradeoffs between their desire to promote a healthy democratic outcome in Russia and their concern to hedge against the risks of failure.

The advent of *perestroika* was met initially in the West with considerable skepticism, understandably so given the track record of

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attempted Soviet reforms in the past. By the end of the decade, however, that skepticism had given way to unanimous acclaim in response to a stunning succession of unilateral Soviet withdrawals on a variety of Cold War fronts, beginning with Afghanistan. These were accompanied by far-reaching concessions to Western arms reduction positions, culminating in the Start I nuclear arms reduction agreement and the treaty on conventional forces in Europe. Above all, Western certainty that *perestroika* meant the end of the Cold War was confirmed by Soviet acquiescence in the wholesale defection of Warsaw Pact “allies” from the Soviet Bloc and from Communist rule, capped by Soviet agreement to the unification of Germany.

Symptomatic of the West’s enthusiasm for *perestroika* was Gorbymania, the newest expression of the irrepressible Western tendency to personify its stakes in Russia. Related to this, also the product of the West’s zeal for closing out Cold War accounts of the Soviet Union as quickly as possible and welcoming a reformed, benign Soviet Union into “the community of civilized states,” the West promised (or at least appeared to do so) much more by way of material aid than it could deliver. The prospect of large-scale Western assistance in turn fueled the promises that radical Russian reformers made to the Russian people about what was bound to be a difficult and socially painful process of change, opening the way for the disappointment and disillusionment with the West that followed in due course and which has now given birth to the first serious manifestations of anti-Westernism in non-fringe, mainstream Russian political circles.

The speed with which skepticism about *perestroika* being “too good to be true” dissipated in the West was striking. Even more surprising was the ease with which the West came to identify its interests with the preservation and integrity of the Soviet state, just at the point at which its dismemberment, the fondest dream of generations of Western Cold War strategists, seemed on the point of realization. Driven chiefly by anxiety about the fate of the huge Soviet nuclear

arsenal and fear of its dispersal, this apprehension was generalized into an overarching concern to maintain stability in the geopolitical space of the former Soviet Union.

In the waning months of *perestroika*, the West's devotion to Gorbachev and its priority on stability obscured mounting evidence that *perestroika* had in fact run out of steam, and that Gorbachev had come increasingly to rely on anti-democratic forces and institutions to stay in power and to keep the union together. Faith in Gorbachev and a narrow conception of stability led the American president to journey to Kiev in October 1991, less than two months before the dissolution of the Soviet Union, to deliver a hapless plea to the Ukrainian parliament to contain its appetite for independence in the higher interests of stability.

Western concern about stability continues to be a central element in strategic thinking about Russia, but "stability" has become less and less capable of providing an adequate compass for steering Western policy through the complex policymaking landscape of Central Eurasia. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union, tension between the West's continuing priority on stability in the ex-Soviet region and its commitment to helping preserve the independence and territorial integrity of all the successor states, or at least of the most geopolitically significant ones, like Ukraine and Kazakhstan, has obliged Western statesmen to walk a fine line between approval of "stabilizing CIS integration," on one hand, and suspicion of "Russian neoimperialism," on the other.

Although the Western world watched with evident regret and sympathy the demise of Gorbachev after his rescue from Foros in August 1991 and his humiliating final days in office at the end of the year, its penchant for personalizing Russian politics quickly led it to find a substitute in the lionization of Gorbachev's nemesis, Yeltsin, the hero of the successful resistance to the August putsch. Adulation of Yeltsin was particularly intense in the United States, where a new

administration, without ties to Gorbachev and *perestroika*, took office in January 1993. Chiding its predecessor for responding too slowly and cautiously to the new, post-Soviet Russian revolution, the Clinton Administration proclaimed America's backing for Yeltsin personally as the best guarantor of democracy and free markets in Russia. But in a peculiarly Western neoliberal version of economic determinism, U.S. policy especially, but Western policymakers generally, focused support almost exclusively on promoting Russia's economic transition to a market economy, in accordance with a transition model that placed enormous social demands on a population that had not been politically mobilized to support it and for which there was not a consensus even among Russia's Western-oriented democratic elite. The market economy, with the property-owning middle class and general prosperity it would engender, was held to be the indispensable foundation for a democratic political order; meanwhile, as economic reform went forward, Yeltsin would be counted on to maintain his commitment to a democratic polity and to Russia's continuing orientation on the West.

These considerations caused the West to disregard the failure of the Russian leadership to institutionalize democratic political reform while marching toward the market—indeed, in crisis, to violate democratic norms when required to remove roadblocks to economic reform—and to fail in good time to notice the consequent shrinking of the Yelstin administration's social support base. The West was therefore ill-prepared for the shock of the December 1993 parliamentary elections which exposed Yeltsin's political decline and the striking weakness of the pro-democratic political forces identified with Western-type economic reforms for which the "shock therapy" version had come rightly or wrongly to be perceived as the prototype.

The disaster of the Chechen war has further eroded already shaken Western confidence about Russia's future by challenging the assumption that President Yeltsin could be counted on to keep the country on a democratic path. Western leaders continue to pledge

support for Yeltsin, but this seems only because they fail to see a more promising plausible alternative and can foresee several that would be much worse. Ironically, while confidence in Yeltsin's democratic credentials, as well as in his reliability as a cooperative "partner" of the West in international politics, have been severely shaken, belief in his commitment and that of the Chernomyrdin government to free market reform has emerged unscathed from the Chechen crisis. But, for the first time since the launching of Russia's economic reform in early 1992, "reform" in the narrow speedy-march-to-the-market sense, seems no longer a sufficient criterion in the West for measuring Russia's progress toward democracy.

The dimming of confidence in prospects for a successful democratic transition in Russia has also contributed to a recent shift in Western security calculations that involve Russian interests, notably with regard to NATO expansion to East Central Europe. From the start there has been a tension in Western policy between the goal of promoting a healthy democratic outcome in Russia, on the one hand, and insuring against a "sour" Russian outcome and its adverse security consequences, on the other. In the United States, this has taken the form of a debate between a Wilsonian neoliberal internationalist approach and the more traditional geopolitically-oriented realpolitik thinking of the Cold War years. The neoliberal perspective on policy toward Russia, which has so far been dominant, emphasizes the promotion of "market democracy" in Russia ("support for reform") on the theory that a democratic Russia with a healthy market economy will almost inevitably be a benign factor in international relations, a welcome security partner for the United States and the West, and perhaps even a future ally. The corollary of this "Russocentric" doctrine ("Russocentric" in the sense of enjoying a higher priority than other foreign policy interests in the region of the former Soviet Union) is that so long as Russian reform remains broadly on track, the West should give its leader the benefit of the

doubt, even in the face of strong-arm outbursts at home and displays of muscular behavior in the “near abroad.”

Lately, a more traditional, geopolitical and balance-of-power-oriented conception has returned to center stage after a post-Cold War hibernation. In this conception, articulated among others by Henry Kissinger, Russia is seen on virtually existential grounds as fated to remain an “outside power,” incapable of being assimilated by Europe and the West, driven by its geography, history, and traditions to be an expansionist force in world politics, and extremely unlikely to overcome its deeply ingrained authoritarianism, if only because its allegedly intrinsic imperialism is fundamentally incompatible with its democratization.

In resolving the tension between promoting a healthy democratic outcome in Russia and hedging against the consequences of a “sour” outcome, the neoliberal “Russocentric” view inclines strongly toward the priority on promoting democracy and giving Russia (Yeltsin) the benefit of the doubt; the geopolitical view toward “insurance.”

Declining confidence in Russia’s prospects, fueled by the October 1993 Moscow crisis, the December 1993 parliamentary elections, and especially the war in Chechnya, now seems clearly to be tilting the balance toward “insurance.”

The U.S.-led shift in the position of the Western allies on NATO expansion is symptomatic. Notwithstanding efforts by Washington, Bonn, London, and other NATO capitals to disconnect expansion from any potential Russian threat, virtually the entire Russian political class, including those most committed to Western values and institutions, regards NATO expansion to East Central Europe as the drawing of a new line in Europe making clear which states the West intends to include and which not. To Russia’s nationalist-extremists and unreconstructed Communists, this is a welcome message, since it can be used to confirm their warnings that Russia cannot pursue a modernization strategy that depends critically on its integration into

the West, and that the West, now that it has gotten Russian troops back behind the old Soviet borders, is regrouping to consolidate further to the East the favorable geopolitical situation created for it by the collapse of the Soviet Union. For democratic, pro-Western forces in Russia, NATO expansion is a deeply disappointing sign of abandonment by the West at a time of deep political crisis in Russia.

The West's recent decision to ratchet up the NATO expansion process in the absence of any urgent necessity to do so conveys a message about its enduring beliefs regarding Russia's place in the world that does not tally with its continuing support for Russia's Westernizing reform. It demonstrates that ten years after the launching of *perestroika*, the Western world has still not sorted out its interests and priorities in the radical changes which *perestroika* unleashed and risks squandering a perhaps fleeting opportunity to help shape a healthy future for Russia, or at least to avoid doing harm.

