

The Emergence of a New Russian Foreign Policy

Radovan Vukadinović

In view of Russia's importance and international position and considering the internal ratio of forces, Yeltsin's re-election as Russia's President can be examined at several levels. The confirmation of the president, who is regarded in the West as the champion of reform, has been interpreted in western capitals as a guarantee that Russia would continue its reform policies and the pursuit of democracy, and fully endorse a market-oriented economy. This, in turn, is expected to provide a new basis for co-operation with the West and for a common search for solutions to the issues brought about by the new world order. It is assumed that, in opting for Yeltsin, Russia has chosen its place within that order and that it can be expected to act accordingly.

The defeat of the communists is seen as the expression of the electorate's decision to endorse Yeltsin's line, despite all his faults, and of their desire for a better and more democratic life. In the opinion of many analysts, it was precisely this choice between Yeltsin and the communists which induced so many Russians to cast their vote for the controversial president, in preference to the return of the communists. Moreover, by throwing in their lot with Yeltsin, they seem to have stemmed the rise of communism in Russia, and the CP may never be able again to win as many votes as it did under Zyuganov.

Russia is expected to emerge from the presidential elections with its position on the world political scene as strong as before, if not stronger. This would have the effect of preventing unnecessary tensions or undesirable measures.

Of course, such reading of the new Russian situation has a certain relevance, both as a reflection of the current state of affairs and of the wish that Russia under Yeltsin would follow a pro-western course and favour the stabilisation of that major nation.

The above analysis of the Russian situation, however, is the result of a broader strategic perspective whose primary objective is stability in Europe and the desire that Russia may never again become the focal point of a movement motivated by ideological values opposite to those of the western world. As the price of this vision of Russia and of its president, western analysts are prone to forget or overlook numerous indications which present Yeltsin and his policies in a completely different light.

It would thus seem more appropriate to ask: What can be expected of the new Yeltsin policy and to what extent can it meet western expectations?

Interestingly enough, in their approach to Russian foreign policy, both presidential candidates expressed strikingly similar views. It remains to be seen to what extent Yeltsin copied the communists also in this field, but one thing is certain: their foreign policy platforms manifest a striking similarity of objectives and definition of interests.

The first set of new demands concerns faster reintegration of the post-Soviet area, i.e., the

Commonwealth of Independent States. It is claimed that a series of mistakes had been committed in this field and that faster economic, security and political advancement of Russia cannot be achieved without seeking stronger links with the former Soviet republics. These links would, at the same time, stem the further erosion of Russian positions in some of the former republics as well as being a means of halting conflicts. With its new policy Russia must provide a foundation for new forms of diverse links and make Moscow be seen by all republics as the focal point of their prosperity and stability. We can expect strong Russian action along these lines and the launching of new mechanisms to reinforce the Commonwealth and to demonstrate the benefits of co-operation. This would also largely resolve the problem of the vast number of Russians (24 million of them) living outside Russia and create conditions for more effective concerted action in relations with third countries.

The second set of issues in the focus of both presidential candidates was the restitution to Russia of the status of super power. This lofty position is inherent in the political thinking of the Russian élite irrespective of political belief or party affiliation. The disintegration of the great state was so quick and so unexpected as to catch both the Russian élite and the population at large unprepared for the new situation, in which their country was exposed as underdeveloped, removed from the mainstream civilisation trends and too weak to continue in the role of a super state. Years of indoctrination have left their indelible mark, and any reference to the great role and position of Russia as a world power is guaranteed to win broad support. However difficult it may be to achieve this, there should be no doubt that Yeltsin will try his best to reinstate Russia in the centre of world affairs. Whether this will be done by political means, or just by continuing to insist on the greatness of Russia and on the leading position that is her due, is of no relevance. What is psychologically important for the Russian political establishment is the recognition that their country is a great power and that it is entitled to a special place in international relations. The means and the instruments whereby to produce this new image of Russia have to be devised in their Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The third group of issues are a direct result of the stance of a super power that Russia adopts in international relations. By stressing its size, tradition and the still existing nuclear might, Russia will endeavour to extend its influence on the West as much as possible. This will be particularly reflected in its efforts to influence those western decisions that directly affect Russian neighbours (NATO expansion, the Balkans). In spite of general proclamations of the wish to co-operate with the West, it is to be expected that the scope of topics and areas of confrontation between Russian and western interests will continue to widen and that Russia will seek opportunities to assert its interests. This new stage of co-operation and

confrontation between Russia and the West is aptly described by the Foreign Secretary Evgeny Primakov, who declared that Russia should stop treating good relations with the West as a top priority of its foreign policy, since this "does not coincide with her interests". In the light of Primakov's earlier claims that Russia had invested too much into these new relations and had gained too little, and that there was need for a system of international relations wherein no single state can assume the leading role, it is evident that the aim is to bring about a situation in which Russian views will be taken into account. To reinforce Russia's special role as permanent member of the Security Council, efforts will be intensified to gain membership of the G-7 and to assert influence on some NATO decisions (expansion of the security system).

The means to be employed in attaining these goals, however, will presumably depend on domestic policy factors. At the moment, the country is still on the brink of a crisis. Yeltsin's unrealistic pre-election promises are bound to generate additional discontent. According to some statements, Russia's budget for this year has already been spent. And there is the war in Chechnya, too. Furthermore, the so-called pillars of stability: the army, the police and the state apparatus have fallen on lean times and are supporting themselves largely by illegal activities.

In a situation like this, a policy which aspires to re-establish Russia as a superpower has a very meagre material basis to operate from, and it is highly questionable what else, apart from rhetoric, can be used to build up the proclaimed dynamic approach of Russian foreign policy. At the same time, this state of affairs might help to intensify the growth of nationalistic and pseudo-imperialistic tendencies in Russia, which Zbigniew Brzezinski, for one, expects to become the major components of the new foreign policy.

The Russian Duma, in which communists continue to hold the majority, will have a chance to level criticism against the President's foreign policy decisions, even though he remains outside their reach due to the powers and autonomy his office entails. Those who are disgruntled with the domestic conditions and development of Russia will find ample scope in this nationalistic and pseudo-imperialistic course to promote their ideas and to articulate their own vision of Russia's place in the world community.

With the additional element of the new tripartite division of powers in the Kremlin: Yeltsin - Tchernomirdin - Lebed, there will evidently be room enough for all kinds of combinations and alliances, leaving an impact also in the field of foreign policy. In the more immediate future, however, sharp confrontations are to be expected at the top. First of all, Tchernomirdin and Lebed will have to set the limits of their own powers, with the winner having to contend with Yeltsin to the end of the latter's term of office - or life. In this manner, the new tripolarity in the Kremlin opens up additional areas of instability, with consequences that will not be long in waiting.

Built on such a foundation, Russian foreign policy will be constantly obliged to assess the current ratio of forces in the Kremlin and to consider the priorities of each chief protagonist. In some segments, it will have more freedom (i.e., attempts to reintegrate the former Soviet republics), but in matters concerning the delicate fabric

of the relations between Russia and the West it will have to lend a careful ear to the messages emanating from the Kremlin. In pace with the vicissitudes of Russian nationalistic tendencies, of the mood of the Russian political élite and of the struggle for dominance in the Kremlin, Russian foreign policy will probably vacillate between rhetoric and filling the vacuums that are formed.

The expansion of NATO will continue to be regarded as a threat to Russia, and the support will be sought of the Russian public, which has decisively rejected any idea of a rapprochement between NATO and Russia. Intensified reintegration within the Commonwealth of Independent States is likewise expected to proceed, prompted by the general belief in the necessity and beneficial effects of this undertaking. It is in this light that we must regard Russia's efforts to maintain its positions in the Balkans and the demands for a reduction of the American role there.

Some Russian advances to China (new strategic partnership) or to Iran (sales of arms and nuclear technology) are designed to keep up the appearance of Russia's capacity for global action, however, always taking good care not to overdo this and to jeopardise the present Russo-Western relations.

In the countries of the former socialist bloc, on the other hand, Russian foreign policy has not only missed all the chances it had in the beginning but is even now still unwilling to treat those countries as equal partners. There is overwhelming obsession with the need to prevent the expansion of NATO and with the maintenance of transport channels for Russian fuel and energy to the West. It is therefore not surprising that the former socialist countries insist on some form of association with NATO, seeing in this a way to ensure their security and to build up a basis for a new type of neighbourly relations with Russia.

Domestically impoverished, at the crossroads of change, burdened by internal strife, Russian foreign policy during Yeltsin's new term of office is likely to be a mixture of ends and means, with rather slim chances of success. The claims that Russia would need 30-40 years to reach the level of the least developed members of the European Union are by no means exaggerated, and can be regarded not only as an indicator of economic development but also of the difficulties Russian foreign policy has to contend with.

If Yeltsin's new mandate helps to alleviate at least some of the current political tension and builds a basis for a more relaxed view of foreign affairs, this could be a major contribution to Russian stability. It remains to be seen, of course, how long Yeltsin will be able to stay at the head of Russia and what new alliances will be formed at Kremlin's top. Russian foreign policy will of necessity be just a reflection of the dilemmas which Yeltsin's re-election has failed to resolve on a long-term basis.