

Primakov's Foreign Policy: Russia and the Middle East

Jan 30, 1996



Brief Analysis

On Tuesday, January 30, 1996 Mr. Peter Rodman, director of National Security Studies at the Nixon Center for Peace and Freedom, and Dr. Robert Freedman, acting president of Baltimore Hebrew University and author of *Moscow and the Middle East*, addressed a session of The Washington Institute's Policy Forum on the appointment of Yevgeni Primakov as Russia's new foreign minister and the prospects for a more assertive Russian approach to key Middle Eastern issues. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

PETER RODMAN

Yevgeni Primakov has been a significant figure in Russian foreign policy for at least the past fifteen years. As a prominent participant in the Dartmouth group of U.S./Soviet exchanges, he appeared as a reasonable spokesman to Western audiences. In the 1980s he became an "apostle" of new thinking on Soviet foreign policy in the Third World. In a 1982 book, Primakov provided a candid reassessment of Soviet policy expressing disillusionment with Khrushchev's and Brezhnev's assumptions that Third World countries could be partners with the Soviet Union against imperialism. Instead, Primakov argued that the Third World was more of a burden than an ally to Russia. One example of this new thinking came with his apparent advocacy of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. Primakov later wrote an article espousing peaceful coexistence with the United States as a long-term strategy for the Soviet Union. He believed nuclear war was the main threat to the world and as a realist, he sought to find some middle ground.

As Gorbachev's emissary to Iraq during the Gulf War, Primakov's actions were "mischievous." He worked to position the Soviet Union between the United States and Iraq in a scheme to exert Russian power. He can best be remembered for his press conference explanation for Soviet efforts to mediate between Washington and Baghdad: "We are a superpower and we are demonstrating our own line," he said. Most recently director of Russia's foreign intelligence service, Primakov's work continued to focus on nationalistic goals, for example exerting Russian influence in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and working to prevent NATO expansion.

Primakov is neither a sentimental partner with the West, nor a reckless antagonist against it. He is an advocate of Russian national interest. His appointment is representative of the government in Russia today, reflecting the more nationalist trends now evident in Russian policy.

ROBERT FREEDMAN

Primakov's appointment as foreign minister can be viewed more as a confirmation of policy shifts already underway than as a harbinger of change to come.

Around the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, President Mikhail Gorbachev and then Boris Yeltsin began a policy of cooperation with the United States in the Middle East. Since 1993, however, nationalist trends have been increasingly evident, and we can assume that these trends will continue, especially in the Middle East. Russian interests in the region can be divided into four areas: the "near abroad" (the Caucasus and Central Asia); Iraq; Iran;

and the Arab-Israeli arena.

In the first of three of these areas, change was already afoot well before Primakov's appointment. In the "near abroad" Kozyrev initially (1992) called for good neighborly ties and proper diplomatic relations; by 1995 Yeltsin was threatening to rebuild the "old" Soviet sphere of influence, a major change in policy which Primakov will likely continue. In Iraq, the Russians sent two warships in 1992 to enforce the UN embargo; today, they are eager to lift the embargo in order to gain both political and economic dividends. (And as a way to skirt the embargo, the Russians have sent humanitarian aid, equipment, and perhaps even "spare parts" to the Iraqis.) On Iran, the Russians may have sold some arms in the early 1990s, but in the past two years they have upgraded their bilateral ties and sold Tehran nuclear reactors, relatively advanced submarines, and top-of-the-line aircraft. In the Arab-Israeli arena there has been less change. From Madrid to the White House lawn to Wadi Araba, the Russians have recognized their limited role as peace process brokers but have insisted on speaking at each of these events to maintain the image of "co-sponsor."

In the coming six months, leading up to the Russian presidential elections, there are several policies in the Middle East which Primakov is likely to follow:

• Increasing pressure on Georgia and Azerbaijan. Under Primakov's nationalist outlook, it will be a priority to bring these states under greater Russian control. The oil pipeline to Azerbaijan that is sending "early oil" through Georgia will become a major issue when a decision must be made on where to send the bulk of the oil and how to protect the pipeline itself.

• Improving relations with Iraq and Iran and promoting trilateral cooperation. This is one area in the region which the United States has left susceptible to Russian initiative because of Washington's dual containment policy. Russia will work to lift the oil sanctions against Iraq, which would permit Iraq to repay its debt to Moscow and sign reconstruction contracts worth billions of dollars. Consolidating ties with Iran will help Russia's weak economy, especially their manufacturing sector which constitutes 85 percent of Russian sales to Iran.

• Maintaining the status quo on the peace process. This is a low-cost area to underscore Russia's commitment to cooperate with the United States. In addition, it gives Moscow further access to build ties with Israel, which has replaced Syria as Russia's most important partner in the Arab-Israeli arena. The two countries already enjoy a quarter billion dollar trade relationship and with 750,000 Russians and other ex-Soviet Jews in Israel, business and other cultural ties are growing. A two-year memorandum on defense cooperation was recently signed between Israel and Russia, creating an opportunity for military ties.

In sum, although the appointment of Primakov has been viewed by many as a drastic change in Russian policy, it seems more like the confirmation of a series of smaller changes which have taken place over the past three years. The June presidential election, however, could herald more drastic departures; if the communists win, all bets are off.

This Special Policy Forum Report was prepared by Lauren Rossman. ❖

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