

# Chernomyrdin in the Gulf and Russia's Emerging Policy

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## Brief Analysis

**A**s Israeli Prime Minister Rabin visits Washington, Russian Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin is in the Persian Gulf on a visit to several Arab Gulf states. Chernomyrdin's trip is the latest in a series of diplomatic visits, initiatives and high level statements which cumulatively signal that Russian policy toward the Gulf is moving beyond the framework of the Gulf War coalition into a new post-war posture. The result will be a Russian foreign policy that will be more independent, assertive and protective of perceived Russian national interests in the region. Such an approach will challenge the notion that the United States -- as the lone world superpower -- has a security and political monopoly in the area.

### Formulating a Policy

The outlines of Russian policy toward the Gulf are gradually emerging from several high-level statements and actions over the past two months:

- President Boris Yeltsin's mid-September UN General Assembly (UNGA) speech: Yeltsin's speech did not deal directly with the Gulf region, but it did lay down some general building blocks upon which a more specific Gulf policy could be built, including (1) the insistence that Russia is a great power; (2) the economic and foreign policy priorities of Russia lie in the Commonwealth of Independent states (CIS) or the so-called "near abroad" (including the states of the Caucasus and Central Asia); and, (3) concern that local and regional conflict in and beyond the CIS can threaten Russian security and cause "a real avalanche of geopolitical change."
- Protecting the Iranian Relationship: Following his UN speech, Yeltsin visited Washington for a summit meeting which by all accounts was generally successful. However one of the most important areas of lingering disagreement was (and is) over Russian arms sales to Iran, which Washington is keen to stop. While Yeltsin apparently agreed to forgo arms sales under future contracts, he left untouched arms being sold under a current contract which reportedly has several more years to run. In signaling that it was not prepared to end arms sales to Iran, Moscow was also signaling that it was not prepared to bend to U.S. pressure to relinquish its political relationship with Tehran.
- Tilting Toward Saddam: The October crisis along the Kuwait-Iraq border revealed that Moscow has concluded that the regime of Saddam Hussein is not in danger of falling, that the time has come to deal with it, and that the Saddam's regime is no more threatening to long-term Gulf stability than would be a future Iraqi government of unknown composition. Ultimately, that was the message of Foreign Minister Kozyrev's highly publicized diplomatic mission to Iraq during the height of the crisis and his subsequent defense of Russian diplomacy at the UN. Underpinning this diplomacy is the Russian drive for position (economic, political and strategic) in the Gulf.
- The Posuvalyuk Article: On November 13 Victor Posuvalyuk, recently elevated from the post of director of the Middle East Department in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the rank of Deputy Foreign Minister, published an article in the pan-Arab daily newspaper al-Hayat which is probably the clearest statement available detailing Russian thinking about the Gulf. Probably prepared as an advanced statement for the Chernomyrdin visit, the article contains two major themes:

1) Russia's objectives in Iraq are much deeper than the mercenary desire to lift Iraqi sanctions to enable Baghdad to repay Russian debt. Rather, Russia's objectives must be viewed in the broader context of Moscow's strategic interests in the Gulf.

2) Russian interests in the Gulf consist of several elements:

Economically, Moscow has interests not just in Iraq but also in maintaining and expanding its commercial links with the Arab Gulf states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). (Posuvalyuk's article did not mention Iran.)

Politically, Russia has a "paramount interest in defusing tensions in that strategically sensitive region and ensuring that it remains peaceful and stable." This interests emanates from domestic factors as well as concerns about the impact of extra-regional instability on the CIS political environment.

Strategically, because it is a close neighbor to the Gulf, a major naval power and a permanent member of the UN Security Council, Russia "is developing the aspiration to become a guarantor of peace and stability in the Gulf region."

- The Chernomyrdin Visit: Chernomyrdin's visit to Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Oman is designed to "show the flag," push commercial and economic relations (including arms sales) and explain Russian policy towards Iraq and Iran. The visit underscores Russians interests in all three major Gulf players -- Iran, Iraq and the GCC states and the fact that it alone among great powers can speak to them all. The Russians are well aware that in making a play in Iraq, they may well alienate the Gulf Arab states. In making their case, the Russians will probably argue that Russia is uniquely placed to provide valuable political and diplomatic services. Indeed, this is the manner in which the Russians have interpreted their Iraq diplomacy in October (e.g., that they helped to prevent the renewal of conflict) and their role in Iraq's recognition of Kuwait (e.g., that they convinced Iraq to renounce unambiguously its claims to Kuwait).

#### Implications for the U.S. Policy

For the United States, Russian activity in the Gulf is a clear message that Moscow will no longer accept the framework of the Gulf War coalition as the context for its Gulf policy. Having accepted this framework in the post-Gulf War period, Russia seems to have concluded that its continuation only serves U.S. interests, not Moscow's. The result has been a Russian effort to stake out an increasingly more independent and assertive Gulf policy. In this regard, two points are worth emphasizing:

- Moscow apparently sees post-sanctions Iraq (which includes Saddam Hussein) as part of a future Gulf security system. This is in sharp contrast to U.S. thinking about Saddam Hussein and certainly about any role in Gulf security which Saddam's regime would play in the future.
- Posuvalyuk's comment about Russia's aspiration to be a "guarantor" of Gulf security is significant. Although there seems to be an awareness that this development lies in the future, it nonetheless represents the clearest indication to date of an emerging Russian view which will not be content with the U.S.-dominated political-strategic status quo in the Gulf.

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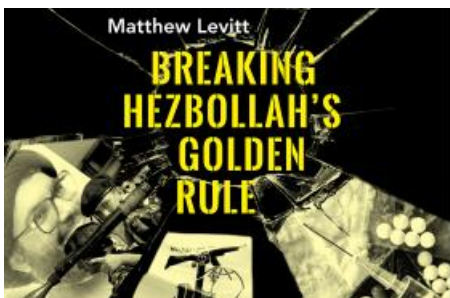
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