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THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION AND THE FUTURE RUSSIAN THREAT TO THE WESTGeostrategic Woolgathering

It is understandable that Washington and other major NATO capitals want some construct with which to forecast the future Soviet or Russian threat to European security. This seems needed to decide and gain political support on a whole range of vital matters: the military postures and doctrines of the Alliance and its members; the structure and even survival of NATO; nuclear forces and strategy; US military presence in Europe; European security architecture beyond, or after, NATO. But no such construct is at hand, and no amount of analysis or geopolitical philosophizing seems likely to create one until the air clears on the question that occupies most of this paper: What is going to happen within the USSR? Most past assumptions about Soviet power and policy cannot be used with any confidence. Simply extrapolating what we perceive as present Soviet reality -- Gorbachev, perestroika, "new thinking", defensive doctrine, shrinking forces -- is unsatisfactory because, at best, it offers but one alternative future among several, and a relatively unlikely one at that.

We can say a few important things with confidence; but, even then, implications must be hedged with care. Most importantly, the familiar or "canonical" threat is gone or rapidly going, namely, a hegemonical USSR animated by a hostile universalist ideology, present in the heart of Europe with powerful offensive military forces. This threat will not return short of a replay of the events of 1944-48. Nevertheless, most of the forces embodying that threat are still in place for the moment. Both their immediate locations and their homeland are undergoing unprecedented turbulence. It is a situation ripe for dangerous accident, if not deliberate aggression, until Soviet forces are completely gone from East Europe (a point made publicly by Hungary's President Gonz).

The new Eastern Europe is seen by all as a rich source of ethnic and territorial conflict that could disturb the general peace. But major wars that endanger Western security are not likely to occur over these conflicts. The more serious danger is indirect, that interstate conflict in East Europe, along with economic and other troubles, could derail progress toward stable democracy, affording opportunities for intervention by a revanchist Moscow at some future time. Although East European instability may be a legitimate argument for maintaining NATO's strategic strength and cohesion, it is unlikely by itself to be a very persuasive one with publics and parliaments as time passes and contrary concerns intrude.

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The real problem boils down to the Soviet Union or Russia or whatever it turns out to be: What will be the threat, particularly the military threat, to Europe emanating therefrom?

A reasonable view must embrace a breathtakingly wide spectrum of possibilities. At one extreme of unpleasantness one can readily imagine an authoritarian, chauvinist, and revanchist Russia threatening weak democratic states in East Europe and the Baltics who look to the "new European security architecture" -- which means the powerful Atlantic democracies, i.e., NATO -- for protection. Perhaps such a revanchist Russia could find allies in new (old?) crypto-fascist regimes in East Europe, such as Nazi Germany did.

At the opposite extreme of pleasantness one can imagine a confraternity of stable democratic states, including Russia, whose major security responsibility is to manage local squabbles and to deter external threats (e.g., from China or some future Islamic Federation in South Asia?), a kind of IISS with armies, but no rogue members with disruptive power and ambition. (Recalling the League of Nations, Henry Kissinger rightly notes that a collective security system without enemies tends to fail when one of its members becomes an enemy to other members). If realists find this too farfetched, they must account for the fact that this is what everybody professes to be for ultimately, under labels such as "common European house" and "new European security architecture."

None of these or other possible constructs can be fixed upon as most likely or excluded as too unlikely for planning purposes on time horizons relevant to such questions as whether to preserve, alter, build upon, or replace NATO. Such speculations do, however, sharpen appreciation as to the key question: What will be the nature of the future Russian state? Especially, will it be democratic or authoritarian? As in the past, that nature more than anything will determine the power and aspirations of the Russian state, and the degree to which it threatens the West.

Our statecraft must recognize, as do most Soviet leaders and citizens, that this is the question on history's agenda. But neither we nor they can answer it now, nor foretell in what manner and when it will be answered. Because we have little else to turn to, historical lessons should be consulted: Russia has always come out of revolutionary phases as it was before, autocratic, xenophobic, and backward, but powerful enough to threaten the neighborhood. Yet historical lessons are for opening, not closing minds, and open-mindedness reveals brighter prospects today than in the past, especially if one looks outside rather than inside the Kremlin's walls.

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The Second Russian Revolution

Gorbachev is undoubtedly correct when he says, as he has recently, that Russia is undergoing a second revolution. Although he hopes understandably that it won't come to this, revolutions, by definition, sweep away whole political and often social orders, creating new ones. One may argue over exactly what stage in the revolutionary process the USSR finds itself, but the process is clearly underway. The result will be, as the term revolution signifies, the removal of the present Soviet regime and probably the replacement of the present Soviet Union with some new political-territorial configuration.

The Soviet economy is now shrinking absolutely and its ability to deliver well-being to all but the most privileged is shrinking rapidly. No reforms or reallocations will turn this around in the short run. All reform moves will, in fact, exacerbate the trend, and those most needed for long-term recovery will be most severe in the short run. Moreover, the economy is "balkanizing" into regional cells with important political as well as economic effects. Widespread interlocking strikes are almost a certainty this year.

Despite Gorbachev's new presidential powers, central political authority is rapidly eroding as is the power of traditional party hierarchs in all regions. The CPSU is splitting and shrinking; no serious observers outside the leadership give it much of a future. Making things worse, while losing its active power, the old authority structure still has the power to block or disrupt positive adaptation to the new situation by the center or new local authorities.

Both of the above are rapidly accelerating social disorder and insecurity, e.g., crime. All this has generated deep fears in the populace, e.g., widespread talk of coups, impending civil war, "technogenic" disasters like Chernobyl, etc.

In varying degrees, all the non-Russian colonies of the empire house growing nationalist separatism. Central Asia is running behind the Baltics, Transcaucasia, and the Ukraine, but on the same track. Even Russians, especially in Siberia, are increasingly bent on escaping Moscow's authority.

In the Russian heartland, this crisis is having a polarizing effect in popular politics. On one hand, the dominant effect over the past year has been the growth of support for genuinely democratic forces, such as Democratic Russia and the Democratic Platform of communist reformers. On the other hand, this has energized the opposing force of Russian nationalist authoritarians, powerful institutionally but

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less popular. Many in the nomenklatura ally with this conservative force in hopes of ending perestroika and protecting their power and privilege. At present Gorbachev appears to be simultaneously appeasing this force and (misleadingly) holding it out as the most likely alternative should he fall, hoping thereby to recover support from real democrats and prevent losing it in the West.

Certainly the most promising political phenomenon on this landscape is the growing electoral appeal of the real democratic forces, especially and most surprisingly among the workers of major Russian cities. The capture of Moscow and Leningrad city governments by these insurgents is a dramatic example of a spreading phenomenon. Its strength, so far, holds out the prospect that the second Russian revolution can have a democratic outcome.

How this brew will yield some lasting political outcome is now as impossible to predict as the outcome itself. The struggle is increasingly polarized between the democrats and the republic separatists, on one side, and the authoritarian Russian nationalists on the other. But the political scene remains highly varied and fractured. The democrats have no other source of support than the populace. The authoritarians have more support among the military high command, some elements of the KGB, and the party apparatus, giving them the option of a putsch, but a very risky one. Should the democrats fail to get power or govern effectively, or economic collapse occur, the authoritarians could gain authentic popular support.

In the most desirable scenario, the democrats would gradually win national power in Russia from the localities upwards; and Gorbachev, perhaps after disposing of the CPSU at the next congress, would give up his balancing act and join them. In a pattern rather like that seen in Poland, a popularly elected government would come to power and Gorbachev might preside, perhaps marginally like Jaruzelski. Other scenarios are all distinctly nastier. Deepening chaos without a clear victory for the democratic forces increases the likelihood that Russian nationalist authoritarians will ultimately prevail. Should the latter seek to short-circuit the process through a military putsch, they might succeed in creating a transient regime reminiscent of Pinochet in Chile. But an equally likely result would be a social uprising against them and, possibly, widespread civil war.

Although it cannot be excluded entirely, one scenario is very unlikely. That is the orderly progress of perestroika with Gorbachev at the helm of (finally) successful political and economic reforms of the sort he currently articulates. His authority appears too weak and his policies too incoherent or misguided. But he's changed course sharply in the past and could do so again.

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The real issue is not Gorbachev but the strength and promise of the democratic forces. They are greater than ever expected for a lot of reasons, the most important one being quite simple. After 70 years of misrule by a self-appointed "vanguard", people want self-government. Education, modern communications, and painful negative examples have taught them something about what self government is. They identify democracy with what they poignantly call a "normal society". They are less ready to embrace the values of democratic economics, i.e., markets and private property, that go with democratic politics in a "normal society". But they are capable of learning if they get the chance. In a way, the capacity of the Russian people to exercise the democratic politics they are rapidly learning, and then to learn and exercise democratic economics is the central uncertainty about the Russian state at the end of the 20th Century, as it was at the beginning when promising developments were destroyed by war and the Bolsheviks.

Military Power and the Future Russian State

Since it emerged in early-modern times, the unified Russian state has been identified with a large peacetime military establishment. The army not only served to consolidate the state/empire, it was a central legitimizing symbol of the state itself. This continued under Communism. Because victory in World War II was the major achievement that somehow legitimized the Stalinist system, the Soviet army became, much more than the CPSU, the Soviet institution that enjoyed authentic popular support and therefore legitimized the state. This contributed to the militarization of Soviet policies and political culture in the post-war years. The army's modernization so as to be competitive with armies of neighboring countries was always a central goal during periods of political and economic reform throughout Russian history. Stalin embarked on force-draft industrialization in large part to create military strength. Gorbachev launched his assault on the Stalinist system in large part to revive the economic and technological base for that strength.

Today, however, this knot of identity among Russian statehood, modernity, and the army are under severe challenge that leaves the future of this tradition nearly as uncertain as that of the regime. First, the Gorbachev leadership has admitted and, exploiting glasnost, the democratic forces have amplified the truth that the overwhelming priority of military force building after World War II -- called the "hypertrophy of militarism" -- was a central cause of the crisis besetting the system today, not only crippling healthy economic development but contributing greatly to the estrangement of the USSR from the advanced industrial world. Second, glasnost has unmasked how greatly the army harbored the corruption, waste, and irrationality that characterized the "stagnation" of the Brezhnev years. To many in the USSR today, the army equates to a deserved defeat in Afghanistan and brutal conditions for young conscripts. All this

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has profoundly undermined the army as the object of patriotic loyalty. This has in turn deeply outraged and divided the Soviet officer corps.

The Soviet military is already involved in necessarily repressive operations to contain current revolutionary developments. This involvement will almost inevitably grow; and the military leadership is understandably fearful that this will further undermine its popular support, even though it favors defense of central authority and public order. It resents being thrust into this caldron by an adventurous, indecisive political leadership.

Should the Soviet military be drawn into a putsch against Gorbachev, or by Gorbachev into one against his radical opposition, or by its own leaders to preserve the state from chaos, this crisis of legitimacy among army, state, and society could escalate sharply, perhaps fatally. Such a putsch could unleash a wider uprising. Or the military could be engaged against striking workers in the Russian heartland even this year. Military involvement in suppressing unrest might succeed, but as likely would produce mutinies and fracturing. One can imagine an outcome in which the traditional identity of army and state is permanently destroyed in Russia. Less likely, but not inconceivable, military intervention against pervasive chaos with the support of popular sentiment, either democratic or nationalist/authoritarian, could create a new tradition, similar to that in Turkey, wherein the army is the ultimate foundation and guarantor of the new Russian state.

The internal revolutionary dynamic that defines the new Russian state, although highly unpredictable, will probably be dominant in defining the relationship of that state to its military establishment. But external factors will also be important, perhaps in contradictory ways. When Russia emerges from the current travail, whom will it see as its enemies? How strong or threatening will they appear to be? Powerful threat perceptions will encourage reversion to paranoid xenophobia inflating the state's perceived military needs. The role of foreign states, especially neighbors, in the revolutionary process itself will be a factor in shaping those perceptions, as it was in 1918-22. But the outcome of that process will be critical. Had the Bolsheviks failed to seize and hold power, Allied intervention in Russia early in this century might be remembered more fondly. And, of course, the geography and intensity of threat perceptions of a post-communist Russian state will be influenced by what happens to the non-Russian colonies, how their new status was achieved, and how the new Russian state accommodates to them.

The future Russian state could face potential or pressing security problems from several sides: Europe, including a united Germany and democratizing East Europe; Islamic South Asia, with involvement of Iran and especially Turkey in the affairs of its Central Asian colonies; China, undergoing revolutionary developments of its own; and Japan, growing in economic and

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possibly military power. Whether these regions are perceived by Russia to be genuinely threatening (or inviting of Russia's own interventionist ambitions) will be influenced very much by developments internal to them. China will probably be the most severe challenge over the long run because of its inherent strength, nuclear power, and instability. Islamic South Asia will be a problem for Russia, but a lesser threat because of its geopolitical fragmentation and backwardness. Europe will probably be perceived as least threatening because of its evolving democratic nature, anti-militarism, and likely helpfulness in easing Russian economic problems...unless the new Russian state is a revanchist, chauvinist autocracy, in which case democratic Europe could be seen as the major enemy.

Whatever the geopolitical setting and the internal outcome of the second Russian revolution, it is likely that a unified Russian state will survive (or reemerge) and that it will have the ability and desire to sustain a powerful military establishment, with a formidable nuclear arsenal. How powerful and how hostile to the West that state proves to be will depend, once again, mostly on its nature, democratic or authoritarian.

The Variable of Democracy

Why should the variable of democracy in future Russia be so powerful a consideration in our perceptions of the threats it may pose to the West? This should be self-evident to democratic societies. The Cold War, indeed most of the great conflicts of the 20th Century, have been about democracy. Yet the matter must be treated explicitly because its future is both crucial and uncertain, and also because much of Western opinion has a muddled view of it, underestimating the potential for and misidentifying the strongest sources of real democracy in Russia.

The old truths are still true. Democracy tends strongly, if not automatically and absolutely, to make states less threatening to other states, especially if the other states are also democratic. This is not because of the nobility of democratic souls but because of the limitations that democratic societies put on the state as the repository of coercive, armed might. They do this for their own prosperity and protection and to keep themselves out of needless trouble with their neighbors. As the history of our country shows, democracies can go to war and spend whole GNPs on military power, but the cause has to be and remain persuasive to a lot of people under very critical scrutiny. That there are dangerous departures from this dominant tendency, e.g., current tensions between "democratic" Pakistan and India, does not deprive it of its persuasiveness as a major contributor to peace.

A democratic Russia is far more likely than an autocratic one to manifest these tendencies, if perhaps only gradually and haltingly. It would be very unlikely to sustain the kind of arsenal economic performance witnessed in the post-war period of strategic buildup even after recovering economic health, unless

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faced with a compelling need that withstood constant public scrutiny. A democratic Russia would wrestle with powerful nationalist and xenophobic, even imperialistic sentiments, but marshaling military power to express them would have to overcome the pervasive desire of people to live normally, which, on the whole, includes living fairly with neighbors. A democratic Russia would insist on much more humane conditions for its service men, which means a smaller military and in time probably a volunteer military. Such a Russia would argue constantly and publicly with itself about real military needs and the costs of meeting them. It would in time recover the ability to bear those costs, perhaps better than an autocratic Russia, but be ever less willing to bear them. All these arguments apply equally to those many other dimensions of "the threat", e.g., intelligence and subversion activities, foreign adventures, etc.

Nevertheless, if and when economic and social health were recovered, a democratic Russia would share with its autocratic counterpart a desire to be an equal to the other superpower or powers, whatever that may come to mean in the years ahead. That such equality must include dimensions of power other than and competitive with the demands of military power is clear to most educated Russians now.

All this says that the future of our Russian threat is being decided in the struggle of Russia's democratic forces. To the extent Gorbachev and his policies aid them, they serve our security interests. Although Gorbachev merits historic credit for unleashing these forces on the Soviet scene, his record of supporting them has been ambiguous, especially lately. The democratic forces have shown remarkable strength. They hold the possibility of a transformation in Russia as sweeping as those seen in East Europe. But their success is far from assured.

Concluding Reflections

What conclusions can be drawn from these speculations?

Russia is headed for a revolution that will replace the current regime. Orderly evolution of the present regime into some condition foreshadowed by its current policies is no more than, say, 20% likely.

This revolution will be marked by chaos and violence, because it already is so marked and this seems likely to continue. Massive violence and civil war are not inevitable, however. A relatively peaceful revolution (i.e., better than Romania's experience) is possible. The faster the democratic forces rise to power -- with or without Gorbachev's leadership -- the more likely that civil war will be avoided. Extended chaos or repressive intervention by authoritarian forces makes civil war and an authoritarian outcome more likely, but not certain.

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A unified Russian state will emerge from this revolution. The more democratic it is the more likely it will be able to retain confederal relations with parts of the present empire (Ukraine, Byelorussia, parts of Central Asia) and accommodate to departure of others (Baltics, Transcaucasia, perhaps Western Ukraine). The more authoritarian it is, and based purely on Russian nationalism and the claims of order, the more likely that non-Russian parts will leave the empire.

The process of revolution is likely to last at least a decade. The shape and economic health of the new Russian state will then begin to emerge. It will recover its ability and desire to maintain a competitive military posture, including strategic nuclear power, against whomever it perceives to be its enemies in the neighborhood and to balance off to some degree the military strength of other large powers, including the US.

How great Russian military power is, how it is configured, and how it is aimed against the values and security of the West depend most critically on the variable of democracy versus nationalist authoritarianism in Russia. Democracy tends to mean a less threatening Russia, cooperating in Western collective security; authoritarian Russia means hostility to the West, although "detente-like" relations would come and go.

Although authoritarianism would mean more hostility to the West, it would probably mean less capability to generate truly competitive countervailing military strength, because authoritarianism probably would brake social, economic, and technological modernization. Democracy will in the long run mean more Russian capability, but less hostility to mobilize it. A middling formula that must concern us, however, might be seen in a corporatist Russian authoritarianism, somewhat along the lines of Mussolini's Italy.

With or without NATO, the future security architecture of Europe will tend to be for democracies and against non-democracies. Democratic Russia could be integrated into it. Authoritarian Russia would inevitably be its enemy.

A European security architecture that is strong and explicitly designed for democracies would be among the most powerful external factors to help the democratic forces in Russia.