



U.S.-Russia Relations: A Time of Troubles

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The Kosovo crisis dominated relations between the U.S. and Russia during this period. Even before the U.S.-led NATO force commenced its aerial bombardment of Serbia, anti-U.S. and anti-Western sentiment within Russia was running at the highest pitch in recent memory, and certainly since the end of the Cold War. Whereas Russian antipathy to the expansion of NATO had been confined largely to the Moscow and St. Petersburg chattering classes, the assault on Serbia struck a chord among the broader public and indignation was also expressed among the younger generation and the intelligentsia. It brought to a head the growing sense of frustration, impotence, and irrelevance felt by most Russians as their nation was sidelined on the international stage by the sole remaining superpower, and their economy continued to deteriorate--for which many blamed Western advisers and international financial institutions. The NATO bombing campaign exacerbated these sentiments to the extent that most polls showed over 80 percent--and sometimes up to 98 percent--of respondents condemning the U.S. and NATO.

Russian Domestic Politics

Although the elections for the State Duma are currently scheduled for mid-December 1999, and the presidential elections for June 2000, both election campaigns are already under way. This has manifested itself in the deeds, and especially the words, of the principal Russian protagonists during the Kosovo crisis. Thus then-Prime Minister Primakov gave vent to bitter recriminations against the U.S. and NATO, even while doing his best to accommodate the IMF and its most prominent member. In his more coherent moments, President Yeltsin publicly blasted the U.S. conduct of the bombing campaign, threatening dire albeit unspecified retaliation, while secretly instructing his special emissary to Yugoslavia, ex-Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, to pressure Milosevic to agree to the peace plan.

Throughout most of the period under review, Yeltsin was obviously in poor health. On one occasion, he initiated a telephone call to Clinton but, when the connection was made, Yeltsin was said to be unavailable, and Stepashin took the call instead. Most of the television coverage of the president was heavily edited, with no sound broadcast. And on most TV appearances, Yeltsin looked frail and required support in walking and even when standing.

Much of Yeltsin's time and energy during the second quarter were expended on political survival and infighting. For instance, the presidential administration fought a running battle to neutralize Prosecutor General Yuri Skuratov who, it was rumored, possessed a great deal of *kompromat* on the president's family and retinue. On May 12, the president dismissed Prime Minister Yegeni Primakov and replaced him with Sergei Stepashin. Three days later, the Duma failed to muster enough votes to impeach the president on five charges. Then on May 19, against the expectations of many, the Duma confirmed the appointment of Stepashin.

Former Prime Minister Primakov and his colleagues, together with most Duma factions, had been noisily critical of the IMF--which they assume follows U.S. instructions--but Yeltsin showed his awareness that the Fund's approval of the Russian government's economic program was crucial for the nation's fiscal and economic recovery. For only after the IMF gives its blessing and issues the first tranche of the \$4.5 billion standby credit, first mooted in March, will the World Bank and the Japanese government follow with credits amounting to about \$2 billion and \$1 billion respectively and, even more important, will the Paris and London Clubs sit down with the Russian negotiators to reschedule their Soviet-era debt.

Chernomyrdin Appointment

In his choice of Viktor Chernomyrdin to act as his special emissary on the Kosovo crisis, Yeltsin was motivated partly by the fact that the former prime minister was well-known to, and well-liked by, the Clinton Administration from his performance in the long-standing Gore-Chernomyrdin Commission. Another ground could have been Yeltsin's desire to give Chernomyrdin a boost ahead of the forthcoming presidential election, where he might possibly be the president's designated heir if the candidacies of Stepashin or Aksenenko failed. But the main reason was surely Yeltsin's determination to circumvent and to trump the hard line approaches in negotiations over Kosovo to be expected from Foreign Minister Ivanov and Defense Minister Sergeyev and their teams. For in view of the widespread anti-American sentiment not only in the Communist, agrarian, and nationalist blocs in the Duma, but also in the country at large, Boris Yeltsin continued his vehement and public criticism of the NATO air strikes yet consistently strove to prevent Russia's isolation on this issue.

At one stage in the Kosovo negotiations, Chernomyrdin visited some of the CIS capitals to gain their support for the Russian position. Instead of support, these countries sent their heads of state to Washington to participate in the fiftieth anniversary celebrations for NATO. And while they were there, Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova, and Uzbekistan signed an agreement to create GUUAM, whose main task is to develop and transport to market the area's rich oil and gas deposits to the exclusion of Russia. This provoked bitter recrimination from Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov.

Policy Implications

It is perhaps still too early fully to assess the overall impact on Russian-U.S. relations of the Kosovo crisis. For much of the time, Russia played a blocking and carping role. For a time, Russia was virtually the only major country supporting the Milosevic regime. And yet it was Yeltsin's personal emissary, Viktor Chernomyrdin, who played a pivotal role in persuading the Serbian leader to accept the peace plan. At the end of the day, Russia will be remembered more for its positive contribution toward bringing peace to Kosovo, than for its earlier recalcitrance. The price paid for this included the upgrading of the G-7 forum to G-8, U.S. backing for an IMF agreement, and perhaps an implicit agreement to delay further expansion of NATO.

The dash of the 200 Russian troops from their station in Bosnia to the Pristina airport was almost certainly devised by the general staff, authorized by Yeltsin, and pushed through without the knowledge or consent of the Foreign Ministry, the Security Council, or of Viktor Chernomyrdin. . . . Vintage Yeltsin! All strata of Russian society warmly received the news of this piece of bravado, Yeltsin promoted its commander on the spot, and the military have been exulting ever since. Yet the evident lack of coordination between the power branches does not encourage much faith on the part of external partners in the credibility and integrity of the Russian government.

In the wake of Kosovo, we may see a holding pattern on both sides. The Yeltsin administration and the Duma will be preoccupied by the upcoming elections, while the Clinton administration will be bracing itself for the next Russian president who could prove to be an even greater challenge than Boris Yeltsin, together with a new State Duma that could prove even more obdurate than its predecessors. All of this suggests that the current Time of Troubles could persist at least until the middle of the coming decade.

Chronology of U.S.-Russia Relations April-June 1999

April 14, 1999: Yeltsin appoints Viktor Chernomyrdin as his personal emissary to Yugoslavia.

April 18, 1999: In an interview with the Spanish newspaper *El Pais*, Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov describes NATO's military operations against Yugoslavia as a violation of the 1997 Russia-NATO Founding Act.

April 19, 1999: In a statement, the Russian Foreign Ministry rules out making any amendments to the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty.

April 19, 1999: In a telephone conversation with Clinton, Yeltsin pledges not to send further Russian warships to the Adriatic.

April 20, 1999: Ivanov announces that Russia will boycott the NATO fiftieth anniversary in Washington.

April 24, 1999: Georgian, Ukrainian, Uzbek, Azerbaijani, and Moldovan representatives, in Washington for the NATO anniversary, sign an agreement (GUUAM) which aims, inter alia, to develop and transport to market the area's rich oil and gas deposits to the exclusion of Russia.

May 3-4, 1999: Chernomyrdin tries to broker diplomatic solution to Kosovo with Clinton, Gore, Albright, and Annan.

May 6, 1999: Russia and the major Western powers draft a joint plan to end the Kosovo conflict, including deployment of an "international force" to keep the peace after Yugoslav forces withdraw.

May 12, 1999: Responding to Russian proposal, Clinton Administration suggests Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari as the Western envoy to help mediate the Kosovo crisis.

June 2, 1999: Chernomyrdin, Ahtisaari, and Talbott agree on most elements of a Kosovo peace plan to be presented to Milosevic. Serbian parliament endorses this on June 3.

June 11, 1999: A group of about 200 Russian troops from the peacekeeping force in Bosnia dashes to occupy the Pristina airport ahead of NATO forces.

June 13, 1999: At G-7/G-8 summit in Cologne, Yeltsin declares: "We must make up after our fight." Russia agrees to discuss possible changes in 1972 ABM treaty, while U.S. agrees to discuss START-III before Duma ratifies START-II.

June 21-26, 1999: Zapad (West)-99, the largest strategic command staff exercise conducted by Soviet or Russian forces since 1985, is aimed at a simulated Western aggressor.

June 24, 1999: U.S. and Russia agree to prolong the Nunn-Lugar Program for a further seven years.

June 26, 1999: Yeltsin approves deployment of 3,616 Russian troops for KFOR through June 10, 2000.