

NATO expansion could topple Yeltsin regime

By Dmitri Shalin
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Boris Yeltsin tried to sound upbeat after the Helsinki summit, but the news didn't play well back home. Bill Clinton's concessions could not offset the fact Yeltsin failed to forestall the NATO expansion into Central and Eastern Europe.

This fateful decision is having a peculiar impact on the Russian political scene: It has brought

together the pro-Western elites and their anti-Western opponents, historic archrivals who are setting aside their differences and uniting in their opposition to what they perceive to be Western ingratitude and encroachment.

Ever since Peter the Great began to modernize Russia, pro-Western intellectuals mused about their place in Europe. Russian Westernizers saw in their country an easternmost flank of Occidental culture and swore to defend its values against the Asian menace. Whether they hailed the Enlightenment, socialism or human rights, Westernizers did so in the hope that some such Western scheme would help transform Russia into a mainstream European nation.

By contrast, Slavophiles pictured Russia as the westernmost plank of Eastern civilization, superior to its Western rival. The Russians' concern for ethics is a cut above the Western preoccupation with law; their preference for communal living beats Western individualism; and their aversion to private property is loftier than bourgeois philistinism, contended Slavophiles. The opening to the West could only undercut Russia's unique mission among Christian nations.

These competing ideologies have left their mark on Russian foreign

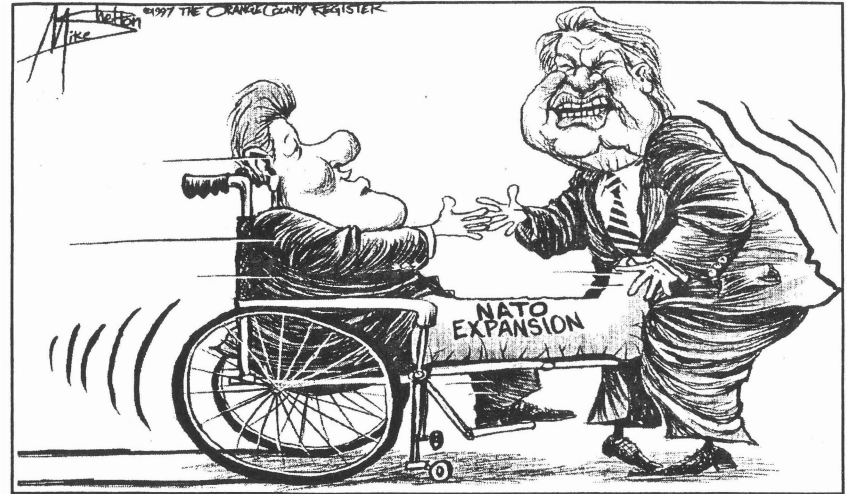
policy. Depending on which faction wielded influence at the moment, the Russian government sought a rapprochement with the West or raised an iron curtain to protect its indigenous culture.

Deep cuts in the nuclear arsenal, reductions in conventional forces, international summitry, cultural exchanges — Mikhail Gorbachev's foreign policy showed a clear pro-Western bias. Boris Yeltsin built on this legacy, urging Russia's speedy integration into the international community. Now he finds himself on the defensive as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is poised to expand eastward.

The opposition to the NATO plans cuts across the familiar divides in Russian politics. Liberals hailing from Andrei Sakharov's camp, moderate nationalists nurtured by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, populists with ties to Alexander Lebed, Gennady Zyuganov's Communists — all cultural/political elites in today's Russia deplore NATO's efforts to enlist new members.

Westernizers feel betrayed by the West. The desperate messages they send to the Clinton administration warn of the disastrous consequences that its policy spells for the liberal camp. After the Soviet empire willed itself into oblivion — an unprecedented case in world history, Westernizers claim — the fledgling Russian Republic deserves a better treatment.

Neo-Slavophiles are gloating. They heap scorn on hapless liberals and demand to restore Russia's waning glory. The West failed to appreciate the ultimate sacrifice Russia made on behalf of the European unity, Slavophiles contend. This truly Christian act won them no reprieve from their enemies, who hasten to take advantage of Russia's dire conditions and entice its historical allies into a hostile military pact.



This overwrought rhetoric is a touch self-serving. After all, it is Stalin's imperialism that spurred the North Atlantic Treaty. Eastern European nations have reasons to fear Russian expansionism. And the likelihood that the enlarged NATO would strike Russia pre-emptively is negligible.

Still, it is a mistake to treat the Russian concern as "an issue of primarily of perception, of political sensibility," the way Strobe Talbott, President Clinton advisor, did in a recent policy statement.

Rationales for the NATO expansion are more than a bit confusing. We hear that NATO is no longer chiefly a military alliance, that it is a political association promoting democracy, that it poses no military threat to any nation. At the same time, we are told that the threat from the East is real, that NATO should maintain a credible deterrence, and that bringing Eastern Europeans into NATO without fully integrating them militarily would offend their feelings.

These two sets of reasons are at cross-purpose. If NATO is now primarily a political organization promoting democracy, then all European nations should benefit from it. Russia is a European country that needs a helping hand with its democratic reforms more desperately than Poland, Hungary or the Czech Republic. Give all interested parties the

same associate membership status, go easy on the military integration, and there will be no need to worry about offending anybody's sensibilities.

If NATO remains a military alliance par excellence designed to thwart the Russian menace, then bringing the Eastern European armies into the NATO command structure should be a priority.

As the Clinton administration decides on NATO's *raison d'être*, it might want to ponder history. Many in the West remember the Cuban missile crisis, when John Kennedy humiliated Nikita Khrushchev into withdrawing Soviet nuclear missiles from Cuba. Few people are aware of what Russians called the European missile crisis — NATO's successful program to install nuclear weapons along the Soviet borders. This double humiliation gave Khrushchev's conservative opponents the ultimate rationale for routing his regime.

What an irony it would be if the double humiliation facing Russia today — its failure to maintain a superpower status and to prevent NATO from expanding eastward — gives Yeltsin's opponents the final rationale for toppling his regime.

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