

Weimar Russia: Resist Its Blackmail-by-Weakness

By Josef Joffe

MUNICH — Russia is the joker in the European deck, and wariness should be the watchword. The West ought not to bet on the predictability of a player which represents the residual risk in Europe's post-Cold War destiny.

The problem is domestic in part. It is true that Russia has forsworn communism, that it is scrapping nuclear weapons while struggling valiantly to try democracy and market economics. But in the process, the New Russia has come to resemble an older model: Weimar Germany.

Like Germany in the 1920s, Russia seems to be fighting a losing battle with the economy. While hyperinflation has slowed a bit, the economy as a whole is in a free fall. In the first quarter of this year, industrial output fell by 25 percent from the year-earlier period. As in Weimar Germany, democratic forces have been blindsided by attempted coups. They are being attacked by chauvinists of all stripes who hawk a heady message of imperial revival while depicting the motherland as the craven victim of Western humiliation.

Economic catastrophe and nationalist snake oil were precisely the two ingredients that helped to poison the Weimar experiment. So don't bet on Boris Yeltsin, or on Russia turning into another Canada: huge, but placid and cuddly.

The other side of the problem is a Russian diplomacy that displays more continuity with the old ways than the West should be ready to stomach. Consider Defense Minister Pavel Grachev, who last week presented his wish list to NATO.

The list boils down to two key items that could have been formulated by Messrs. Khrushchev and Gromyko. One states (in so many words): Get rid of NATO. The other, also wrapped in circumlocution, demands a certified Russian veto power over Western strategy.

While in Bonn three weeks ago with Boris Yeltsin, General Grachev pointedly asked why West Europeans kept harping on the need for a continued U.S. military presence. Who needs NATO? Far better, General Grachev claimed in Brussels, would be a "system of collective security and stability under the aegis of the CSCE," the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe. Meanwhile, the Western alliance should prepare for its eventual extinction by turning into a military handmaiden of the CSCE.

If that mini-United Nations — including Russia and cohorts like Belarus and Uzbekistan — should approve, NATO might do the dirty police work in local wars. In no case, contended General Grachev, should NATO act without binding consultation with Moscow.

One could almost hear the ghosts of Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev applauding. Mr. Khrushchev routinely claimed a veto over Western defense choices, be it on West Germany's rearmament in the 1950s or on neutron bombs and cruise missiles in the 1970s and 1980s. And he practically wrote the script on a collective security system in Europe that would exclude the United States and dissolve NATO.

These parallels ought to concentrate the Western mind. In the past, it was Soviet strength that pressed on Europe; now it is Russian weakness. Curiously, the policies are similar. This goes to show that great powers do not necessarily change their tune abroad just because they are experimenting with a different political system at home.

What to do about "Weimar Russia"? The answer is obvious: Don't treat it like Weimar

Germany. Keep all doors open, don't kick Russia while it is down, try to bring Lenin's heirs into the community of the responsible great powers.

If it helps Mr. Yeltsin against his tormentors at home, give him an extra star on his shoulderboard; pay homage to his country's bruised ego and cooperate with him across the board.

But do not give away the game by yielding to blackmail-by-weakness. Treat Russia as a partner where possible, but as a risk factor when necessary. Above all, do not recklessly ditch NATO — either by accepting Russia as a de facto member (last year's Kremlin strategy) or by letting the Western alliance slide into a CSCE-type collective security hodge-podge (the Grachev gambit).

And think about this part of the Weimar analogy: D-Day might not have been necessary if the West had maintained a credible deterrent in the 1920s and 1930s.

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