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VIEWPOINT

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Three's a Crowd

Yeltsin's attempt to create an axis of power comes off as sheer anachronism

THE SYMBOLISM WAS EITHER CRUDE OR TOUCHING, depending on your taste. During their threesome in Bor, a government complex just outside Moscow, Boris Yeltsin presented his visitors from France and Germany, Jacques Chirac and Helmut Kohl, with a funny-looking gift. It consisted of three drinking bowls that can be screwed together with a key-shaped wrench. Get it? Three vessels locked in line—here was a new transcontinental “axis” extending from Moscow via Bonn/Berlin to Paris.

During the summit, Yeltsin never stopped babbling about “axes” and “troikas.” But when he said that he would safeguard the key in Moscow, Chirac and Kohl banged the table (metaphorically, that is). Protesting politely, the French President reminded his host not to overdo the symbol mongering. After all, such a token could be misinterpreted as a pitch for Russian “neo-hegemonism.” The Chancellor put it more curtly: “The key belongs to us all.”

This brief episode serves to show that Boris Yeltsin and his generation, those ex-Soviet figures who currently rule Russia, still inhabit a different historical time zone. Six years after the self-destruction of the Soviet Union, 19th century geopolitics is alive and well in Moscow. While Foreign Minister Yevgeni Primakov plays footsie with the likes of Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic to reassert Russian influence in the Middle East and the Balkans, his boss dreams of a European counterweight to the United States.

It was Yeltsin who invented the idea of a regular three-way summit. He has invited the Chinese to join him in a “strategic partnership” against you know who: those who would try to remake the world into a “unipolar system.” And he has serenaded his neighbors to the West with the siren song first composed by Joseph Stalin. Wouldn't it be nice if Europe could solve its problems without the United States? In Bor even the French, who love to take potshots at the U.S., softly answered, “No.” They are not above getting into bed with the Russians when it comes to stopping an American bombing run over Iraq. But to *stay* in bed with Boris? Nor will Helmut Kohl ever join them in any anti-American combination.

Helmut Kohl had gone to Moscow to provide his Russian friend with a nice photo opportunity and to sign some innocuous cooperation agreements. But both he and Chirac encountered a Yeltsin who hit his partners with an all-too-familiar triple whammy. First, the man gets sick and disappears from sight, raising the fearsome specter of a rulerless Russia. Second, he comes back and fires his cabinet for no apparent reason—unless it was to cut down his Prime Minister, Viktor Chernomyrdin, who seems to be preparing a run for the presidency. Third, instead of putting his shoulder to the wheel at home, he launches a grandiose foreign

policy initiative. It reminds you of Shakespeare's advice to “busy giddy minds with foreign quarrels.”

The moral of the story is that Yeltsin's Russia is still some way from resuming its seat at the table of the responsible Great Powers. Though its capacity for real mischief is severely limited by the disintegration of its army and economy, Russia seems to suffer from a distorted view of reality. How can Yeltsin, this half-democratic Czar, believe that he can forge an anti-American axis with the Germans, who won't even fall for such designs when they are “Made in France?” Why would he even entertain such wayward dreams when the United States labored so hard to draw post-totalitarian

Russia into the democratic-capitalist realm?

Chirac and Kohl did the right thing in Bor. When Yeltsin talked “axis,” they offered him an autobahn linking London, Paris, Berlin, Warsaw and Moscow. When he talked “alliance,” they pledged to join forces against natural disasters and pushed cooperation among their universities. In so doing, Chirac and Kohl confronted Yeltsin with a different political universe. In so many words, they told the Russian President that in the 21st century, Bismarck is out. In the

1880s, the “Iron Chancellor” preached to the Russian ambassador, Petr Saburov, that all geostrategic wisdom consisted of being in a “threesome” as long as Europe was governed by a “precarious equilibrium of five powers.”

Today, the grand chessboard has changed. The stakes are welfare, not warfare, and the balance sheet is more important than the balance of power. Winning and losing have to do with the strength of a nation's economy and the stability of its socio-political arrangements. Boris Yeltsin, of all people, should understand this. The Soviet Union collapsed precisely because it insisted on playing the arms game while its economy rotted away and its people succumbed to political cynicism. Today, Russia has a real chance of taking home the Big Prize of democracy and market economics.

But watching Yeltsin's antics, one wonders. His imagination seems limited to thinking up bolted drinking cups. These might be good for boozing. But in the 21st century, a high-speed road link between London and Moscow is worth more than an anachronism by the name of axis. ■

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