

# Toward a Modern, Non-Imperial State

This week's drama in Moscow was the final convulsive gasp not only of Soviet Communism but also of the Soviet Union as we have known it. Indeed, even the restoration of Gorbachev to the presidency does not alter the fact that the Soviet Union of Gorbachev's perestroika is itself now a thing of the past. The implications of that are far-reaching.

Consider the following consequences of what has transpired:

The failure of the coup means that the most formidable institutions of centralized Soviet power have been thoroughly demoralized, discredited and undermined. Even the plotters did not dare to identify themselves openly with the once ruling Communist Party, though the coup was staged in order to preserve its leaders in power. The party is now totally disgraced, and its formal demise is only a matter of time.

The KGB, at one time the fearsome organ of terror, proved to be a scarecrow, a toothless shadow of its lethal past. It failed to deliver: no preemptive arrests of potential leaders of the opposition to the coup, no effective intimidation of the resentful populace. The KGB will now probably be disbanded, while its chief conspirators will most likely enjoy long-term sojourns in the KGB's own places of incarceration.

The Soviet Army proved that it was even less able to quell the Soviet population than to crush the Afghan resistors. In a sense, the Soviet generals—if not the Soviet troops—have lost their second war in a row. The hesitant behavior of the Soviet troops is a testimony to the demoralization that has set into what was once the world's most powerful military instrument. There are now bound to be prolonged internal recriminations and personnel purges.

The events of the last several days thus prove that the three critical instruments of central Soviet power are now in a state of massive disarray.

The foregoing leads directly to the next major consequence of the abortive putsch, namely the massive increase in the power of the various national republics. As the coup unfolded—or, rather, stumbled along—the non-Russian republics assertively defended their rights. Even the relatively compliant Kazakhstan made it clear that it would not obey the Kremlin *Diktats* anymore, while Estonia followed the earlier examples of Lithuania and Georgia in unilaterally proclaiming its independence. The government of Ukraine—even while not directly contesting the authority of the would-be new Kremlin leaders—made it plain that it would not be bound by their orders.

The failure of the coup will now make any restoration of central power even less likely. On the contrary, it will accelerate the decentralization and eventually even the partial dissolution of the Soviet Union.

These new power realities are given special salience by the fact that Gorbachev's restoration to power was made possible by the heroism and determination displayed by one man above all others—Boris Yeltsin. Gorbachev is now beholden to him, and Yeltsin—far more than Gorbachev—represents the emergence of genuinely constitutional and legitimate power in the Soviet Union. Western admirers of Gorbachev have rightly hailed him for having been the grand innovator in foreign policy, but they have tended to overlook

Blocked due to copyright.  
See full page image or  
microfilm.

*The West will now have to help the reformed leadership embark upon a decisive transformation—not just reform—of the Soviet Union.*

the fact that he has been the grand equivocator in domestic policy.

In contrast, it has been Yeltsin who has stood foursquare for the rapid democratization and decentralization of the Soviet Union. Western press generally ignored the truly courageous decision by Yeltsin to sign—on the very day in July that President Bush was visiting Gorbachev in the Kremlin—a precedent-making treaty with Lithuania, formally recognizing on Russia's behalf that country's independence—an act yet to be matched by the United States itself.

With the reactionary institutions of power crumbling, Gorbachev—if he is to remain an effective leader—now will have to embrace Yeltsin's programs. That means acceleration in comprehensive political and economic changes—across the board and without hesitations.

The bottom line is that Gorbachev's need or excuse for maneuvering has disappeared, while Yeltsin has reinforced his democratic legitimacy through a display of sheer personal power and changes.

The acceleration in Soviet domestic reforms and the end of the existing Soviet Union will now require the West to participate both with a restored Gorbachev and with a newly powerful Yeltsin in domestic Soviet crisis-management. It is no exaggeration to say that the Soviet economy was placed into Western receivership during the London G-7 summit, and the abortive coup has now involved the West to an unprecedented degree in internal Soviet politics. After Yeltsin, it was Western leaders—and very much the American president himself—who played a significant role in isolating and discrediting the would-be putschists.

That involvement carries with it—whether we like it or not—special responsibilities. The West will now have to help the reformed Soviet leadership adopt and embark upon a truly decisive transformation—not just reform—of the Soviet Union. In doing so, the West should no longer coddle a hesitant Gorbachev but should support

instead a program that truly is meant to give the various nations that inhabit the Soviet Union (and President Bush would do well to stop speaking of "the Soviet people"—a phrase from the odious past) an opportunity to join the modern world.

Democratic Russians—who know that Russia cannot be free unless it itself is committed to freedom—are on the record as to what the fundamental components of the needed transformation must be:

- True national self-determination for non-Russians either within or without a new loose confederation;
- A genuinely competitive multiparty system;
- A decentralized and demilitarized economy that permits the emergence of several but cooperative national market economies in the place of the politically centralized and Moscow-run Soviet state economy.

When such a program has been unambiguously adopted by the liberated Gorbachev, and as it is being set in motion, the West should be ready to help with financial aid. The West should now also emulate Yeltsin in recognizing the independence of the Baltic republics. In addition, perhaps a mixed commission of prominent Soviet, American, European and Japanese public figures should be set up to monitor the implementation of the desperately needed changes and to sustain Western support over the long term.

In brief, the ugly chapter in Russian history that opened on Nov. 6, 1917, is finally closing. The heroism demonstrated by the Russians of Moscow and Leningrad now places on history's dynamic agenda the possibility that Russia may truly join Europe in political development as a modern and non-imperial state. For that promise to become a reality, Western statesmen will now have to display the courage of commitment so vividly demonstrated by Boris Yeltsin in the first lonely hours of his confrontation with the once feared troika of the KGB, the Soviet generals and the Communist Party henchmen.