

# AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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## The Impact of the Disintegration of the USSR on World Politics

The breakup of the USSR is easily the most dramatic event of the latter half of the 20th century. Many would argue that the success or failure of the Commonwealth of Independent States, and most importantly the future of Russia, will in large measure determine the stability of the post-Cold War world. Viktor Israelyan, a former Soviet Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of the USSR, spoke on these issues at the Harriman Institute on February 25, 1992.

Formed in December 1991, the CIS came into being when 11 Soviet republics jointly agreed to disband the USSR and form a commonwealth. Though the powers of (and prospects for) the commonwealth are unclear, the leaders of the 11 signatory republics agreed to cooperate in the areas of foreign policy, defense, and the economy. Numerous problems have nevertheless emerged: border and ethnic disputes, disagreements over the fate of Soviet property and the destiny of the Soviet armed forces, etc. Despite these differences, however, Israelyan noted that the republics also have many common interests. Among the first is their relationship *vis-à-vis* the rest of the world, principally the West. Many people in the former USSR now see the West, and particularly the USA, as allies. A similar attitude is visible toward what used to be called the non-aligned world, albeit a less favorable one than before. While in the past the non-aligned were "allies in the struggle against imperialism, now the non-aligned are considered competitors for Western aid."

But overriding the importance of each republic's newfound freedom to engage in international diplomacy, according to Israelyan, is the importance of each republic's relationship with the other republics. In Israelyan's estimation, the CIS and its individual members face three alternatives. The first is a revival of totalitarianism, and perhaps an expansionist dictatorship striving to recreate

the union or empire. A second alternative would be for the CIS to develop along the lines of an Eastern European Community or an Eastern NATO. Finally, there could be a prolonged transitional period in which the CIS would become, in Israelyan's words, a "gross hot spot of the world," with regional conflicts and interstate wars similar to that in Nagorno-Karabakh. Most serious, perhaps, would be an eruption of hostilities between Russia and Ukraine, which in Israelyan's opinion is "something which is against logic, tradition, and history, against everything. Neither Russia nor Ukraine have an alternative but alliance."

From the standpoint of international politics, the most dramatic changes have come in the status and geopolitical position of Russia. The territory that Moscow directly controlled used to extend into the heart of Europe; now, Moscow's effective borders stop at the frontiers of Belarus, Ukraine, and the Baltic states. Attempts to redress longstanding territorial grievances would, Israelyan said, open a Pandora's box with unforeseeable consequences. The Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939, for instance, provided for an array of frontier changes affecting the Baltic states, Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, Western Ukraine, and Western Belarus, while in the Far East Russia has a lingering dispute with Japan over the Kurile Islands. Rational negotiations over these issues in the current ethnically charged atmosphere is highly unlikely.

In Israelyan's opinion the most threatening challenges to Russia loom in the South. For the first time in centuries Russia does not have any direct contact with the Middle East; instead, it now borders with the independent states of Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan. It has no direct borders with Turkey, Iran or Afghanistan. As Israelyan pointed out, this change "is more than a question of borders, it is a question of influence, of strategic position."



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Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have rushed to fill the power vacuum in Central Asia created by the collapse of the USSR. Turkey has been the most successful in this regard, playing the lead role, for instance, in the formation of an organization of Black Sea states, and Azerbaijani officers are now being trained in Turkey. Israelyan quoted one Iranian official as saying that "for the first time in history, the Caspian Sea has become an Islamic Sea." While cooperation between the ex-Soviet Muslim republics and other Muslim states is not a direct threat to Russian security, Israelyan believes that it does have inherent dangers because of Russia's own ethnic composition. Many of the areas in Russia currently the focus of separatist movements, such as Tatarstan, Bashkirstan, Dagestan, Balkaria, and Chechen-Ingushetia, are predominantly Muslim. If secession fever grips all of them, Israelyan asked, "Then what remains of Russia?"

## Deadly Games

Faced with this scenario, what should Russian foreign policy be? A return to the old ways, in Israelyan's opinion, is unlikely. The foreign policy of Russia has to insure what is its "utmost task . . . to contribute to the mastering of the economic crisis. It's a question of the survival of Russia." How can this be done? First and foremost by strengthening the CIS. More cooperation with the West at this time is impractical, so improving economic ties with Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan is imperative. Unfortunately, such cooperation is being hindered by the tactical maneuvering of republican leaders, bent on maintaining power by appealing to nationalism. As Israelyan noted, "It's a deadly game, [and cooperation] has to be restored in some civilized way."

Israelyan believes that Russian foreign policy will soon assume a very different orientation. First, it will be an openly pro-Western foreign policy, perhaps even more

pro-German than pro-US. Second, Russian foreign policy will place more emphasis on human rights, i.e., things such as the freedom for people to travel, the rights of minorities, etc. Further progress on both the economy and on human rights issues is predicated, however, upon a reduction in the enormous Soviet military arsenal. Unfortunately, the financial and structural difficulties involved in this process are overwhelming. A former arms control negotiator himself, Israelyan noted that the destruction of some weapons costs more than their construction. One of the most pressing issues involves a recently-signed agreement obligating both the US and the USSR to destroy their entire stocks of chemical weapons. For the Soviets alone this means about 40 thousand tons of weapons. As Israelyan pointed out, however, the Soviets will not be able to fulfill their obligations under the treaty simply because neither the facilities nor the money for a project of such scale exists.

## Fresh Blood

Facilitating all of these rapid changes in Russian foreign policy is the wholesale turnover in personnel at the Russian foreign ministry. Based on his 45 years of involvement in the Soviet foreign ministry, Israelyan believes a new era has dawned in its successor organization. Just as the first generation of foreign ministry officials, such as Litvinov and Chicherin, gave way in the 1930s to a younger generation composed of men such as Vyacheslav Molotov and Andrei Gromyko, so to has a successor generation come to prominence in the 1990s, led by the new Russian foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev. All of the former deputy foreign ministers have been forced to resign, and most countries have been assigned new ambassadors: as Israelyan noted, "Fresh blood has been needed."

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