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## THE “PRIMAKOV DOCTRINE”: RUSSIA’S ZERO-SUM GAME WITH THE UNITED STATES

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Russian Foreign Minister Evgenii Primakov is claiming credit for calming Saddam Hussein during the recent Iraqi crisis. However, Primakov’s role in temporarily defusing the crisis should be seen not as an exercise in diplomatic finesse, but as an important sign of Russia’s new post-Cold War foreign policy and as part of a larger strategy to challenge America’s leadership role in global security.<sup>2</sup>

The purpose of this strategy is to build a Eurasian counterbalance to the American-led Atlantic alliance by forging closer ties between Russia, China, and potentially Iran. This goal was evident in early 1996 when Primakov and his then-Iranian counterpart, Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati, issued a joint statement describing the foreign military presence in the Persian Gulf as “totally unacceptable.”<sup>3</sup> Moscow and Beijing already have come together in what their leaders refer to as a “strategic partnership”<sup>4</sup> and would like Iran, and possibly India and France, to join their efforts as well. The goal of Primakov’s policy obviously is to weaken U.S. influence in the Middle East and in Eurasia, and to establish Russia in the Middle East as a power equal to the United States. Under Primakov, Russia seems intent on excluding the United States from influencing issues involving the former Soviet area while strengthening China’s position.

1. The author thanks Professor Stephen J. Blank, Professor Robert O. Freedman, J. Michael Waller, Professor Uri Ra’anan, Herbert Romerstein, and a number of colleagues for reviewing and assisting with this article.
2. For a thorough discussion of Russia’s growing role in the Middle East, see Stephen J. Blank, “Russia’s Return to the Middle East Policy,” *Orbis*, Fall 1996, p. 516.
3. Scott Parish, “Primakov in Tehran,” *OMRI Daily Digest*, December 30, 1996.
4. Qian Qichen, “Primakov Holds Talks,” Xinhua, November 10, 1997, FBIS-CHI-97-314.

A partnership consisting of Russia, China, and Iran would be dangerous for the United States and its allies. It could pose a serious threat to stability in the Persian Gulf and the Taiwan Strait. It could endanger the flow of oil from the Persian Gulf to the West if the extremist regimes in Iran or Iraq, with Russia's encouragement, were to break out of their international isolation and pursue aggressive policies toward their neighbors. Such a strategy, which can be called "the Primakov doctrine," could increase instability throughout Europe and Asia and entangle the United States in regional conflicts in Eurasia. In short, it would turn Russia's relations with the United States into a zero-sum game.

## THE SPY WHO CAME IN FROM THE COLD WAR

The roots of this strategy go back to the Cold War, which gave birth to shrewd foreign policy operators such as Russia's current foreign minister, Evgenii Primakov. Primakov was the quintessential Soviet establishment insider. He was born in Kiev in 1929. In the 1950s, while working for the Russian broadcasting authority, he was trained by the Soviet KGB as an Oriental scholar and speaker of Arabic and English.<sup>5</sup> In the 1960s, he rose to the position of head of the Arabic broadcasting service of Radio Moscow. In 1962, he began working for the International Department of the Central Committee of the USSR Communist Party as a senior commentator and *Pravda* correspondent in the Middle East.<sup>6</sup> He became the expert on the Middle East for Leonid Brezhnev's government.

Primakov played an important role in the 1970s and 1980s in formulating the Soviet Union's policy in the Middle East and South Asia. He authored the Communist Party's most authoritative ideological justification for the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan. In his writings, he has lamented the 1980–1988 Iran-Iraq war as a diversion from the struggle against imperialism and the United States, while calling for the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to overcome its internal differences in order to pursue its struggle against Israel. Primakov has befriended and supported Saddam Hussein of Iraq, Hafez al-Assad of Syria, Muammar Qaddafi of Libya, and Yasser Arafat—leaders of the anti-American camp in the Middle East. He maintains close personal relations with these leaders to this day.

After serving as director of two prestigious government think tanks, the Institute of Oriental Studies and the Institute of International Economics and Foreign Relations, Primakov became chairman of the upper house of the USSR Supreme Soviet in 1989. In September of that year, he became a Candidate Member of the Soviet Politburo.

In late 1990 and January 1991, as special advisor to Mikhail Gorbachev, Primakov undertook two last-minute missions to prevent the Gulf War. He sought a resolution that would allow Iraq to retain occupied Kuwait while preventing the United States from using force against Saddam. These missions were designed to undermine then-Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze, who had pursued a policy of cooperation with the U.S.-led coalition.

In September 1991, Primakov became the last chief of the First Main Directorate (foreign intelligence division) of the KGB and First Deputy to the Chairman of the KGB. In late 1991, he served as head of the Central Intelligence Service, which in December 1991 became known as the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation (SVRR). Thus, Primakov supervised the seamless transition of that service from Soviet to Russian control. In this capacity, he was in charge of supervising major Russian intelligence spies in the United States, such as the Central Intelligence Agency's former counterintelligence chief Aldrich Ames.

During 1991 and 1992, a parliamentary investigation of organized mass theft of property and financial fraud estimated that billions of dollars had been illegally laundered and held abroad in bank accounts for

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5. Yevgenia Albatz, "KGB-MSB-MBVD: Substantive Changes?" *Moscow News*, January 13, 1992, which cites former KGB General Oleg Kalugin. Also from personal interview at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Boston, Massachusetts, 1990, with source who requested anonymity.
  6. Alexander Rahr, *A Biographical Directory of 100 Leading Soviet Officials* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 144-145.

Communist Party and KGB officials. Lawmakers concluded that all detailed records rested with the Foreign Intelligence Service and other agencies, and they called on Yeltsin to instruct Primakov's agency to cooperate and track down the funds. Primakov, however, asked Supreme Soviet Chairman Ruslan Khasbulatov to shut down the investigative commission, and Khasbulatov complied.<sup>7</sup>

When Yeltsin fired his first foreign minister, Andrey Kozyrev, in December 1995, Primakov assumed the position.<sup>8</sup> Unlike his predecessor, Primakov managed to consolidate institutional support from the Moscow-based bureaucracy, the Duma, the armed forces, and the media. Russians of all political stripes uniformly praise him as a professional, a tough negotiator, and an outstanding bureaucratic infighter. Duma deputies from the Communist and nationalist opposition who loathed the allegedly pro-Western Kozyrev were pleased with his nomination. Deputies from Yabloko, the social democrat opposition led by Grigory Yavlinsky,<sup>9</sup> and from the center-right parties also lauded him.

Primakov is a realist and a flexible tactician in pursuit of Russia's strategic goals, skilled in dealing with setbacks. For example, he was able to put a positive spin on Russia's Founding Agreement with NATO which paved the way for the alliance's enlargement; and he praised development of energy resources in the Caspian Sea area by multinational oil and gas companies—something Russia had opposed in the past. For many in the Russian power elite, Primakov articulates the country's yearning for recognition as a great power, even after the collapse of the USSR, as well as its widespread resentment of the United States, which many in Moscow see as the winner of the Cold War. Such bitterness may prod Russia, through Primakov, to challenge America's interests and allies and to attempt to create hostile coalitions.

## PRIMAKOV'S VIEW: A BRAVE NEW MULTIPOLAR WORLD

According to various staff members of the foreign ministry in Moscow, Primakov views Russia's international role as preventing a monopolar world dominated by a single superpower.<sup>10</sup> In speeches, articles, and press conferences, he states incessantly that the post-Cold War world is developing along several poles, or focal points, which include the United States, Russia (with CIS countries), the European Union, China, Japan, the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), and Latin America.<sup>11</sup> Primakov's world view has no place for a single superpower, despite the current dominant status of the United States.

By promoting this multipolar model, Primakov is attempting to dilute American international power. His version of multipolarity also provides cover for a Russian-Chinese strategic partnership which may welcome the Islamic Republic of Iran as a junior partner. Such a coalition could challenge the United States in two vital regions: the Persian Gulf and the Taiwan Strait. In addition, Primakov wants an exclusive Russian sphere of influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia. He claims that CIS countries must integrate with Russia; he supports union with Belarus; and he advocates Russia's use of force in the former Soviet region.

**The China Connection.** Since 1991, the Russian military-industrial complex has been selling China its most advanced weapons, including ballistic missile systems, nuclear weapons technologies, and modern aircraft, at a cost of at least \$2 billion per year. China's military modernization program is aimed primarily

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7. J. Michael Waller and Victor Yasmann, "Russia's Great Criminal Revolution: The Role of the Security Services," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, January 1995, at <http://www.afpc.org/issues/crimrev4.htm>; J. Michael Waller, "Who Is Making Foreign Policy," *Perspective*, Vol. V, No. 3 (January-February 1995), at <http://web.bu.edu/ISCIP/content/vol 5/ Waller.html>, confirmed by interviews with Duma members who requested anonymity, Moscow, July 1996.
  8. Primakov and SVRR worked to undermine Kozyrev and his "pro-Western" foreign policy. See J. Michael Waller, "Primakov's Imperial Line," *Perspective*, Vol. VII, No. 3 (January-February 1997), p. 2, at <http://web.bu.edu/ISCIP/content/vol 7/ Waller.html>.
  9. Savik Shuster, "Face to Face, Conversation with Alexei Arbatov," Radio Liberty transcript, November 16, 1997.
  10. Conversations with Heritage staff during visits in 1997.
  11. Tomas Kolesnichenko, "Our Foreign Policy Cannot Be the Policy of a Second-Rate State—Primakov on NATO Relations, Multipolar World," *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, December 17, 1996, pp. 1-7, FBIS-SOV-96-243. See also Aleksandr Nechayev and Victor Khrekov, "Text of Primakov Interview on Reform," ITAR-TASS, January 8, 1997, FBIS-SOVI-97-006.

at establishing control over the Taiwan Strait. It may also be designed to challenge Taiwan militarily in just a few years. Such a scenario, which would hinder the ability of the United States to project power and influence in Asia, would be advantageous to Russia under the premises of the Primakov doctrine. The leaders of Russia and China are calling their relationship a “strategic partnership for the 21st century.”

**Evgenii of Arabia.** Primakov is also working to strengthen America’s foes and weaken its allies in the Middle East. He is personally leading Russia’s rapprochement with Tehran and is supporting involvement by the Russian natural gas monopoly Gazprom—together with the French company Total—in developing gas fields and pipelines in Iran. He approves of legitimate civilian nuclear cooperation between Russia and Iran while flatly denying that Russia is supplying nuclear weapons technology, ballistic missile systems, or other modern weapons to the ayatollahs—despite ample evidence from intelligence sources to the contrary.<sup>12</sup>

In the most recent crisis involving Iraq, Primakov put together a coalition in the U.N. Security Council, which included Russia, China, and France, to oppose the use of force by the United States against Saddam Hussein. He promised Saddam that he would work for the lifting of sanctions and even demanded that Iraq’s self-proclaimed “progress” in complying with U.N. decisions be recognized.<sup>13</sup>

Primakov has three priorities for Baghdad which will benefit Russia: (1) the resumption of sales of oil, which will allow Iraq to repay its \$7 billion debt for Soviet weapons purchased in the 1980s;<sup>14</sup> (2) the fulfillment of Saddam Hussein’s pledge to order 4,000 battle tanks from the ailing Russian military-industrial complex, which could save the crumbling Russian arms industry; and (3) the lifting of U.N. sanctions so that such powerful Russian oil companies as Lukoil can begin implementing their agreements with Iraq to develop multibillion-dollar oil and gas projects, such as the Western Kurna oil field.

Primakov is taking steps to improve Russia’s position in Iraq and throughout the Middle East so that, once again, Russia is seen as a friend of the Arab cause. If both Iran and Iraq break out of containment, America’s allies in the Middle East—including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Israel—will be threatened. Another war in the Middle East would result in large casualties and drive up oil prices, undoubtedly benefiting both Iran and Russia. To placate the Arab regimes, Primakov has called for the multilateralization of mediation efforts in the Arab-Israeli peace process, and he is demanding the participation of Russia and the European Union. In a recent interview, he stated that “The process of political settlement has come to a point in time when the monopolization of peacemaking efforts by any single side does not create favorable conditions for progress.”<sup>15</sup>

Primakov is using arms sales and intelligence support to authoritarian and anti-Western regimes as a means to regain Russian influence in the Middle East—the same policies he pursued as the USSR’s top Middle Eastern expert in the 1970s and 1980s. On his watch, the Russia Foreign Intelligence Service started training Iranian intelligence operatives who are engaged in terrorism around the world.<sup>16</sup> Moscow forgave 50 percent of Libya’s \$4 billion debt for weapons purchases in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>17</sup> Primakov is thought to be behind a huge pending sale of arms to Damascus in which bankrupt Syria, which already owes Russia \$10 billion, will receive modern weapons worth an additional \$2 billion to \$3 billion.<sup>18</sup> This is an expensive price tag for Primakov’s old Middle Eastern policy that left the former USSR with a multi-billion-dollar bad debt from its former client states.

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12. Ariel Cohen and James Phillips, “Russia’s Dangerous Game in Iran,” Heritage Foundation *Executive Memorandum* No. 503, November 13, 1997.

13. “Russia Push for Iraq Opposed at UN,” Associated Press, November 25, 1997.

14. Josef Joffe, “Moscow Is Mediating on Its Own Account,” *Sueddeutsche Zeitung*, November 20, 1997, p. 4, FBIS-WEU-97-324.

15. Aleksandr Zhudro and Georgiy Shelenkov, “Primakov Against ‘Monopolization’ of Mideast Peace Process,” ITAR-TASS World Service, October 31, 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-304.

16. J. Michael Waller, “Primakov’s Imperial Line.”

17. *Ibid.*

18. According to U.S. government sources, Russia is seeking Saudi financing for this transaction. From personal interview, December 1997, in Washington, D.C.

In another destabilizing move, Russia agreed to supply Cyprus with its state-of-the-art anti-aircraft/anti-ballistic missile system, the S-300, which Turkey already has threatened to destroy. This step is aimed at exacerbating the conflict between the two NATO allies, Greece and Turkey, on the eve of NATO expansion. Moreover, terms of the contract for the supply of this modern system remain murky, and it is not clear whether it will allow Cyprus to transfer the S-300 system to Iran, Iraq, or Libya.

**Another Discovery: CIS Integration.** Since his days as Russia's chief spymaster, Primakov has promoted the integration of the Commonwealth of Independent States under the aegis of Russia.<sup>19</sup> In a widely publicized report, he claimed that his experts at the espionage agency discovered an "objective tendency" for integration of the CIS into Russia.<sup>20</sup> He also has warned the West not to become involved in the development of Eurasia's mineral resources and not to assist or strengthen the New Independent States on their road to democracy and market economy. Similar to the concept of multipolarity, these "centripetal processes" serve only to promote Russian neo-imperialist aspirations in what Moscow sees as its "near abroad."

Under Primakov, Russia also is playing a key role in all regional conflicts in Eurasia. From Moldova to Abkhazia and from Nagorno-Karabkh to Tajikistan, Moscow was involved in supporting pro-Russian factions and exacerbating ethnic conflicts that have destabilized the New Independent States. Now it is attempting to dictate the terms of peace to the warring parties.<sup>21</sup> While it is conceivable that Primakov has decided to improve relations with Russia's neighbors in order to challenge the United States elsewhere, it is also likely that he is coming to grips with limitations on Russia's power and capabilities due to its economic and political decline.

The treaty of unification with Belarus was a victory for Russia's neo-imperialist faction. Primakov was instrumental in negotiating this arrangement and now wholeheartedly supports and promotes it.<sup>22</sup> He views union with Belarus as a geopolitical response to NATO expansion, which would bring Russian troops to the Polish border and extend Russia's presence on the borders of Ukraine and Lithuania. Provisions of the union treaty unite Russia with the most politically oppressive and economically retrograde neo-Stalinist regime in Europe—a step seen by Russian hard-liners as the first step to reunification of the old Soviet Union.<sup>23</sup> However, repressive actions by Belarussian President Aleksandr Lukashenka, such as the arrest of Russian television crews and members of Belarussian opposition groups and the closing of newspapers, as well as concerns in Moscow regarding the costs of reunification have slowed the unification process.<sup>24</sup>

In January 1997, Primakov threatened Estonia with economic sanctions.<sup>25</sup> While Russia and Estonia completed the draft of a peace treaty, Primakov stalled the signing of the agreement. Meanwhile, the Russian foreign ministry took a harsh position toward Latvia, apparently in an attempt to forestall a bid on the part of the Baltic states to join NATO.<sup>26</sup> The Russian Duma is stalling ratification of a peace treaty with

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19. Ariel Cohen, "Revisiting Russia's Turbulent Rim: Caucasus, Central Asia and Moldova," in *Russia: A Return to Imperialism*, ed. Uri Ra'anan and Kate Martin (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 87.

20. *Rossiia-SNG: Nuzhdayetsia li v korrektriovke pozitsia Zapada* (Moscow: Sluzhba Vneshnei Razvedki Rossiyskoi Federatsii, 1994).

21. For the context and implications of Russia's CIS policy, see Ariel Cohen, "A New Paradigm of U.S.–Russia Relations: Facing the Post-Cold War Reality," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 1105, March 6, 1997, and "U.S. Policy in the Caucasus and Central Asia: Building a New 'Silk Road' to Economic Prosperity," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 1132, July 24, 1997.

22. Nechayev and Khrekov, "Text of Primakov Interview on Reform."

23. Ariel Cohen, "Russia's Union with Belarus: Expensive and Troubling," Heritage Foundation *Executive Memorandum* No. 476, April 21, 1997.

24. Russian economic reformers, including First Deputy Prime Ministers Anatoly Chubais and Boris Nemtsov, indicated to Boris Yeltsin that the unification with Belarus would drastically dilute presidential power and cost the Russian treasury over \$10 billion.

25. "Primakov Assesses Ties with Baltic States," Interfax, January 13, 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-009.

26. "Latvian Foreign Minister Assesses Meeting with Primakov," Radio Riga Network, September 29, 1997, FBIS-SOV-97-272.

Lithuania. Only recently did Russia change its tune and attempt to improve relations with the Baltic states, primarily to prevent them from joining NATO.

## “MULTIDIRECTIONAL” FOREIGN POLICY: A PRESCRIPTION FOR OVERREACH?

The Primakov doctrine is designed primarily to dilute America’s strength and influence while increasing Russia’s influence and position in the Middle East and Eurasia. To achieve this goal, Russia is also attempting to capitalize on China’s quest to become a regional superpower and force reunification with Taiwan. Moreover, Moscow is working to improve ties with Tokyo. For example, Primakov seems to have succeeded in convincing the government of Japan to moderate substantially its claims to the Northern Territories (the South Kurile islands occupied by Russia in World War II).<sup>27</sup> Moscow would like to improve relations with Tokyo in order to neutralize the Japanese-American military alliance.

Primakov has shown himself to be a master at exploiting anti-American feeling. He is playing on the traditional anti-American sentiments of the Iranian Shiite establishment, the Arab nationalists, and even the French foreign policy elite. On recent visits to Japan and Latin America, Primakov promised Russia’s support for their efforts to secure permanent seats on the U.N. Security Council.<sup>28</sup> The United States and Great Britain most probably would oppose such a move—thereby making Moscow look good by comparison.

## CONCLUSION

Russia is looking to establish its position in the post-Cold War world and, under the leadership of veteran Cold Warrior Evgenii Primakov, is not likely to position itself with the West and the United States. Russia is too weak to sustain a credible coalition to challenge the United States, but its irresponsible attempts to counter the United States undoubtedly will lead to increased tensions in the Middle East and elsewhere. Therefore, Primakov’s attempts to have Russia challenge the United States for influence are dangerous. In the end, they will prove to be counterproductive and will contribute little to Russia’s integration into the global economy.

Primakov’s path for Russia is one of nurturing geopolitical tensions, imperial grudges, and as-yet-unfulfilled great power ambitions.<sup>29</sup> By playing into the hands of unreconciled communists and nationalists in Moscow, dictators in Baghdad, and mullahs in Tehran, Primakov is hoping to strengthen his own political position in Moscow and the Middle Eastern capitals. In the process, he is hampering Russia’s integration with the West, endangering both the flow of technology transfers and foreign investment into his country<sup>30</sup> and the access by Russian enterprise to U.S. capital markets—a situation that undoubtedly will be blamed on “American opposition” to the flow of Western capital to Russia.

By building an anti-American coalition, cultivating Middle Eastern dictators, and modernizing China’s military power, the Primakov doctrine endangers U.S.–Russia relations as well as world peace and stability. It will place Russia increasingly in a zero-sum game with the United States and the West while encouraging Russia to champion the pariah states of the world. This is an irresponsible game that serves no country’s best interests, not even Russia’s. Washington’s foreign policy decision makers should take note of his efforts and proceed with caution when faced with Evgenii Primakov’s neo-Soviet foreign policy.

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27. Shigeki Hakamada, “Proposal for Building New Japanese-Russian Relations,” *Tokyo Foresight*, August 1997, pp. 6–9, FBIS-EAS-97-296.

28. *Ibid.* See also “Russia Backs Latin American Wish for UNSC Membership,” ITAR-TASS, November 21, 1997, as quoted in FBIS-SOV-97-325.

29. Kolesnichenko, “Our Foreign Policy Cannot Be the Policy of a Second-Rate State.”

30. “Senator D’Amato Serves Notice on Those Who Aid and Abet U.S. Adversaries: No Fund-Raising on American Markets,” Center for Security Policy *Perspective* No. 97-C 161, October 30, 1997.