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Special Analysis
Memorandum # 5

Russian Strategy Toward a New Association of Republics (U)

This memorandum is part of a special series designed to provide continuing analysis and refinement of previous judgments on the dramatically shifting Soviet scene.

Summary

The Russian leadership wants a new association of Soviet republics that will enhance Russian security, facilitate economic development, and help stabilize ethnic minority relationships in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and other republics as well as in the Russian Republic. It does not want a central authority that enjoys autonomous power; nor does it want a system that would put Russian economic resources at the disposal of a majority vote of other members of the union, particularly the Central Asians. [REDACTED]

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Even this weak confederalism, however, may not catch hold: there is deep suspicion in the non-Russian republics of Russian imperial ambitions, and the Ukraine may in any event opt for unencumbered independence. If it does, the Russian leadership will have to reassess its position. [REDACTED]

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Outlook of the Russian Leadership

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Yel'tsin's long term objective remains promoting the material well-being and moral regeneration of the people living within the boundaries of the Russian Republic. His brand of liberal Russian nationalism does not seek to impose Russian domination on neighboring countries or on the other republics, and it consciously rejects the burden of empire. Yel'tsin believes that the pre-coup union represented by the power structure in Moscow and the central economic and security bureaucracies was based on coercion and was incompatible with the welfare of Russia and other nations of the former Soviet Union. His aim has been to destroy this power structure, not to make it his own. [REDACTED]

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Perception of a number of specific dangers is now influencing the strategy and tactics of Russian leaders. There is apprehension that reactionary forces have not been finished off for good and could strike back. There is fear of short-term economic collapse. There is a serious concern about disintegration of the armed forces and loss of command and control which--at the extreme--would bring about uncertainty over the control of nuclear weapons.¹ There is continuing anxiety about the breakaway "autonomous republics" and ethnic fragmentation in the RSFSR itself. And there is also a concern about the destabilizing effect of possible infringement by non-Russian republics of the rights of Russian minorities. [REDACTED]

In addition, the attempted coup has strongly imprinted in the minds of Russian leaders the belief that it was Russia that preserved freedom in the USSR, and that the positions taken by the other republics (with the exception of the Baltic states and Moldova) during the coup were less than honorable. The mindset of the Russian leadership now displays an unabashed determination to assure Russian control over Russia's destiny, prevent the emergence of any new center that could jeopardize this control, and eliminate economic exploitation of Russia by other republics. In Silayev's words: "Nothing will get in our way now--either from the center, or from the left or right. We will pursue a completely independent policy." "Russia will not succumb to the anti-Russian hullabaloo . . . We do not intend to waive the principles of Russian statehood and economic

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¹ The Russian leadership's concern with stabilizing the military establishment is clearly revealed by the welfare benefits provided by Yel'tsin's 30 August instruction on "Strengthening Social Protection of the Military Serving on the Territory of the Russian Federation." According to TASS, "The instruction was issued for the purpose of ensuring measures to secure the safety of citizens of the USSR and protect the constitutional system of the Russian Federation, create conditions and guarantees for the proper performance of the military duty and service rules by the military on actual service on the territory of the Russian Federation, as well as by citizens of the Russian Federation serving on territories of other Soviet republics." [REDACTED]

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independence. Still less do we accept the accusations of intent to 'subjugate' other republics. If economic cooperation with us is oppressive to the republics, we shall not impose ourselves." [REDACTED]

Russian Imperialism?

Traces of Russian chauvinism exist in the thinking of most Russians, including democrats. However, the policies generated by the outlook of the Russian leadership described above are not designed to recreate new bonds of empire--much less justify annexation of neighboring territory. They are based on recognition that reassertion of the imperial role would impose huge new economic burdens and undermine Russia's fledgling democracy. Yel'tsin's team has strongly supported Baltic independence. It has accepted the recent "independence" declarations of various other republics, as it had earlier accepted their "sovereignty" declarations. It has accepted the principle of collegial republic representation in the new transitional political structures recently adopted at the Congress of People's Deputies. And, while it assumed emergency control over elements of the central bureaucracy during and immediately after the coup, the purpose of this maneuver was not to take the opportunity to extend RSFSR control over other republics, but to deal with the immediate economic crisis, break the power of the central ministries, and guarantee that the center would no longer determine Russia's destiny. [REDACTED]

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Yel'tsin's sudden raising of the "border problem" on 26 August gave the appearance of displaying Russian imperial intent, and his colleagues--who obviously considered his saying what he did in public to have been an unfortunate tactical error--hastened to counter this impression.² But the issue here, in fact, had little to do with the delineation of borders.³ Rather, as subsequent statements and actions by various Russian leaders

² Yel'tsin's statement, issued through his press secretary, said: "The Russian Federation does not cast any doubt on the constitutional right of every state and people to self-determination. However, there exists the problem of borders, which may be left unresolved and is only tolerable as such if there exists a relationship of alliance which is registered in a relevant treaty. In the event that such a relationship ceases, the RSFSR reserves the right to raise the issue of a revision of borders. The aforesaid applies to all contiguous republics [i.e. Belorussia, Ukraine, Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan], with the exception of the three Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, the state independence of which has already been recognized by Russia, thus confirming that the territorial problem in bilateral relations is soluble." [REDACTED]

³ The Russian government may have some bones to pick with its neighbors about borders, but it is hard to say what they are. Last fall the Russian government signed treaties with Ukraine and Kazakhstan that recognized existing borders. This year it officially resolved concerns with Lithuania about Kaliningrad Oblast. And as recently as 17 August, Yel'tsin exchanged articles of ratification of the RSFSR-Kazakhstan agreement

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showed, what was at stake for the Russians was, first, the unilateral Ukrainian move to declare jurisdiction over Soviet armed forces on Ukrainian territory, which was seen as threatening to set off a chain reaction disintegration of the Soviet armed forces or mutinous discontent; second, the immediate economic chaos threatened by a further rapid Ukrainian retreat to autarky; and, third, the potentially destabilizing impact of escalating Ukrainian radicalism on the Russian speaking population of eastern Ukraine and--no less--on opinion in the RSFSR that might be swayed by interventionist or annexationist rhetoric.⁴ To command the attention of the Ukrainians and others, and calm Russian minority unease, Yel'tsin chose to unlimber in public the heavy artillery of what would be understood as a reference not to borders but to the extremely sensitive problem in various non-Russian republics (especially Ukraine and Kazakhstan) of large regions with Russian-speaking populations some, of which had been administratively ceded to these republics under communist rule. The downside of this action was that it fed non-Russian fears of Russian expansionism, may have given unwanted encouragement to Russian secessionist sentiment in Ukraine and Kazakhstan, and did not promote confidence among leaders of non-Russian republics in their treaties with Russia. [REDACTED]

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Nevertheless, this hardball maneuver achieved its immediate aim. The joint communique issued by the Russians and Ukrainians on 29 August, while pledging Russian recognition of Ukrainian independence and the existing Ukrainian-Russian border, bound Ukraine to participate in creating a "collective system of security," "not to take unilateral decisions in military and strategic questions," and to participate in transitional structures "to ensure the essential needs of the population and the working of the economy." The same day the Ukrainian Supreme Soviet issued an appeal to "citizens of the republic of all nationalities" stating that "the declaration of the Ukraine's independence will in no way lead to an infringement of the rights of people of any nationality." [REDACTED]

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in Alma Ata with Nazarbayev--again confirming existing borders. Three days after the statement of 26 August, a Russian delegation to Kiev signed a communique confirming the treaty provision recognizing the border, and a day later repeated this performance in Alma Ata. [REDACTED]

⁴ Commenting on the 26 August statement, Yel'tsin's associate Ruslan Khasbulatov has observed that it was simply misunderstood. The issue of borders had been raised by people themselves who were uncertain about their future, especially after the coup when republics started taking resolute steps toward independence. "If we preserve the union not only as an economic space but also as a single political and legal space, then it will be easier for us to explain to citizens of Ukraine, the Russian people who reside there, and other people who earlier lived in Russia that there are no grounds for worries. The same regards those residing in Kazakhstan." [REDACTED]

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Russia Wants an Association of Republics

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If absolutely necessary, Russia's leadership would be prepared for Russia to go it alone, and members of the Russian team--including Yel'tsin--have recently said so. However, the "border" episode underscores the seriousness of the Russian leadership's interest in fashioning an association that will meet Russian economic, security, and ethno-political needs. The logic of these interests and Russian insistence on voluntary membership by republics in the association have suggested that the kind of entity Russia should support ought to consist of a system of several discrete associations of varying composition--and this a la carte model, which was supported by other republics too, was indeed what Yel'tsin urged at the Congress of People's Deputies on 3 September. [REDACTED]

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Politically, the Russian leadership wants a structure that is established horizontally by the voluntarily participating republics themselves, and that lacks the central power required to reassert dominance over Russia. The Russians accept the idea of a president, but do not want a cabinet and an "enormous mass of ministries," in Silayev's words, that could "dictate and suppress." (If there were to be a cabinet, Yel'tsin has made it clear that Russia would demand as its due the premiership and security portfolios.) Basically, Russia has supported the formation of collegial-style executive and deliberative organs based on "equal representation" by republic delegations. The main function of these bodies should be to harmonize and coordinate republic activities, not to issue commands--and to do so primarily in the economic sphere. [REDACTED]

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Economically, what the Russian leadership wants is to create as large as possible a common market that is distinct from the political union, in which the participating republics or independent states have control over their own resources, and in which market forces and world prices--not political directives--determine resource flows. Where non-market redistribution does occur--and this may be necessary initially, although its volume must be rapidly and severely reduced--this process should be conducted through bilateral agreements among participating republics on the basis of some sort of reciprocity, not through the center. The economic community would have a council that would coordinate policy among the members. Member states could have their own separate currencies, but the ruble would serve as the reserve currency and means of exchange within the community. [REDACTED]

Militarily, the kind of unified association the Russian leadership is promoting is substantially different from what it is talking about in the political and economic spheres. Yel'tsin rejects the pre-coup Soviet military world view which portrayed the rest of the world as a potential

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united threat and stressed the need to field a military capable of dealing with that kind of threat. His overriding concern is to neutralize the danger of internal intervention by the military while preserving a role for it as ballast in a potentially unstable new association of republics. At the same time, however, he recognizes the need for a modern--but scaled down--military to protect Russia's external security interests. And it is now clear that he looks to the existing Soviet armed forces to serve this function. [REDACTED]

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Russia has inspired the Defense Ministry's acknowledgement that the republics will have a significant voice in overall defense policy formulation, including defense budget decisionmaking. It has also pressed for a republic voice in the control of military forces--both strategic and general purpose. Yel'tsin and his Minister of Defense, General Kobets, have publicly made clear that Russia will insist on dual or joint control by the republics over the new union's military forces at the operational as well as the administrative level. Yel'tsin also has insisted for some time on control over defense industries located in the RSFSR. [REDACTED]

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Yel'tsin has long accepted the argument of the new Minister of Defense, Marshal Shaposhnikov, that nuclear weapons must be centrally controlled. He has also said, however, that while nuclear weapons will be controlled by the center, Russia will be "responsible" for any weapons located on its territory and will participate in any nuclear release decision. He has also asserted that he has reached agreement with Ukraine and Kazakhstan that all nuclear weapons located in those republics will be moved to Russia (although recently he has talked about destroying the weapons in Ukraine as part of a 50 percent reduction). [REDACTED]

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For the past year, Yel'tsin--focusing on the danger of a military-supported move against the democrats--seemed to be considering the establishment of a sizeable separate Russian armed ground formation that would deter union military or police action. Now, with the failure of the coup, Russia has gained control over the heavily armed MVD formations on its territory, and no longer has to fear the use against it of the all-union border troops, which have been stripped from the KGB. Yel'tsin's recent revelation that the home guard--which he and other Russia leaders had earlier talked up--would now amount simply to a brigade-size palace guard of 3-4,000 men, highlighted his confidence in being able to shape existing Soviet general purpose forces so as to serve Russian security needs yet keep these forces depoliticized. [REDACTED]

In the joint declaration on union relations signed by Gorbachev and the ten republic leaders (including the Ukrainian Kravchuk), which provided the basis for the structure of the union officially approved by the Congress of People's Deputies on 5 September, the parties proposed that "an

agreement should be concluded, based on the principles of collective security, in the sphere of defense in order to preserve united armed forces and a single military-strategic area . . . in a manner that takes account of the republics' sovereignty." Public comments by Yel'tsin and Kobets suggest that in respect to general purpose forces Russia has been working to create a smaller center-managed standing army--perhaps formed around a rapid reaction force--backed up by republic-controlled reserves. Russia and other participating republics would be able to influence the use of this army on their own territories through input at the top via the new State Council, a yet-to-be-ironed-out process of consultation with the central military high command, and a dual or joint control system that would give the military chain-of-command responsibility for troop management yet allow for predominant republic control over manpower and mobilization issues--all ultimately backed up by the republic power of the purse. [REDACTED]

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There are strong incentives for non-Russian republics to join in such a system. They get an opportunity to influence the center's overall military policy, to save on defense spending, to improve their own local external security environment, and counterbalance at least partly Russia's military weight--while gaining leverage they never exercised in the past over military forces in their republics. And Yel'tsin has strongly stated that each republic in the new union should have its say in defense policy formulation and in controlling the operation of military forces located within its borders. [REDACTED]

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But these arrangements nonetheless imply in practice an asymmetrical surrender of republic sovereignty. To protect Russian interests, the Russian government will want to dominate appointments to the military high command, play a unique role in nuclear-strategic matters, and--by being responsible for the lion's share of general purpose forces--exert a determining influence over procurement and other key elements of military affairs. Indeed, the Russian leadership has already staked its claim in each of these areas. Overall, this is still not a bad bargain for most of the republics. But many Ukrainians, in particular, will not see it that way, and whether Ukrainian participation can be negotiated is the critical question. [REDACTED]

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Ethno-politically, what the Russians seem to be interested in most is the establishment of a judicial framework that would accompany almost any type of association among the republics. A "union" in this sense would be highly desirable--but not essential--to the Russian government as a means of stabilizing ethnic autonomy pressures inside Russia by helping to legitimize an RSFSR federal structure that guarantees the territorial-political integrity of the Russian Republic. Recently, in this connection, the Russian government has tried to line up the autonomous republics behind the old '9

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plus 1" proposal of signature of the union treaty by them as part of a single Russian Republic delegation. The existence of a union might also help prevent development of a situation in which independence demands of some autonomous republics might escalate into terrorism supported from the territory of sympathetic non-associated republics. [REDACTED]

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More important is the political problem for the Russian government of dealing with unstable relationships between titular national and large Russian minority populations in the other republics-- particularly Ukraine and Kazakhstan, but elsewhere as well. As the republics gain greater control over their own destiny, the likelihood of clashes between local nationals and Russians in some republics will rise. A democratically elected Russian government does not enjoy the luxury of ignoring this issue: it is threatened with an economically and politically destabilizing huge new influx of refugees, and already faces more severe political pressures on the Russian minority score in the Russian parliament than was the case in dealings with the Baltic republics. [REDACTED]

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There are two options for dealing with the problem: threats and intimidation (highly counterproductive from the standpoint of a democratic Russian government), or political conciliation of the sort Yel'tsin implemented successfully with the Balts. The latter requires attempting to damp down nationalist passions both in the non-Russian republics and Russia, convince Russian minorities that their interests are being looked after, entrench minority rights, and establish reciprocal treaty obligations that provide a means for legitimate political intervention by both sides to protect fellow nationals. Achievement of these objectives requires, as the first condition, the cooperation of other republics. What Yel'tsin's statement on "borders" (see above footnote 2) says between the lines is that to hope to make the political conciliation approach work, there also has to be some kind of political association that goes beyond mere economic union. The critical republic here from the Russian standpoint is Ukraine, although today the problem is most acute in Moldova, where Yel'tsin's policy is being attacked as a sellout of the Russian minority.⁵ [REDACTED]

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In the conduct of external affairs, the outcome of the failed coup has strongly reinforced Russian's position that union-level foreign policy organizations

⁵ [REDACTED] on 3 September, the chairman of the RSFSR Supreme Soviet Committee on Inter-Republic Relations stated that Yel'tsin considered Ukraine vital to any union-type structure. Besides the economic mutual dependence of the two republics, all kinds of human rights and nationality issues would arise without a union super-structure. More than eight million Russians on Ukrainian soil would probably look to Moscow for help if they did not enjoy equal rights with Ukrainians. Absent a "union referee" Russia might be compelled to "intervene in the internal affairs of

should serve simply as a mechanism for helping to elaborate framework-type policies for matters of common concern to the republics, and as a mechanism for coordinating implementation of certain policies--mainly in the arms control arena. The republics should do the rest.⁶ While the Russian leadership accepts the right of all the other republics to assert themselves in foreign affairs, it is capitalizing on its prestige and preeminent position at home to shape what is left of union foreign policy to conform to Russian interests, seizing the policy initiative and exercising what amounts to a veto over actions by the union Ministry of Foreign Affairs. For example, it has reshaped the agenda of the CSCE conference on human rights, and assumed the leadership of the Working Group for the Japan-Soviet Peace Treaty. [REDACTED]

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Current Agreement on Forms of Association

In the first week of September Gorbachev and the now 10 participating republics--not without signs of tension among them--pushed through the Congress of People's Deputies an entire package of differentiated association arrangements. On balance, these economic, political and military forms of association were very much in line with the objectives of the Russian leadership outlined above, reflecting Yel'tsin's weight in the drafting process. Their acceptance did not, however, once and for all put to rest the idea of autonomous "Soviet statehood," which was suggested by talk of central ministries and even statements by Yel'tsin alluding to future presidential and parliamentary elections. Nor did it eliminate challenge to Russian interests potentially from a front of non-Russian republics, which was a threat inherent in Russian recognition of the need for political union, but one strongly accentuated by acceptance by the Russian leadership of the "equality" principle in forming collegial policymaking bodies. [REDACTED]

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Ukraine" to protect Russians. The rise of nationalist sentiments in Ukraine could spark pogroms against Russians, or a mass migration back to Russia. [REDACTED]

⁶ In a 7 September new conference Yel'tsin stated: "Now . . . each republic will be a subject in international law and will have the right to conduct its own independent foreign policy. . . . Although this will be a complex business, we believe that in view of our situation other countries should now conduct a two-tiered policy. The first tier of policy, with the union center, would be some kind of treaty on principles. And then there would be independent agreements with each republic, including Russia for instance. In other words, these would embrace the entire fabric of life, including the economy, the social sphere, politics, culture, science, new technology, and so on." [REDACTED]

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Outlook

The Russian leadership offers a non-violent, non-annexationist approach to the single most potentially explosive problem in inter-republic relations, unrest among the Russian minorities outside the Russian Republic. This is a problem that could lead to violent ethnic clashes, massive refugee flows, and outright enmity between Russia and neighboring republics. The Russian approach also addresses the potential danger of an unraveling of the Soviet armed forces. It encourages the democratization of still authoritarian republics. And it probably is the one most likely to preserve some form of political association among the republics. The Russian approach stands in sharp contrast to the "Serbian" solution that Milosevic has pursued in Yugoslavia, with such appalling consequences. [REDACTED]

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Conceptually, it is possible to imagine scenarios that could result in a stronger and more autonomous center than that which is now being suggested by the Russian government, but these constructs do not hold up well. There are certainly figures of a liberal establishment bent, centered around the Shevardnadze-Yakovlev Movement for Democratic Reform, that would like to push developments in this direction. To do so, they would need to cultivate elements in the non-Russian republics prepared to support a stronger center as a counterweight to Russia. But there are two problems with this scenario. First, the Russian Republic has now assumed control over all the raw materials, enterprises and other economic resources on Russian territory. The Russian leadership--not the new transitional Inter-Republic Committee--will set the terms on which these resources will be shared, giving it immense leverage in bilateral relations with the other republics (who are also seizing control of all the wealth on their territories). Thus, the center can offer little in the way of critical positive incentives to gain the support of non-Russian republics. Second, although many non-Russian republics would like to see a counterweight to Russia, they have no interest in buying into a strengthened center to get it, given the dynamics of national self-assertion today. [REDACTED]

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Another scenario features Russian imperialist politicians like Zhirinovskiy and hardliners that manage to survive in the military and security services exploiting mass popular unrest induced by food shortages and inflation to seize power, liquidate the present Russian government, and reestablish imperial rule. The problem with this scenario is not the postulation of mass unrest and overthrow of the Russian government, which could indeed occur, but near certainty of protracted civil war and likely fragmentation of the military if a new authoritarian government sought to reimpose central control now over Russia and the ethnic borderlands. [REDACTED]

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Finally, there is the possibility of a creeping fusion of Yel'tsin's Russian government with the central authority and enhancement of the center's power in this piggyback mode. Up to a point, such a development is quite conceivable and could happen more or less spontaneously--although it is not what the current Russian leadership is seeking. However, this scenario too would soon run up against the obstacle of resistance by the non-Russian republics to a strengthened center, whether operating under the auspices of Yel'tsin or of any other Russian leader. [REDACTED]

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There is a good chance, however, that even the generally weak confederal political association Yel'tsin is promoting may not survive. In the military area, and perhaps in monetary and other economic spheres, it will impose what will be perceived as asymmetrical limitations on the independence of the non-Russian republics. Russia's flexing of its muscles has deepened fears among non-Russians of Russian hegemonism, and this will--if anything--strengthen centrifugal forces. The Ukrainians are central here, and they may very well choose the path of unencumbered independence. They may continue building their own army, call for a far looser military accord than that now supported by Yel'tsin, and agree to sign only a union treaty much feebler than that contemplated now by other republics. If the Ukrainians really opt out, the incentives for the Russian government to stay in a political association with the remaining republics would be significantly diminished. Some Russians would be inclined to go it alone. Others might be interested in an alliance just with Belorussia and/or Kazakhstan. There could be strong pressure from the political opposition in Russia to annex the huge territory of northern Kazakhstan. [REDACTED]

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If Yel'tsin's model does manage to gain acceptance, its prospects in promoting stability are mixed. On the one hand, pursuit of the model may be quickly aborted by near-term economic disaster or an explosion of tensions between Russian minorities and local nationals in the non-Russian republics. Over the longer term, its provision in central organs for republic collegiality--if strictly followed--is a formula for stalemate; moreover, the likely domination of top security and economic posts by Russians will create chronic frustration and resentment, even if these individuals do not behave in a heavy-handed fashion. But, on the other hand, the model has the unique advantage of any structure in which patterns of affiliation are voluntary and based on genuine interests of the parties, rather than affiliation imposed by an unrepresentative and illegitimate central authority, or simply by political maneuvering. In the present instance, the model might produce an association of states that is not fatally flawed from the outset by disequilibrating terms of membership, yet is sufficiently integrated to hold in check centrifugal forces and encourage cooperative action. [REDACTED]