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Special Analysis

USSR:

Yel'tsin's Union Game Plan

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Yel'tsin's recent bilateral agreements with Ukraine and Kazakhstan indicate he is now the driving force behind the effort to establish a fundamentally reconstituted association of republics in place of the present union. This new association will have strictly limited functions and preserve a common armed forces, and Russia will dominate it while preserving its own full sovereignty. Yel'tsin's plan is likely to spark renewed conflict soon with Gorbachev and fears in other republics of Russian domination; its failure would rapidly accelerate independence movements in Ukraine, Belorussia, and Central Asia.

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Yel'tsin and his team are seeking to capitalize on the rout of traditionalists, paralysis of the union government, and the prestige of Russia to reshape the center immediately, without waiting for agreement on the future union. Yel'tsin believes Gorbachev can serve as a facilitator during the transition period, but he also has asserted Russian leadership of the reconstitution of a temporary central government and has taken the central Soviet bureaucracy into Russian receivership.

What Sort of Union?

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Yel'tsin has apparently encountered no resistance in pushing for acceptance of even secessionist republics in an economic union. He continues to voice support for establishing a new union, and as recently as Wednesday referred to the need to sign a revised union treaty, but he makes it clear that Soviet states would participate at their own initiative. The new union's authority would be restricted to providing for a "common economic space" and managing military affairs, nuclear energy, and a few other unspecified functions. The union's directive institutions would basically play a coordinating role and might be merged later into a system of "interrepublic administrative bodies."

The New Situation

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Most of Yel'tsin's proposals are not new but have been brought into reach by the failed coup. His aim remains to neutralize any threat from the center to Russian independence and to destroy the center's capacity as an autonomous power structure.

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Yel'tsin's posture has changed, however, in several significant respects in response to new conditions. The claim of jurisdiction by various non-Russian republics—but especially Ukraine—over central military forces in their territory and plans to establish large republic armed formations have posed the threat of uncontrolled disintegration of the Soviet army. Republic "independence" declarations also threaten relations between titular nationals and large minorities (mainly Russians) in these republics. This in turn could create serious political problems for Yel'tsin if he is seen as "selling out" Russian minorities in negotiating creation of the new union. [REDACTED]

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In order to exert leverage on these republics, prevent unraveling of the army, and demonstrate attentiveness to the minority issue, Yel'tsin has chosen to link solution of the "border" problem—which Ukrainians and Kazakhs thought had already been settled in bilateral treaties—with participation in the new union. Through this maneuver Yel'tsin successfully sought to press republics—the Ukrainians in particular—to slow down unilateral action in the military sphere and to provide public assurances of intent to observe minority rights. [REDACTED]

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Meanwhile, Yel'tsin has revealed that his plan for a Russian national armed formation entails only a kind of palace guard of 3,000 to 4,000 men. This line signals his success in getting his supporters into key positions in the Ministry of Defense and warns any recalcitrant republics that, if they do not participate in Yel'tsin's type of union, the present Soviet army could become the Russian army. [REDACTED]

Implications

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Yel'tsin's plan assigns a secondary role to Gorbachev even in the short term. Renewed conflict between the two will come quickly unless Gorbachev abandons his vision of a union with a semiautonomous center, which he would represent. In view of the drive of all republics for sovereignty, the strongest union that could emerge now appears to be Yel'tsin's model, which combines elements of a common market incorporating all 15 republics, with some elements of weak confederation in many spheres. It is uncertain whether such a union is viable, and, even in the short term, Yel'tsin's shock tactic of raising the "border" question and his proprietary attitude toward the Soviet armed forces will stir fears of Russian pretensions and strengthen centrifugal forces. [REDACTED]

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