

Ditchley hails new Russian imperialism

by Mark Burdman

"Anglo-German realism," seeking to accommodate to a newly emerging Russian Empire, will prevail over those "American hawks" who hope to do something to stop the advance of the Russian imperium, according to the London *Guardian's* Martin Walker, who participated in a Jan. 21-23 conference at Ditchley Park in Britain, attended by various high-level officials, to discuss "Russia's search for a post-communist identity."

Walker writes that the "the bizarre anomaly of the past five years" has ended. "Russia is now acting as an international player, with its own interests and spheres of influence, and its new self-assertiveness has inspired a new school of American hawks, who believe that we are watching the re-creation of the late and unlamented Soviet Union."

He predicts that this "new American hawkishness" is "beginning to seep out from the Pentagon and State Department, and rumble through the op-ed pages and in the Senate Foreign Relations and Armed [Services] Committees," even if it is "not yet American policy."

After itemizing the various signs of Russian imperial resurgence, Walker writes: "In recent NATO and other top-level meetings, including a session at Ditchley Park this weekend that brought high British and German officials together with Americans and a handful of attendees from the various republics of the old Soviet Union, it was clear that a western consensus has yet to emerge on Russia's real ambitions in its near-abroad [border states]. . . ."

"The question the West has yet to answer, is the degree to which Russia can now be allowed to have legitimate security interests beyond its borders, and be able to act on them. With 25 million ethnic Russians in the near-abroad, and Yugoslav-style ethnic clashes erupting in an arc of instability along the Russian frontier from Moldova through the Caucasus to Tajikistan on the Afghan and Chinese borders, Russia has security problems. All the world's new near-nuclear trouble spots, from North Korea to Indo-Pakistan, from Iran-Iraq to Ukraine, are uncomfortably close to Russia. And so is Islamic fundamentalism."

Keeping Russia under control

Walker's article suggests that any Russian imperial aims can be kept under control: "Britain and Germany, and other Europeans who have institutional memories of dealing with

a 19th-century czarist Russia which seems uncannily similar to that of our elected Czar Boris and his weak Duma, are taking a realist line. If Russia is going to become a dangerous neighbor, it can be warned off. Until then, they reckon that Russia's legitimate interests will have to be defined and accepted, so long as they follow the U.N. and other accepted rules of peacekeeping.

"There are places like the Caucasus and Central Asia where the West might even welcome Russia playing a stabilizing role that we all know—after Bosnia—the West cannot stomach. At the least, that means only intervening by invitation and with international approval, having a clear exit strategy and operating under the eye of international observers."

From the French side, leading strategist Thierry de Montbrial, head of the IFRI think-tank in Paris, suggested in the daily *Le Figaro* that new Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin "has already shown himself a flexible and pragmatic politician, who deserves our best wishes." According to de Montbrial, all the major recent events in Russia, including the rise of Vladimir Zhirinovsky, the downfall of the Fyodorov-Gaidar and Sachs-Aslund economic shock therapy groups, make clear that President Boris Yeltsin's rise won't bring about Russia's entrance into the era of "democracy and the market economy." De Montbrial says that fear that Russia is returning to "the old demons of imperialism" is too simplistic a view. It is impossible to move from a communist system to a system of "hard and fast liberalism. . . . The dogmatism à la Jeffrey Sachs could only lead to disaster: hyperinflation, capture of the economic 'circuits' by the mafia, aggravation of the living conditions for the majority of the population, expansion of the sentiment of humiliation."

De Montbrial says the western experts should not be chiding Russia for its failings, when the West seems incapable of solving its own economic problems. "Let's stop . . . demanding from others that they do what we are not accomplishing ourselves, in these incomparably more favorable conditions."

De Montbrial offers soothing comments about Chernomyrdin, calling him a "centrist" who has decided to follow "the Chinese experiment" instead of Harvard's. He may be the "prototype of a communist *aparatchik*, but he "has his feet on the ground" and is capable of "firmness and flexibility." Thus assured, de Montbrial writes: "As to the question of the return of imperial Russia, we must, there as well, relativize things. Neither the Americans, nor the Europeans, nor the Chinese have the slightest desire to get involved in Central Asia. The West, which didn't succeed in reaching a consensus around a policy toward Yugoslavia, is not, by the evidence, ready to 'assume' Ukraine." According to de Montbrial, Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev's seeking a U.N. mandate to assure stability within the former Soviet Union for Russians, with western financial aid, is "less absurd than it would seem at first."