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Have the Western Countries Disarmed Too Fast, Too Much, Too Soon?

By Ton That Thien

In the “end of the Cold War” euphoria resulting from the momentous pull-down of the Berlin Wall in October 1989, followed in rapid succession by the collapse of the communist regime of Eastern Europe, the Reagan-Gorbachev historic meeting at Malta, the dismantling of NATO, and finally the disintegration of the Soviet Union, the western nations went into a disarmament spree. Spurred on by the apparent end of a great danger which had hung over their heads in the past five decades, but also by the budgetary problems plaguing them, the governments of these nations wielded the ax freely and energetically in defence matters, making large cuts in the sizes of their armies, navies and air force, and closing scores of bases not only abroad but also at home. However, the events unfolding in many places in the world now raise questions concerning the pace, the extent and the timing of such moves.

It is undeniable that the Cold War, as we have known it – a fierce and all encompassing confrontation: ideological, military, political, economic, social and cultural – between the communist bloc and the West has ended. There is no longer a powerful and intensely hostile Soviet Union facing the West and threatening its position and interests all over the world. The successor of the Soviet Union – Russia, or Commonwealth of Independent States – is a Soviet Union greatly reduced in size and power, no longer desirous of challenging the power of the West, and incapable of doing so even if it wished to.

Unfortunately, in the past year, a new danger has arisen on the Russian horizon and everyone caring about the progress of democracy in the world should feel seriously concerned. The democrats and reformists have proved to be rather inept. They performed poorly at the last parliamentary elections. And Yeltsin’s authority has been eroded more and more. The reasons for this deterioration have been widely reported. A major one was the worsening of the lot of a large number of people as a result of floppy economic reforms which spectacularly failed to turn the Russian economy into a free market economy, and especially to stop the deteriorating situation.

However, what the analysts have failed to point out is that, instead of putting the blame squarely on the shoulders of the communists, who had forced Gorbachev to slow down, systematically blocked the policies favoured by Yeltsin and his reformist team headed by Gaidar under the previous parliament, and continue to do so under the new one, Yeltsin and his followers have spent their time singing the virtues of reforms to a crowd which has become thoroughly disillusioned with these reforms, and angry at those who preach them. In the meantime, the communists have a field day because they can point to the disastrous results of reforms, which is a glaring reality. That they themselves are the real major cause of this disaster; first by their misrule in the previous 70 years, and by their systematic sabotage since 1991, is not realised by the majority of the Russians.

The second danger has been extensively reported, and is fully realised in the West. So, there is no need to repeat it here. It has to do with the rise of Jirinowsky, who now represents the emergence of fascism in Russia.

Considering that Yeltsin's choice for prime minister is Chermomyrdin, a former communist who does not believe in the free market and who surrounds himself with like-minded former communist apparatchiks, one should expect the economic situation to deteriorate, and the population to turn away for reforms and from democracy, still further. Since, in the eyes of the population, Yeltsin, as president, carries responsibility for what happens in the country, and especially for the deterioration of their lives, he will become more and more the object of popular discontent. As a result he will probably lose the next presidential election if he runs again, and, in any case the democratic and reformist camp will probably lose control of the presidency in 1996, and still more probably of the Duma in the next parliamentary elections in 1998 as well. The next president of Russia will then be either a communist or Jirinowski, and the Duma will have a majority of communists or Jirinowskists. In either case, we have the ingredients for a communist or fascist Russian government, i.e., the seeds of a Third World War.

Elsewhere in the world, in particular in the Middle East, as a result of the stupid Hebron massacre the hopes for restoring peace to that region have gone into smoke. There is a serious risk of a chain reaction of escalating massacres and counter massacres developing, and of the situation getting out of control. All the Middle East will be in turmoil. In such a situation it will be difficult for the western nations to keep out. So there, too, we have the seeds of a big conflagration. And a Russia under a communist or a fascist government will make it bigger, and western intervention more inevitable. Of course, the same applies also to the still very difficult to resolve war in the Balkans. We shall be back to the time of either Hitler or Stalin.

In the light of what has been described above, one may legitimately ask whether the disarmament into which the western nations have plunged headlong in the past year has not been too fast, too much, and too soon, and whether greater wisdom should prevail.

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