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FORGING A BLIND DIPLOMACY: THE UNITED STATES AND THE RUSSIAN CONSTITUTIONAL CRISIS OF 1993

Abstract:	*When he assumed the presidency in January 1993, Bill Clinton made Russia a top priority on his foreign policy agenda. Considering that a successful democratic transition in post-Soviet Russia was in the national security interest of the United States, Clinton tried to strike a strategic alliance with the Russian reform. As the leader of the reform process, Boris Yeltsin received the unconditional support of the U.S., regardless of whether the Russian President exceeded his constitutional bounds.* *This paper aims to analyse the American perceptions towards the Russian constitutional crisis of 1993. It seeks to find how the American officials evaluated the events that unfolded in the months leading to the 3-4 October bloodshed on the streets of Moscow and how they interpreted Yeltsin's decisions. Drawing on declassified documents from the National Security Archive and Clinton Digital Library, the article argues that the American administration, influenced by how the Russian President portrayed Moscow's political dynamic, preferred to avoid questioning the legality of Yeltsin's actions and continued to view him as the only alternative for ensuring America's strategic interests.*
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Introduction

Since he became President of the United States in January 1993, Bill Clinton emphasised the importance of helping the Russian reform of democracy and market economy. In Clinton's view, the success of Russia's democratic renewal would contribute significantly to global freedom. Supporting the Russian reform and the reformers led by Boris Yeltsin was a wise investment in enhancing the security and prosperity of the United States[1]. As Moscow mired into a political stand-off between the legislative and executive powers, the Clinton administration continued to highlight the importance of supporting the reform process and its leader. Even though Yeltsin started to exceed his constitutional bounds and created a democratic ambiguity in Russia's post-Soviet regime, President Clinton never doubted his endorsement of Russia's first democratically elected President.

This paper aims to analyse the American perceptions towards the Russian constitutional crisis of 1993. It seeks to find how the American officials evaluated the events that unfolded in the months leading to the 3-4 October bloodshed on the streets of Moscow and how they interpreted Yeltsin's decisions. Although President Clinton was determined from the very beginning to express his public support for the Russian leader in his fight with the Congress of People's Deputies, some other members of the administration, such as Ambassador-at-Large Strobe Talbott, were uneasy about the possible outcome. The article examines the factors that influenced American

[1] The American Presidency Project, *Remarks to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Annapolis, April 01, 1993,* https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-american-society-newspaper-editors-annapolis (25.03.2025)

decision-making during a turning point in post-Soviet Russia's democratic development and how the U.S. reacted to the policies adopted by Yeltsin.

Using qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis, the research is based upon memoranda of conversations and cables from the National Security Archive's briefing books and collections, public speeches from the Clinton Digital Library and The American Presidency Project, as well as memoir material. The documents reveal the strategic thinking behind the Clinton administration's policy towards Russia, the personal relationship between Clinton and Yeltsin, and the views expressed by the officials regarding the Russian constitutional crisis and its long-term impact.

The Russian constitutional crisis of 1993 has been a subject of intense debate in the context of Russia's rise to authoritarianism. Prominent historians and political scientists have explored in their studies the causes that led to the political deadlock and the outbreaks of violence. Michael McFaul[1], Daniel Treisman[2], Lilia Shevtsova[3], Peter Reddaway and Dmitri Glinski[4] focus in their works on the tumultuous history of post-Soviet Russia and the challenges it faced in designing a new political system. Other experts, such as Josephine Andrews[5] and Cindy Skach[6], explore the rules and legal elements of adopting the new Russian Constitution.

Little was studied about the American perceptions of the Russian constitutional crisis. The most extensive work on the American role and its point of view is the volume written by James Goldgeier and Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy Toward Russia after the Cold War* (2003)[7]. The two authors trace the evolution of Russian American relations in the post-Cold War era and how the president and his top advisers in the executive branch formulated and carried out America's Russia policy.

The research is relevant for understanding the process of foreign policy decision-making in a time when the U.S. tried to integrate Russia into the Western world and assist it in democratic reform. Analysing the perceptions of the Clinton Administration during the constitutional crisis could offer a clear view of the main elements that impacted the design of the U.S. national security policy and the role that the American President played in developing the post-Cold War era diplomacy.

The present paper proceeds in four sections. First, it explores how President George H.W. Bush created the broad framework for the American post-Cold War strategy towards Russia, which would continue in the years ahead. Next, the article discusses how the Clinton administration perceived the first crises that threatened Yeltsin's political survival and how it tried to boost the Russian leader's domestic standing. In the third section, it examines the American reactions to the October events and why the presidential administration insisted on supporting Yeltsin. Finally, it concludes by looking at the implications the crisis had for the future of Russian American relations.

Building a Democratic Partnership

The final collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 secured the United States' global position and the international order's unipolarity, which had already taken shape during the last years of the Cold War. American dominance was evident in the military, economic, diplomatic, and ideological realms.[8] With no strategic or ideological rival, the U.S. was at the pinnacle of power on the world scene. But, like any victor in a great war, Washington confronted choices of how to use its unparalleled power.

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[1] Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political change from Gorbachev to Putin*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2001

[2] Daniel Treisman, *The Return: Russia's Journey from Gorbachev to Medvedev*, Free Press, New York, 2012

[3] Lilia Shevtsova, *Yeltsin's Russia: Myths and Reality*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, New York, 1999

[4] Peter Reddaway, Dmitri Glinksi, *The Tragedy of Russia's Reforms: Market Bolshevism against Democracy*, United States Institute of Peace Press, Washington D.C., 2001

[5] Josephine T. Andrews, *When Majorities Fail: The Russian Parliament, 1990–1993*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2006

[6] Cindy Skach, *Russia's Constitutional Dictatorship: A Brief History*, in "University of Miami International and Comparative Law Review", Vol. 29, Issue 1, 2021, https://repository.law.miami.edu/umiclr/vol29/iss1/6 (25.03.2025)

[7] James Goldgeier, Michael McFaul, *Power and Purpose: U.S. Policy Toward Russia after the Cold War*, Brookings Institution Press, Washington D.C., 2003

[8] Hal Brands, *Making the Unipolar Moment: U.S. Foreign Policy and the Rise of the Post-Cold War Order*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2016, p. 334

For the American decision-makers of the George H.W. Bush administration, the unprecedented position in which the U.S. stood presented both opportunity and responsibility. According to the national security advisor, Brent Scowcroft, this exceptional moment gave America the rarest opportunity to shape the world and the deepest responsibility to do so wisely for the benefit of most, not just the U.S., but all nations. In the same vein, President Bush considered that as a leading democracy and beacon of liberty, and given the freedom, resources and geography, the U.S. had a disproportionate responsibility to use that power in pursuit of a common good. These unique advantages obliged the U.S. to lead the world affairs and not revert to isolationism[1].

Guided by this vision, the American administration put forward a post-Cold War strategy in foreign policy. The main elements of it were announced in the public speeches given by the President and in the strategic documents. In the first State of the Union Address since the dissolution of the USSR, President Bush laid out some of the ideas on existing opportunities and threats and the role the U.S. should play in this new context. Thus, standing before the joint session of Congress on January 28, the American leader proclaimed the new mission of the U.S.: to lead in support of freedom everywhere[2]. Refusing the calls to a more restrained foreign policy that started to take hold once America's decades-long adversary vanished, Bush highlighted the importance of a continued American global role. His strategy seemed to be influenced not only by the victory of Western values in the Cold War but also by the American political culture. Since the founding of the United States, the exceptionalism of the American nation and the universality of its values have influenced the aspirations of its leaders. Regardless of the type of exceptionalism applied throughout history, exemplary or missionary exceptionalism, the United States has believed that it has a special role and a moral obligation to spread the benefits of its experiment.[3] Convinced that the US was facing a new opportunity to export its successful democratic model, the Bush administration outlined a post-Cold War strategy that would have as its central element the American leadership and the expansion of the community of democracies.

The most comprehensive document about the new American strategic thinking was the Defense Planning Guidance (DPG). The document caused controversy when excerpts of it were made public by the New York Times in March 1992 because of its apparent attempt to make unipolarity a permanent feature of the international environment[4]. Written by then-Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Paul Wolfowitz, DPG's main reason was to address the fundamentally new situation that had been created by the collapse of the Soviet Union and to set the direction of the American nation in the next century.[5] The principal strategic goals, as presented in the document, were to deter and defeat attacks against the U.S., strengthen and extend the system of defense arrangements, preclude any hostile power from dominating a region critical to American interests, and to reduce sources of regional instability by encouraging the spread and consolidation of democratic governments and open economic systems[6]. Reflecting the complex relationship between power politics and political ideals, the strategy was meant to respond to the new challenges that the U.S. was facing.

One of the major challenges to the peace and security of the new international order was the fate of the former Soviet republics, especially the successor state of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation. Amid a democratic transition, Russia was confronted with real political and economic turmoil at the beginning of 1992. However, its geographical size, natural resources, the presence of a nuclear arsenal, and its veto power in the United Nations' Security Council still made Russia an important actor on the global stage. For the U.S., Russia's transition

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[1] George H.W. Bush; Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed*, Vintage Books, New York, 1999, pp. 754-757

[2] The American Presidency Project, *Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 28*, 1992, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/address-before-joint-session-the-congress-the-state-the-union-0 (26.03.2025)

[3] Hilde Eliassen Restad, *Old Paradigms in History Die Hard in Political Science: US Foreign Policy and American Exceptionalism*, in "American Political Thought", Vol. 1, No. 1, May 2012, p. 56, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/664586 (12.03.2025)

[4] National Security Archive, The George Washington University, *FY 94-99 Defense Planning Guidance Sections for Comments-Excerpts leaked to the New York Times*, 18 February 1992, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/nukevault/ebb245/doc03_extract_nytedit.pdf (12.03.2025)

[5] National Security Archive, The George Washington University, *Defense Planning Guidance. FY 1994-1999, 4/16/92*, p. 1, https://www.archives.gov/files/declassification/iscap/pdf/2008-003-docs1-12.pdf (12.03.2025)

[6] *Ibidem*, p. 1-2

to democracy and market economy had implications for national security and its overall goal of extending the democratic zone of peace. As a result, the DPG stated that the American goal should be to bring a democratic Russia and the other new democracies into the defense community of democratic nations, so that they can become a force for peace not only in Europe but also in other critical regions of the world[1].

The Bush administration's measures to encourage the democratic process in Moscow and integrate Russia into the Western world focused on prudent economic assistance, arms control and support for Russia's first democratically elected leader, Boris Yeltsin. Member of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union from 1961 to July 1990, Boris Yeltsin won the first democratic presidential elections for Russia on June 12, 1991, when he won 57 per cent of the popular vote.[2] An assessment of the U.S. Embassy to Moscow, written in January 1992, emphasised how Yeltsin, although he continued to struggle with the results of the imperial breakup he helped bring about and with the garrison state he inherited, would remain the key leadership figure in the reform process in Russia. No credible substitute was waiting in the wings[3]. The economic hardships created by the reforms his government applied did not affect his popularity among Russians. Moreover, according to the cable, by background and temperament, Yeltsin seemed curiously unsuited for the job of leading an autocratic society towards a democratic future, but he seemed determined that the job be done and be done by none other than himself[4].

During his meeting with President Bush at Camp David in February 1992, Yeltsin positioned himself and his government as the only forces capable of leading Russia towards democracy. He underscored the importance of continued reform in Russia and the threats that loomed large in the case of a failed process of democratization. Painting a grim picture, the Russian leader told his American counterpart that if reform failed, the forces in power would be replaced by conservative forces, hawks, who would reject the principles of democracy and market economy. He appealed to the American support and cooperation[5].

In the joint press conference after the meeting, Bush hailed that, for the first time, an American President and the democratically elected President of an independent Russia had met. He declared that Moscow and Washington had started to chart a new relationship based on trust, a commitment to economic and political freedom, and a strong hope for a true partnership[6].The meeting inaugurated the dawn of the new era in which the two states no longer viewed each other as adversaries.

The following months saw an increase in the American effort to help Moscow and the other republics of the former Soviet Union. President Bush unveiled, alongside the Western Allies, a $24 billion aid package to bolster Russia's struggling economy[7]. In addition, he proposed to the American Congress a comprehensive bill, the FREEDOM Support Act. Persuading the public to support his aid agenda to the former adversary was not an easy task. 1992 was an election year, the U.S. was struggling with its own economic problems, and President Bush was criticised for paying too much attention to foreign affairs. To soothe all the concerns, Bush indicated how the democratic revolution in the former USSR was a defining moment in history with profound consequences for America's own national interests. If this democratic revolution was defeated, Bush considered, it could plunge

[1] *Ibidem*, p.5

[2] Woodrow Wilson Center Digital Archive, *Yeltsin, Boris, 1931-2007, Biography*, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/people/yeltsin-boris (27.03.2025)

[3] National Security Archive, *Cable from U.S. Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State. Subject: Boris Nikolayevich Yel'tsin: A Mid-Range Political Assessment, January 30, 1992*, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/29669-document-7-cable-us-embassy-moscow-secretary-state-subject-boris-nikolayevich (25.03.2025)

[4] *Idem*

[5] National Security Archive, *Memorandum of Conversation. Subject: Meeting with Boris Yeltsin, President of Russia, February 1, 1992*, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/29670-document-8-memorandum-conversation-subject-meeting-boris-yeltsin-president-russia (27.03.2025)

[6] George H.W. Presidential Library & Museum (GHWBPL)– Public Papers, *The President's News Conference With President Boris Yeltsin of Russia, 1992-02-01*, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/3898 (27.03.2025)

[7] James Gerstenzang, Tamara Jones*, U.S., Allies Unveil $24-Billion Aid Plan for Struggling Russia: Economics: The American share is $5 billion. Bush presents the program as a step to avoid a return to totalitarianism. He cites the 'high stakes*', in "Los Angeles Times", April 2, 1992, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1992-04-02-mn-207-story.html (27.03.2025)

America into a world more dangerous in some respects than the dark years of the Cold War[1]. Furthermore, in a speech given to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, Bush advanced Washington's new "mission" towards Moscow, stating that securing and building a democratic peace in Europe and the former USSR would guarantee a lasting peace for the U.S.[2].

But winning democratic peace needed more than just political idealism. American policy included a heavy dose of political realism as a hedge against any reversal in Russia's reform[3]. After the collapse of the USSR, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan inherited much of the vast Soviet nuclear arsenal. The U.S. had a vital interest in ensuring that only one nuclear power emerged from the breakup of the Soviet Union. Therefore, the Bush administration tried, as soon as possible, to convince the three former Soviet republics to adhere to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), bring all the weapons under Russia's control and then sign an arms control agreement with Moscow that would further reduce its nuclear forces. Until June, when Bush and Yeltsin met in Washington, the American administration had successfully finalised its power politics' goal. The newly independent states signed the Lisbon Protocol, and the leaders of the U.S. and Russia agreed to the most significant arms reductions of the nuclear age through the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty II (START II).

With a vision that featured ideals as much as power politics, President Bush developed a strategy that would serve as a guide for the next American administration. Trying to advance the national security interests of the U.S., Bush found that supporting the reform process and integrating Russia into the system of Western democracies were the best guarantees for maintaining international peace and security.

Clinton Administration and the Frst Crises of Post-Soviet Russia

The American Presidential elections of November 1992 resulted in the victory of the Democratic Governor of Arkansas, Bill Clinton. Since the first months of the presidential campaign, Clinton set out his vision regarding America's role in international affairs and the relations between Washington and Moscow. Influenced by the same thinking on American leadership and democratic peace principles as his predecessor, Clinton affirmed in December 1991, at Georgetown University, that the U.S. must build a safer, more prosperous and more democratic world. Convinced that democracies would not go to war with each other, Clinton imagined a global democracy that would be in the best interest of all nations[4]. He emphasised the importance of regarding the funding for democratic assistance as a legitimate part of the American national security budget[5].

As one of the greatest security challenges of the post-Cold War era, the process of Russia's democratic reform was a major concern for Clinton once he took office as the U.S. President in January 1993. Throughout the electoral campaign, he had criticized President Bush for not doing enough to support the democratic revolution and being reluctant to offer Yeltsin a helping hand[6]. Clinton was an admirer of Boris Yeltsin since he opposed the coup attempt against Mikhail Gorbachev in August 1991. He thought that Yeltsin was the right man to lead post-Soviet Russia[7]. Just three days after the presidential inauguration on January 20, Clinton called Yeltsin to assure him that Russia would be a top priority for U.S. foreign policy during his administration and that he was determined to create, alongside the Russian leader, the closest U.S.–Russia partnership. Also, the American leader pointed up that Washington would do whatever it could to help Russia's democratic reforms succeed[8].

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[1] GHWBPL – Public Papers, *The President's News Conference on Aid to the States of the Former Soviet Union, 1992-04-01*, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/4125 (27.03.2025)

[2] GHWBPL – Public Papers, *Remarks to the American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1992-04-09*, https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/public-papers/4167 (27.03.2025)

[3] James A. Baker III, *The Politics of Diplomacy: Revolution, War&Peace, 1989-1992*, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1995, p. 654

[4] Internet Archive, *A New Covenant for American Security, Remarks to Students at Georgetown University*, *December 12, 1991*, http://web.archive.org/web/20030525033427/http://www.ndol.org/print.cfm?contentid=250537 (31.03.2025)

[5] *Idem*

[6] The American Presidency Project, *Excerpts of Remarks in Milwaukee, October 02, 1992*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/excerpts-remarks-milwaukee (31.03.2025)

[7] Bill Clinton, *My Life*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 2004, p. 496

[8] National Security Archive, *Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, Subject: Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russia, January 23, 1993*, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/29754-document-2-memorandum-telephone-conversation-subject-telcon-president-boris-yeltsin (31.03.2025)

In February 1993, in the Presidential Review Directive related to the U.S. policy towards Russia and Ukraine, the Clinton administration indicated that the survival of democracy and reform governments in Russia and Ukraine is one of the most critical foreign policy issues facing the U.S. and the world. The success of these and other reform governments in the former Soviet Union would enhance America's long-term national security and global stability[1]. The Review Directive stated the vision of President Clinton, who believed that the U.S. must devote considerable energy, resources and creativity to assist in the promotion of the spread of democracy and market economic reforms in the former Soviet Union.

By the time the Clinton administration took office, however, post-Soviet Russia appeared to be sinking deeper into a political and economic crisis as the Russian parliament turned against the measures taken by Yeltsin. His government's programme of economic shock therapy for turning the Soviet centralized economy into a market one led to soaring prices and high inflation. In December 1992, the Congress of People's Deputies forced Yeltsin to dismiss Yegor Gaidar, the architect and symbol of Russia's economic change, and replaced him with Viktor Chernomyrdin as prime minister, an experienced Soviet apparatchik[2].

Although Russia was in a democratic transition, constituent elements of the old Soviet system remained in place. The state continued to be governed by the Brezhnev-era Constitution of 1978, and the Congress of People's Deputies benefited from the electoral mandate obtained in March 1990 during the regime of Mikhail Gorbachev. Disagreements over economic reform evolved into a constitutional debate concerning the structure and organization of the Russian political system. Discontented Yeltsin was conducting the internal affairs, the Congress curtailed the president's power to rule by decree, an assignment given initially by the legislature at the beginning of the reform process and passed several constitutional amendments that further limited the president's power. It seemed like these changes were major victories for the Russian Congress and a progress towards greater parliamentary authority in governing the country[3]. Yeltsin rejected the actions of the Congress and, on March 20, announced a referendum through which Russian citizens would express their support for his leadership, a new constitution drafted under his direction and a law to elect a new Parliament. Moreover, until the referendum scheduled for April 25, Yeltsin would govern by special decree, which deprived the legislative branch of authority[4].

Inside the Clinton administration, the Russian leader's decision created uncertainties about what kind of leader Yeltsin was and how much he should have been supported by the U.S. According to Strobe Talbott, Ambassador-at-Large and Special Adviser to the Secretary of State for the New Independent States, Yeltsin's reliance on the referendum had the virtue of taking the issue to the people, but his invocation of special rule had the look of martial law[5]. Despite that, President Clinton favoured issuing statements strongly supporting Yeltsin because he was the only democratically elected national leader in Russia and at the helm of the reform process. In the first statement after Yeltsin's announcement, the administration stressed that the Russian President has the American support, as does his reform government, and all reformers throughout the Russian Federation. By his actions, the statement asserted, President Yeltsin proposes to break the political impasse in Russia by letting the Russian people decide their future[6].

The American President was hardly alone in considering that Yeltsin was the only viable alternative in Russia for a democratic future. The Western allies had the same vision of the Russian leader. In a joint press conference with President Clinton, British Prime Minister John Major declared that Yeltsin was the best hope for the Russians

[1] Federation of American Scientists, *Presidential Review Directive/NSC – 3, Subject: U.S. Policy Toward Russia and Ukraine, February 4, 1993*, https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/prd/prd-3.pdf (31.03.2025)
[2] Kristina Spohr, *Post-Wall, Post Square: Rebuilding the World after 1990*, William Collins, London, 2019, p. 484
[3] Michael McFaul, *Russia's Unfinished Revolution: Political change from Gorbachev to Putin*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2001, p. 186
[4] Richard Boudreaux, *Yeltsin Moves to Rule by Decree: Russia: The besieged president defies lawmakers and orders an April 25 referendum. Legislature calls for emergency session today as leadership struggle hits crisis point,* "Los Angeles Times", March 21, 1993, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-03-21-mn-13722-story.html (31.03.2025)
[5] Strobe Talbott, *The Russia Hand: A Memoir of Presidential Diplomacy*, Random House, New York, 2003, p. 72
[6]Clinton White House, *U.S. Statement on the Yeltsin Speech*, March 20, 1993, https://clintonwhitehouse6.archives.gov/1993/03/1993-03-20-us-statement-on-yeltsin-speech.html (31.03.2025)

and that the reform policies were personified in the person of President Yeltsin[1]. In the same vein, German Chancellor Helmut Kohl considered that there are sometimes situations in politics when one must stand by a person. In a conversation with President Clinton on 26 March, Chancellor Kohl reflected on the possible threat coming from Russia if Yeltsin was not supported. In his opinion, if the Russian leader is assisted, he might have a chance in the fight against the legislature, even though his political survival was not certain. If he were toppled, then things would be much worse and more expensive for the West, which would have to rearm[2]. Thereby, maintaining Yeltsin as the leader of post-Soviet Russia was an idea shared not just by Clinton but also by the main European allies of the U.S.

In the following weeks until the referendum, Clinton tried to enhance Yeltsin's political position at home and unveil to the American public the administration's strategy towards Russia and the benefits of helping the former adversary. The most comprehensive speech on Moscow was given on April 1st, just before the planned summit at Vancouver, Canada, with the Russian leader. Recalling some ideas exposed during the presidential campaign about the importance of an active American engagement role in the world and the task of promoting democratic spirit and economic reforms, Clinton drew attention to the importance of keeping the former Soviet Union at the forefront of the American foreign policy agenda. He highlighted how the interest of the U.S. in security and prosperity lay with Russian reform and with Russian reformers led by Boris Yeltsin. Because supporting Russia was a wise investment, the U.S. must strike a strategic alliance with Russian reform[3]. Optimistic about the Russian journey towards democracy, Clinton saw the crisis unfold in Moscow as a growing pain within democracy, rather than a retreat from democracy[4].

The Vancouver summit between the two leaders would be the right setting to provide a diplomatic boost for the Russian president. In a memorandum sent to President Clinton, the National Security Advisor, Anthony Lake, detailed the importance of the high-level meeting for the domestic audience in Russia in the context of the April 25 referendum. According to Lake, the Vancouver summit would help Yeltsin in many ways. First, it would show his people and the world that things have settled down at home and he has weathered the crisis. Then, it would help him to gain in stature from being treated as an equal by the American President, a perception underscored by the fact that Clinton's first meeting abroad with a foreign leader was with the leader of Russia, and, finally, he would blunt the criticism of his foreign policy as being too pro-Western if Yeltsin would bring home tangible assistance under the mantle of mutual advantage and partnership[5].

The memorandum specified Washington's goals in relations with Moscow and why the success of Yeltsin and his democratic reforms was so essential for the national security of the U.S. Turning to the realist components of Clinton's agenda, Lake underlined the foreign policy issues that would be an important part of the Vancouver summit that Clinton should be stressing: the implementation of START I and ratification of START II, convincing Ukraine to ratify NPT, the continued Russian presence in the Baltics and other former Soviet republics, and Moscow cooperation at the UN Security Council for resolving the principal security crisis on the global stage, such as Yugoslavia, Iraq and Norh Korea. Regarding Russia's reform, Lake pointed out that Russia needed American assistance, but, more than that, the U.S. needed Russian reform to succeed to have the resources and the time to reshape its own economy and cut the defence budget[6].

Meeting in Vancouver on April 3-4, the two leaders discussed the most pressing issues from the bilateral agenda, including the referendum on support for President Boris Yeltsin and his policies. After he outlined how he spent a day campaigning, the Russian leader exposed the difficulties facing political life in Russia and the stark

[1] The American Presidency Project, *The President's News Conference With Prime Minister John Major of the United Kingdom, February 24, 1993*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-with-prime-minister-john-major-the-united-kingdom-0 (01.04.2025)

[2] Clinton Digital Library, *Meeting with German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, March 26, 1993, Oval Office*, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101319 (01.04.2025)

[3] The American Presidency Project, *Remarks to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in Annapolis, April 01, 1993*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-american-society-newspaper-editors-annapolis (01.04.2025)

[4] *Idem*

[5] National Security Archive, *Memorandum from Anthony Lake to President Clinton, Subject: Meeting with President Yeltsin. Date: April 3-4, 1993. Location: Vancouver, Canada, March 31, 1993*, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30378-document-3-memorandum-anthony-lake-president-clinton-subject-meeting-president (01.04.2025)

[6] *Idem*

difference between him and the opposition. He asserted that people do not want the communists to come back.[1] At the joint press conference after the summit, President Clinton, as part of his own campaign of improving Yeltsin's political standing, announced the financial package of $1.6 billion to bolster political and economic reform in Russia and reiterated how his administration was investing not only in the future of Russia but in the future of America as well.[2] Asked about the impact the summit would have on the result of the referendum, Yeltsin tried to downplay the summit's role and affirmed that it was up to the Russians to deal with the referendum issue. However, he insisted that a vote of no confidence would deal a major blow not only to Russia but also to the U.S. and other countries of the world. It would be a loss to democracy, a loss to freedom, a rollback to the past, a return to the Communist yokes, according to the Russian President[3].

On April 25, the people of Russia went to the polls to answer four questions: "Do you trust President Yeltsin? Do you approve of the socio-economic policy conducted by the Russian president and the Russian government? Should the new presidential election be conducted earlier than scheduled? Should the new parliamentary election be conducted earlier than scheduled?"[4]. The answers and the turnout were favourable to Yeltsin. After he learned about the results, President Clinton called the Russian leader to congratulate him on the victory and give assurances that the U.S. would continue to support him. Yeltsin, on the other hand, in contrast to what he declared publicly in Vancouver, recognized that a major part of the credit went to what the American President said during the summit[5]. Reporting to the press on the conversation, Clinton welcomed the political outcome in Russia, declaring that it was a very good day, not only for the people of Russia but for the people of the United States and all the people of the world[6].

Post-Soviet Reforms Under Siege

Far from being resolved by a long-term victory for Yeltsin, the March crisis and the referendum campaign further polarised the political forces in Moscow. In the summer of 1993, Yeltsin convened the Constitutional Conference to draft a new fundamental law. Opposition leaders left the Conference and began the efforts of designing their own draft Constitution that the Congress of People's Deputies could adopt in October. To prevent what he believed would be a law that would eliminate the president's powers, Yeltsin issued, on September 21, Presidential Decree 1400, calling for the dissolution of the Congress of People's Deputies, a popular ratification of a new Constitution and elections for a new bicameral Parliament in December 1993. Also, as a conciliatory gesture, Yeltsin stated that he would hold an early presidential election next year, in March[7]. His political move was considered unconstitutional, and the Congress approved the acting vice-president, Alexander Rutskoi, as Russia's new President.

The Constitutional crisis brought back to the debate the chances of Yeltsin's political survival. Prior to the Russian leader's decision, on September 7, President Clinton turned once again to his main European ally, Helmut Kohl, to discuss what was happening in Moscow. He asked the German Chancellor how he thought Yeltsin was doing with all the rising political controversy. From Kohl's point of view, the situation was far from being clear to assess. Things might go smoothly or very badly. But what was for sure, it was to stay in the current position, of supporting Yeltsin in his fight with the opposition. The German Chancellor expected that nobody who would come after Yeltsin to be as auspicious as he. President Clinton agreed, sharing with Chancellor the opinion that if Yeltsin

[1] National Security Archive, *Memorandum of Conversation, Subject: Working Dinner with Boris Yeltsin, Vancouver, Canada, April 3, 1993, 6:30-8:30 pm,,* https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30381-document-6-memorandum-conversation-subject-working-dinner-boris-yeltsin-vancouver (01.04.2025)

[2] The American Presidency Project, *The President's News Conference With President Boris Yeltsin of Russia in Vancouver, April 04, 1993*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/the-presidents-news-conference-with-president-boris-yeltsin-russia-vancouver (01.04.2025)

[3] *Idem*

[4] Michael McFaul, *Op.cit*., p. 188

[5] National Security Archive, *Memorandum of Telephone Conversation, Subject: Telephone Conversation with Russian President Boris Yeltsin, April 26, 1993, 1:50 – 1:58*, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/30383-document-8-memorandum-telephone-conversation-subject-telephone-conversation-russian (01.04.2025)

[6] The American Presidency Project, *Remarks on the Election in Russia and an Exchange With Reporters, April 26, 1993*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-election-russia-and-exchange-with-reporters (02.04.2025)

[7] Michael McFaul, *Op.cit*., p.195

doesn't make it, anyone who will follow him will be worse[1]. That was a strong argument for the Western leaders to stay with Yeltsin.

As was the case during the March crisis, Strobe Talbott had some doubts about how legal and democratic Yeltsin's action was. He urged President Clinton to find a way to tell Yeltsin, in the telephone conversation that was about to take place between the two leaders, that he can't destroy democracy in order to save it[2]. Even though the Constitution was adopted in the old Soviet times, it is the only one Russia have until it adopts a new one, considered Talbott[3]. In the conversation that followed, President Clinton wanted to hear from Yeltsin, first, what Decree 1400 meant for his position and the reform process. The Russian leader detailed the situation that was taking place in Moscow. He justified his decision by stating that the Supreme Soviet had gotten out of control, no longer supported the reform process, and its members had become communists[4]. Clinton informed Yeltsin that his speech came at a time when the U.S. Congress was preparing to vote on a $2.5 billion assistance package for Russia and other newly independent states. The American President avoided questioning the legality of Yeltsin's action. He instead drew attention to the importance of Russia continuing the process of reform and organizing free and fair elections[5]. The Russian leader promised that the elections would be fully carried out in a democratic way. Moreover, speaking about the unease that had started to take hold on the streets of Moscow, Yeltsin stressed that he did not want, under any circumstances, bloodshed[6].

Encouraged by Yeltsin's commitment to democratic elections, the Clinton Administration publicly affirmed its full support for the Russian leader while trying to convince Congress to pass the aid package as soon as possible. At the end of September, the Senate voted 88 to 10 to approve the bill. It was considered a tangible sign to show Yeltsin and his supporters that the U.S. stood in their corner in the political struggle unfolding between reformers and hard-liners in Moscow[7]. The rapid action taken by Congress showed that a clear bipartisan consensus emerged for giving Yeltsin the needed support for a new victory in the long political fight with his opponents.

At odds with what the Russian leader thought would be a peaceful confrontation, the constitutional crisis turned violent in the first days of October. After Rutskoi's forces went on the offensive by attacking Moscow's mayor's office and the television station, Yeltsin ordered the armed forces to attack the Russian White House building, where his opponents were barricaded. The Clinton Administration was again confronted with taking a side in the events that increasingly looked like a civil war. According to the U.S. Ambassador to Russia Thomas Pickering, Strobe Talbott called him on October 3 to ask what the U.S. should do about Yeltsin. Pickering, like most members from the Clinton Administration, thought that Yeltsin was the only chance for creating a more benign future, less contentious and less ideological. He told Talbott that the U.S. had no alternative in that difficult situation. The fact that the Russian leader has said he would go to the elections was an extremely important basis for supporting him[8]. The ones who opened fire at the government and were entrenched in the White House had not shown any interest in what the U.S. was interested in or in the kind of future for Russia that Washington wanted to support, considered the American Ambassador[9].

After this assessment came from the besieged Moscow, President Clinton described to the press the political profile of Yeltsin's opponents who started the violence, stressing that they represented the old Communist system

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[1] Clinton Digital Library, *Telcon With Chancellor Helmut Kohl of Germany on September 7, 1993*, https://clinton.presidentiallibraries.us/items/show/101325 (02.04.2025)
[2] Strobe Talbott, *Op.cit*., pp. 110-111
[3] *Idem*
[4] National Security Archive, *Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russian Federation, September 21, 1993*, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16845-document-03-memorandum-telephone-conversation (02.04.2025)
[5] *Idem*
[6] *Idem*
[7] Michael Ross, *Senate Includes $2.5 Billion for Russia in Aid Bill: Legislation: Action comes one day after Clinton's call to help Yeltsin. Total package comes to $12.5 billion*, "Los Angeles Times", September 24, 1993, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1993-09-24-mn-38503-story.html (02.04.2025)
[8] The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training – Foreign Affairs Oral History Project, *Interview with Ambassador Thomas Reeve Pickering, Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy, April 18, 2003,* pp. 384-385, https://adst.org/OH%20TOCs/Pickering-Thomas-Reeve.pdf (03.04.2025)
[9] *Ibidem*, p. 359

and were people who did not want a new constitution and an election[1]. He continued to highlight the importance of supporting Yeltsin because he was the person who embodied a commitment to democracy. Also, he reiterated that if the Russian leader would go forward with a new constitution, genuinely democratic elections for the Parliament and genuinely democratic elections for the President, Yeltsin would do exactly what he said he would do, and the U.S. had taken the right position in this conflict[2].

For President Clinton, there was no doubt that Yeltsin's opponents were trying to derail Russia from its democratic reform process. Both Alexander Rutkoi and Ruslan Khasbulatov, Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation, were Yeltsin's allies during the August 1991 coup attempt. Increasingly in disagreement with the policy of economic transformation, they turned against the Russian leader. Their Soviet past, doubled by their hostility towards the only democratically elected leader in Russia and the violent attempt to seize power, led the Clinton administration to refuse any idea of opening the communication channels with them.

On October 4, the civil war between Yeltsin and Congress was over. The next day, President Clinton called the Russian leader to express his intention to continue to work on the bilateral relations and congratulate him on the way he had handled the events[3]. The Russian leader once again motivated his decision to use force, calling his opponents fascist, and mentioned how, with the end of the events, there were no more obstacles to Russia's transition to democracy and a market economy. Moreover, trying to predict the outcome of the upcoming elections, Yeltsin highlighted how he had no visible rivals, with his popularity rating at 90%[4].

Despite this apparent optimism that seemed to emerge with the resolution of the constitutional crisis, a stable democratic regime was far from being established in Russia. The measures taken by Yeltsin after the end of his conflict with Congress seemed to unveil the emergence of a new balance of power in post-Soviet Russia. With his main opponents in prison, Yeltsin believed there was a new opportunity to design the elements of a system more inclined to presidential powers. This change of rules, however, started to be seen with uncertainty. In a cable sent to the American Secretary of State from the U.S. Embassy to Moscow, Chargé d'Affaires James Collins assessed the domestic political dynamics in Russia. Ahead of the first post-Soviet parliamentary elections that were about to be held in December 1993, Collins questioned both the fairness of the campaign and the viability of the new draft Constitution that gave more power to the president. According to his cable, the draft Constitution that Yeltsin was prepared to present to the Russian people failed to provide the basis for handling one of the greatest challenges facing Yeltsin's legislature and government: making the unwieldy Russian Federation work[5].

Apart from the new Basic Law, Collins also raised concerns about the continuing ban on ten hardline nationalist and communist political organizations that would pose a key issue for the ultimate legitimacy of the new legislative body[6]. This concern was a problem that needed to be discussed with the Russian officials. Informing the Secretary of State Warren Christopher of his visit to Moscow, Collins focused on the importance that the U.S. must give to the Russian electoral campaign. He advised Christopher to make clear that Washington wanted to see a fair and democratic election in December – and thereafter – and accompanied by a free and independent media[7].

In his first meetings with the Russian Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev since the October events, the American Secretary of State made brief observations about the problems that would put at threat the democratic

[1] The American Presidency Project, *Remarks in a Town Meeting in Sacramento, October 03, 1993*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-town-meeting-sacramentol (03.04.2025)
[2] The American Presidency Project, *Remarks to the Community and an Exchange With Reporters in San Francisco, October 04, 1993*, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-community-and-exchange-with-reporters-san-francisco (03.04.2025)
[3] National Security Archive, *Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of Russian Federation, October 5, 1993*, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16847-document-05-memorandum-telephone-conversation (05.03.2025)
[4] *Idem*
[5] National Security Archive, *Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State: Secretary's Visit to Moscow: Domestic Political Dynamics, October 19, 1993*, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16849-document-07-cable-american-embassy-moscow (05.04.2025)
[6] *Idem*
[7] National Security Archive, *Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State: Your October 21-23 Visit to Moscow-Key Foreign Policy Issues, October 20, 1993*, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16850-document-08-cable-american-embassy-moscow (05.03.2025)

character of the post-Soviet Russia. He wanted to find out more about the press and political organizations that were banned or restricted, and opened the possibility of sending American observers to verify the electoral process[1]. In his conversation with the Russian leader, Christopher reiterated his idea of electoral observers while praising Yeltsin for the "superb handling" of the constitutional crisis and how relieved the American administration was once it learned about Yeltsin reestablishing control[2]. He avoided signalling out the worries about the electoral campaign or the draft Constitution. Instead, the discussion centred around Yeltsin's highly hopeful vision of the future of democracy in his country. The Russian leader asserted that the country has calmed down with the constitutional crisis over, with no strikes and no appreciable unrest on the streets. Concerning the draft Constitution, Yeltsin insisted that it would be up to the standards of the best Western democracies and would enshrine popular democracy in Russia[3].

The December parliamentary elections proved to contradict a large part of Yeltsin's affirmations. The distress of the Russian people was expressed on the ballot rather than on the street. The Liberal Democratic Party of Russia, headed by Vladimir Zhirinovsky, who based his campaign on a nationalist and imperialist rhetoric, obtained 23% of the votes, the Communist Party 12% and Russia's Choice Party of Yegor Gaidar and Yeltsin 15%. The Liberal parties loyal to Yeltsin did not win a majority of seats in the new parliament. It was a surprise that started to create a perception that Russia's experiment with democracy resembled 1920[s] Weimar Germany[4].

Despite the unexpected results, Clinton congratulated Yeltsin on the historic elections. In the conversation between the two leaders in December 1993, the American President maintained a positive view, telling Yeltsin that in his public statements, he tried to emphasise that the elections were free, fair, the Constitution was approved and that the reformers would still be by far the largest faction in the Duma.[5] Nonetheless, all these remarks could not hide the doubts inside the Clinton Administration regarding the future of democratic reforms in Russia. Even though the Soviet Congress was replaced by a bicameral Parliament, its component was still dominated by parties that opposed Yeltsin's political programme. Being aware of this dynamic, Clinton asked the Russian leader what impact the election results would have on the economic reform and Russian foreign policy. Yeltsin attempted to alleviate the fears, stressing that in the upper house of the Parliament, 80% of the members would be democratically minded people. Alluding to Zhirinovsky, he claimed that there is no room for extremism or fascism in the new Parliament and the President and the Constitution will guard against that[6].

Behind the apparent downsizing of electoral results, there was a rising concern about the stability of post-Soviet Russia and its democratic trajectory. Strobe Talbott considered that even though the Duma had less power under the new Constitution than the Supreme Soviet had had under the old one, the government's political opponents could claim they had a popular mandate. As a result, according to Talbott, everything that the U.S. and Russia were trying to do together would be harder[7].

The threats that the U.S. was trying to avoid during the constitutional crisis seemed to be looming again. But other than a menace to the Russian democracy or the national security of the U.S., the results of the parliamentary elections were a caveat for the Clinton Administration that the strategic alliance with Russian reform was more difficult to achieve than it thought at the beginning of 1993.

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[1] National Security Archive, *Secretary Christopher's Meeting with Foreign Minister Kozyrev: NATO, Elections, Regional Issues, October 25, 1993*, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16851-document-09-secretary-christopher-s-meeting (05.04.2025)

[2] National Security Archive, *Secretary Christopher's Meeting with President Yeltsin, 10/22/1993, Moscow, October 1993*, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16852-document-10-secretary-christopher-s-meetingl (05.04.2025)

[3] *Idem*

[4] Michael McFaul, *Op.cit*., p. 228

[5] National Security Archive, *Memorandum of Telephone Conversation: Telcon with President Boris Yeltsin of the Russian Federation, December 22, 1993*, https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/document/16853-document-11-memorandum-telephone-conversation (07.04.2025)

[6] *Idem*

[7] Strobe Talbott, *Op.cit*., p. 133

Conclusions

As the sole superpower on the international stage after the end of the Cold War, the U.S. took the responsibility of bringing its former adversary into the community of democratic nations. Considering that the transformation of Russia into a free-market democracy was in the national security interest of the U.S., the American administration of Bill Clinton designed a strategy of helping Moscow's reforms succeed and bolstering the domestic position of the first Russian elected leader, Boris Yeltsin. With the increased struggle in Russia between the legislative and executive branches, the Clinton Administration continued to follow the American initial strategy that seemed to be the only alternative for ensuring global peace.

Yeltsin's overstepping of constitutional limits did not seem to represent a serious violation for the Clinton administration. The post-Soviet Russia was still governed by the Brezhnev-era Constitution of 1978, which poorly delineated the political powers, and the Congress, elected in 1990, was dominated by hardliners and members of the former Soviet elites, including members of the Communist Party. In Washington's perception, the actions that Yeltsin took were more part of an effort to drive his country to a more democratic path and leave behind the vestiges of the old Soviet system. His actions were considered an attempt to end the stalemate that made it difficult for Russia's transition to a democracy and market economy.

The American administration little doubted that abandoning full support for the Russian leader would result in a return to a confrontational relationship between Moscow and Washington. Throughout the crisis in Moscow, the debate within the Clinton administration was in favour of offering unconditional support for Yeltsin. Even though Strobe Talbott, one of the key figures in designing the American strategy towards Russia, had considered taking a more critical view of Yeltsin's political stance, the American President's thinking to avoid any criticism regarding the Russian leader prevailed. Encouraged by Yeltsin's calls for a new Constitution and elections and influenced by the way the Russian leader portrayed his political opponents as fascists and communists, Clinton maintained his long-term personal perception that Yeltsin was the right man to lead post-Soviet Russia. His perspective was also reflected in the Congress, where, due to a bipartisan consensus, the American legislators voted for an increased aid package to Russia amidst the turmoil in Moscow.

The US's ideological and geopolitical interests rested on Yeltsin's political survival. As the most pro-Western politician from post-Soviet Russia, Yeltsin was praised in Washington as the only viable alternative for ensuring Russia's integration into the democratic zone of peace and fostering bilateral cooperation in arms control, the denuclearization of former Soviet republics and in managing regional crises. No matter how controversial his measures were, he was the only leader in Russia with a popular mandate and willing to cooperate with Washington. The imperialist and nationalist threats posed by the opposition made the choice and the rationality behind the decision much easier for the American administration.

Far from being resolved through democratic means, the Russian constitutional crisis revealed the fragility of the reform process and the failure of its transition to a full-fledged democracy. It marked the beginning of a more presidential system that would serve as a pathway to authoritarianism in the years ahead. Refusing to see the incipient elements that had already started to appear at the beginning of spring 1993, the Clinton administration preferred to forge a blind diplomacy in relations with Russia. It tried to overlook the undemocratic practices applied by Yeltsin and focus instead on the weak assurances given by the Russian leader on the resumption of reforms.

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