4 Succeeding the Soviet Union

When the Soviet Union formally ceased to exist at the end of 1991, 15 nominally independent republics emerged in its place. Since then a varying number (though never all) of these states have participated in the loose post-Soviet collective arrangement called the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This chapter focuses principally on the position of Russia and assesses what the available evidence suggests about the nature and direction of that country’s attempts to define a new role for itself as a leading power in international life. Section 1 of the chapter is focused on the Russian state and nation. The analysis here looks at the strengths and weaknesses of post-Soviet Russia in terms of its actual or potential power resources as well as its desired regional and/or global roles. Following on from this, Sections 2 and 3 look at Russian policy on both a regional and a global basis since its re-emergence as an independent state.

RUSSIA ‘IN ITSELF’ AND ITS FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES

The eagerness with which Russia’s leaders, principally President Boris Yeltsin and the then Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, sought to assure their country’s status as the internationally-recognised successor to the Soviet Union from December 1991 is noteworthy. Kozyrev hinted at the hard lobbying which had been conducted to this end in a contemporary interview, when he said that ‘it seems to many people that Russia became the legal successor of the USSR automatically, but this was by no means the case’. Yeltsin and Kozyrev were prepared to take on additional economic burdens in the form of responsibility for most of the USSR’s foreign debts, including substantial sums of money owed to the United Nations, in order to ensure the other former Soviet republics’ acquiescence in this claim. The successor status clearly mattered a great deal to the Russian leadership.
It mattered principally because it was viewed as underpinning Russia’s status as a great power in the eyes of the United States and the international community generally. Yeltsin and Kozyrev believed that the reborn Russian state could and should effectively slip into the defunct USSR’s shoes to the maximum extent possible in terms of assuming the latter’s international status and rights. Its responsibilities and obligations were accepted as the necessary flip-side to the coin. Some Western analysts have, in this context, found the term ‘continuing state’ rather than successor state to be the most accurate means of describing Russia’s post-Soviet position.3

Most Russian government officials have generally preferred to avoid using the term continuing state. This is because of their desire to reassure the United States in particular that Russia has not aspired to be simply the Soviet Union under a different name. Nevertheless, the way in which the Russian Foreign Ministry and political leadership set about trying to secure the ex-Union’s international assets at the beginning of 1992 certainly suggested that a strong element of continuity was desired, in fact if not in name. In one of its first significant post-Soviet acts, in January 1992, the Russian Foreign Ministry invited foreign governments to ‘view the former USSR’s diplomatic and consular missions accredited in their countries as diplomatic and consular missions of the Russian Federation’.4 Yeltsin and Kozyrev were especially keen to secure rapid international agreement that Russia should occupy the USSR’s permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. The Russians encountered no opposition to this suggestion from the other permanent members, despite its rather dubious legality in terms of the provisions of the UN Charter. In January 1992 the first and, to date (1999), only summit meeting of Security Council members was convened in New York. This was intended largely to demonstrate to the world at large that Russia had been accepted as one of the Permanent Five.

Russia’s leaders were also keen to carry on with the USSR’s role as chief negotiating partner for the US, particularly in the realm of nuclear arms control and disarmament. This role emphasised Russia’s one undoubtedly pre-eminent power resource in the post-Soviet era: possession, along with the United States, of the world’s largest arsenals of nuclear weapons. In the nuclear arena, if in no other, Russia still occupies a special category of power resources along with the US and ahead of anybody else. Russia remains the only country with the military capacity to destroy the United States, as American leaders are well aware.