

Russia and the 'Counter-Terrorism' Campaign

By Dr James Hughes

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[1] One of the fundamentals of the Bush agenda prior to 11 September was to rid US foreign policy from international constraints and eschew international cooperation where it did not conform to US national interests. The current US preparations for military action against Islamic extremists demonstrates the limits and dangers of isolationism. The US may enjoy a global military superiority but it has a weak capacity to counter a dispersed, highly motivated and fanatically committed enemy, that is small in number but operates with immense popular support in the Islamic world, which is well-funded, well supplied and well-trained in terrorist operations, and of whom the US has poor and outdated intelligence. The US is discovering the limits to its bid for global hegemony and learning the lesson that to be effective in the international arena it must mobilise international cooperation. Any US military operation in Afghanistan would benefit immensely from Russian cooperation, particularly, through the use of airspace, bases in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and the sharing of the much more accurate and up-to-date Russian intelligence on Islamic extremist groups, and the logistics of conducting military operations in Afghan terrain. Tactically, Russia has little to offer since its military has performed so badly against well-motivated guerrilla armies. The Russian government is currently balancing the potential gains against the very heavy costs that close co-operation with the United States could entail. [2] Many Russian politicians and commentators have drawn parallels between the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the bombings in Moscow and other Russian cities in September 1999, supposedly the handiwork of Chechen 'terrorists' (though there is some evidence that they may have been a provocation by the FSB). Moscow has long accused Osama bin Laden of helping Chechen guerrillas and called its wars there 'a struggle against international terrorism'. Now Russia is demanding an end to 'double standards in the fight against international terrorism'. In fact, the images of the destruction of part of downtown New York pale beside those of Grozny, the once modern capital of Chechnya, which has been devastated by wanton Russian bombing and shelling. Russia's two wars against secessionist Chechnya (1994-6, 1999-present) have killed and maimed tens of thousands, obliterated much of the country's modern infrastructure, and driven about half of its population (some 250,000-300,000 persons) into refugee camps. In echoes of US conduct in Vietnam, the wars have been characterised by wholesale human rights abuses by poorly disciplined Russian troops against Chechen civilians, and the rejection of laws of war. Russia's conduct in Chechnya borders on the genocidal, and indeed has brought serious and sustained criticism from PACE, the OSCE and the EU. Whereas, the Clinton administration likened Yeltsin to Lincoln, battling against secession, and saw the wars as an 'internal' matter for Russia, there was a significant policy change when Bush came to power. In the first six months of his presidency Bush put a critique of Russia's conduct in the Chechnya conflict at the centre of his Russia policy. The critique, however, was downplayed somewhat after the summit in Slovenia earlier this summer, as the US sought movement from Russia on a more crucial foreign policy goal – consent for the US to abrogate the ABM treaty. [3] Putin, demonstrating his diplomatic skills, has played on Western fears and incoherence of policy on terrorism, and seizing on the opportunity presented by the attacks in the US, has successfully impressed Western leaders into a policy change on Chechnya. US Secretary of State Colin Powell has reverted to the old Clintonesque formula that Chechnya is an 'internal' affair for Russia. Most significantly, Putinmania has infected the German political class, much as Gorbymania in the late 1980s. German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder, wooed by Putin's 'German' speech to the Bundestag in September 2001, has called for a 'more differentiated evaluation in world opinion' of the Chechnya question, that is to say, a more understanding approach to Russia's near genocidal actions. Even Putin has been stunned by the suddenness of the policy shift on Chechnya, and by the new importance attached to active partnership with Russia expressed by Western leaders. It is no surprise, therefore, that Russia is accelerating its preparations for a major military offensive in Chechnya. Apart from the open airspace for humanitarian missions and the shared intelligence Putin has actually delivered very little in return for the new softer line on Chechnya. The most important contribution that Russia has made to the US preparations for an attack on Afghanistan is to consent to the Central Asian states to open their air bases to the US. These bases will be crucial for US military operations, assuming that the use of bases in Pakistan is considered to be too much of a political and security risk. [4] Nevertheless, despite Putin's rhetoric, there are very strong reasons why Russia would not serve its own national interest by becoming closely involved with US-led military action in Afghanistan. Firstly, Russia is concerned about the surge of US unilateralism under Bush. A US-led 'counter-terrorism' campaign may well further consolidate US global hegemony. Together with France it wants any military action against 'terrorists' to be organised and applied under a UN Security Council mandate. Internationalization of this kind does not serve US interests for several reasons. It would constrain US action by international law and norms, and most importantly, subject military and other actions to the approval of the Security Council, which the US does not control. It would demonstrate the political complexity of 'counterterrorism'. For example, Russia demands international support for its war against the 'terrorists' in Chechnya. Significantly, the US dropped references to the Chechen resistance from its global 'terrorism' list in 2000, a clear indication of a more positive US policy towards the Chechen resistance. Perhaps most significantly, however, internationalisation would mean that the US would lose control not only of the campaign of control but also of the very definition of the phenomenon and the targets. [5] Secondly, Russia's geography makes it acutely sensitive to relations with the Islamic world. Russia and the CIS share

borders with fundamentalist countries and could therefore become an easy target for radical Islamic terrorists. Moreover, Russia's 20 million strong Moslem population, most of which is territorially concentrated in the Volga and Caucasus regions, would be alienated by support for indiscriminate attacks on Islamic countries suspected of harbouring terrorists. Russia, already too weak to deal with a few thousand highly motivated guerrillas in Chechnya, could not cope with more widespread domestic unrest. Russia also has valuable trade relations with countries such as Iraq and Libya, which may well become the targets of US anti-terrorist attacks. Most importantly, Russia has no interest in a US-led defeat of the Taliban that would result in the creation of a pro-West puppet regime in Kabul. Since its military defeat in Afghanistan and forced withdrawal in 1988, Russia has been actively supporting the northern ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks in Afghanistan's civil war (currently under the Northern Alliance). Should the Taliban be defeated or thrown into disarray by a US-led military campaign, it would inevitably intensify Russian-backed military intervention in the north, which could potentially divide Afghanistan into US and Russian zones of influence. In fact, the recent offensive by the Northern Alliance suggests that some coordination of this kind is already occurring. Concurrently, the Pashtuns of southern Afghanistan and northern Pakistan are highly radicalised and militarised and we can expect a destabilisation of the Taliban regime to create a surge of anti-Western Islamic sentiment within Pakistan. [6] Thirdly, Putin is evidently running ahead of his own inner cabinet and senior military chiefs in his enthusiasm for cooperation with the West. Many in Russia's political and military establishment will echo the views of Foreign Minister Sergei Ivanov and Chief of the General Staff, General Anatoly Kvashnin, both of whom have forcefully opposed any direct military cooperation with the US. After all, in Russia Bin Laden is viewed as a creature of the US. His terrorist network was created, funded, trained, and supplied by the US republican administration of Ronald Reagan (in which Bush snr played a leading role) as part of its strategic goal of spoiling Soviet hegemony over Afghanistan after the invasion of 1980. This terrorist network has plagued Russia's security both by stirring up Islamic extremism in Tajikistan and other Central Asian states, and by radicalizing the war in Chechnya from 1999. In any event, they will argue, presumably the US is well-versed in the command and control infrastructure and equipment of Bin Laden's and the Taliban's forces since it was so closely implicated in their provision, along with its proxy in the region, Pakistan. [7] Fourthly, Russia is more concerned by the prospect of wider instability in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, than in taking Bin Laden 'Dead or Alive'. The intricate arrangements of the 1997 peace agreement to end the civil war in Tajikistan could well collapse. Two years of droughts have devastated the country leaving it dependent on the drug trade from Afghanistan, which supplies 80 percent of the heroin in Russia and Europe. Afghanistan is the poorest country in the world, with at least three million persons dependent on UN food aid. Conflict and sanctions against Afghanistan may disrupt the drug trade, and even unseat the Taliban, but it will lead to a massive refugee problem as the population flees en masse for safety and food across borders. The southern frontiers of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are a tinder box of ethno-territorial rivalries infused with demographic pressures and social changes that are waiting to explode into all-out ethnic war. A sudden influx of radicalized ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks from Afghanistan into the southern frontiers of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan could well be the trigger for a conflagration. Similarly, an outflow of defeated and disgruntled Pashtuns from southern Afghanistan into Pakistan could well ignite a civil war. The prospect of such developments will form the key elements of the Russian decision calculus, which at root recognizes that Russia will have to deal with the aftermath of a US-led attack long after the US has turned its attention span elsewhere.