

“Russia’s Stakes in the Anti-Terrorist Campaign”

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The day after the tragic events of September 11, Russian citizens brought flowers to US Consulates across the country. Russia’s president, Vladimir Putin, intimated in an interview to a German magazine that he wanted to cry watching the collapse of the twin towers. But he also stressed that Russia has long warned the Western community of the threat of the so-called “terrorist international,” a militant network connecting anarchic warlord enclaves in an effort to create a pan-Islamic fundamentalist state. In tune with widely shared popular sentiments, Putin made a formal statement of Russia’s condemnation of the attack and support for US retaliation, swiftly and firmly proclaiming his country an American ally in the imminent war. This was followed by a set of equally strong statements made by the Russian president in Bonn and Brussels with regard to Russia’s closer cooperation with NATO and the EU, wrapped in the rhetoric of Russia’s strategic pro-Western choice.

But what did Russia offer to the coalition? Russia has defined the terms of participation in the anti-terrorist coalition in the following way: (1) the provision of intelligence data on Afghanistan; (2) the opening of its airspace for humanitarian missions only; (3) helping, or at least not obstructing, US efforts to secure military bases in the former Soviet Central Asian states, mainly Uzbekistan; (4) providing public political support and approval of the US military action; and (5) supplying weapons and supporting by other means the Northern Alliance, Taliban’s current enemy and, therefore, the US’s current ally.

Let me assess the value of these offers. Russia may have indeed provided intelligence data, but its contents and relevance are unlikely to be disclosed in the near future. Moreover, as Russia’s defense minister, Sergei Ivanov, has indicated, interaction between Russian and US intelligence was already substantial before the September attacks and has only intensified after. As for the opening of Russia’s airspace to humanitarian missions, Putin’s declaration in fact

served to emphasize and publicize Russia's military non-involvement. Moscow was also well aware that Uzbekistan would cooperate with the United States regardless of Moscow's preferences. In the absence of any real leverage over Tashkent, the wisest option was to endorse Uzbekistan's "free self-determination." On the other hand, Tajikistan, another vital border state, was bound to follow Russia because of its political and military dependence, and Tajikistan continues to be Russia's key access point to both military and political activities in Afghanistan. As for Russia's vocal political and moral support of US retaliation, one could hardly imagine a different stance, given Russia's own record of what it has been calling the "anti-terrorist operation" in Chechnya. Public endorsement of the US's actions can thus be exploited on a symbolic level at little cost and with few practical consequences. Finally, Russia's widely advertised military aid to the Northern Alliance began long before the current crisis. It now provides an even greater opportunity for the Russian military to earn money, \$45 million recently, from selling its old arsenals, but this time out of British funds rather than drug trafficking revenues of the mujahideens.

On the whole, then, Russia's support has in practice been fairly modest, above all because the terms of its participation in the coalition were realistically calculated on the basis of the country's current resources and objectives.

The questions that one should therefore ask are: first, what objectives Russia really pursues by participating in the anti-terrorist campaign (ATC)? Second, what are the objective constraints at home and abroad that may correct or impede these pursuits? And third, what accounts for Russia's perception of the current crisis as well as the US perception of Russia's involvement? I will attempt to address these questions by referring to three major contexts in which Russia's stakes are defined: domestic, regional, and global.

The domestic scene

On the domestic front, it is the cautious and mixed attitude of the population, the pressure from the conservative part of the establishment, and the fragility of economic recovery that define the terms of Russia's participation in the ATC. According to opinion polls conducted in the end of September, over 70 percent of the population expressed positive attitude towards the USA. However, when it came to questions about practical participation in the ATC, 54 percent insisted

that Russia should maintain a neutral stance. Twenty-eight percent felt that moral and political support should be offered to the West, while 20 per cent would support Russia's military action alongside the US. A huge majority of Russians, 95 per cent, condemn and regret the attacks on US, but at the same time 50 per cent agreed with the following statement: "Americans got what they deserved and now they know what people felt in Hiroshima, Iraq, and Yugoslavia." The cautious attitude of Russians also stems from fear of instability and flows of refugees that could disrupt Russia's still shaky economic recovery.

An even more serious domestic factor that the Russian government cannot ignore is the 20 million citizens who are members of traditionally Muslim nationalities inside the country, almost 10 per cent of the total. Of these, about 14 million are practicing Muslims. This compels Russia to avoid any confrontation along religious or civilizational lines.

While Russia's economy, after a decade of severe decline, seems to be improving over the past year and a half, its economic (i.e., strategic) potential still remains very modest. The dissonance between Russia's reduced resource base and its superpower aspirations has been, over the last decade, one of the major sources of inconsistency in Russia's foreign policy. Despite many of his sweeping international initiatives, Putin is a realist to the bone. Behind his active but carefully non-confrontational stance on the international scene there is, I believe, a latent mission. Putin's strategy is to withdraw from costly superpower politics in order to allow for a concentration of resources and attention to domestic economic recovery, perhaps with a view to a comeback on the international stage in the future. So again, the frantic international activity since September 11 is designed to create favorable conditions for Russia's retreat, not for an offensive. The recent decision to abandon military installations in Cuba and Vietnam is a reflection of this as well, but the timing allows Moscow to cast these moves as gestures of friendliness and goodwill.

Russia's intellectual elite has repeatedly warned Putin against making one-sided concessions to the West. One analyst went as far as to suggest that "in American political culture there is no concept of gratitude." But Russian decision-makers understand that the West will not give a penny for Russia's friendliness if it stems from weakness. Creating a more harmonious and friendly environment and a secure buffer zone along Russia's borders is exactly what is needed for effective domestic recovery.

The regional dimension

This brings me to the second key dimension—regional. Russia has long identified the Taliban as the major military threat to its Southern borders. Another threat, by the way, is cheap heroin from the south. Russian troops and border guards are stationed in the former Soviet republic of Tajikistan, and currently only a tiny piece of territory controlled by the Northern Alliance separates Russian border guards from Taliban troops. By crushing the Taliban, the US is doing what Russia could only dream of but had neither determination nor power to do. Still, the Russian military and the conservative part of the establishment keep on asking whether it is good for Russia if a US military presence in Central Asia is substituted for the Taliban.

While much still depends upon the military success of the operation and Russia's military is abstaining from any serious involvement, politicians are trying to work out the terms of a post-war settlement. It is here that some US-Russian disagreements are becoming evident. Crudely speaking, there are three forces in Afghanistan: the Pushtun Taliban, actively supported until recently by Pakistan; the Uzbek-based militia of General Abdul Rashid Dustum, which is loosely affiliated with the Northern Alliance; and the Tajik-based group of the former president of the still internationally-recognized Afghanistan government, Burhanuddin Rabbani, and the troops formerly under the command of Akhmed Shah Masoud until his assassination a few days before the attack on the US. While the United States, which is taking into account the interests of its current ally, Pakistan, wants the former king of Afghanistan Zakhir Shah to create a coalition government that includes what is referred to as "moderate Taliban" (to my mind, an oxymoron), Russia is supporting Rabbani and the Tajiks. The result may well be a partitioning of Afghanistan into two or even three zones along ethno-political lines, with one zone, from Kabul to the northern border with Tajikistan, reserved for Rabbani, and a US-Pakistan zone in the southeast.

As part of the postwar settlement, Russia can do little but accept an inevitable US presence in Central Asia. What it could do in addition, however, is encourage the United States to become the guarantor of the security of Russia's southern frontiers. But to achieve this, a broad joint security framework involving not only the United States but also NATO has to be designed and put into place.

The global dimension

Which brings us to the global dimension. Before the current crisis, Russia was largely defined by critically-minded intellectuals as an Asiatic power striving to enter into Europe; now it has to be redefined as a European power stretching into Asia that holds the key to Europe-Asian security. The question, therefore, is how to create institutions and mechanisms for a joint US-NATO-Russia security system. Currently, except for the old idea of admitting Russia into the NATO decision-making process, no realistic technical solution has been suggested. But the possibility of a qualitative upgrade in security cooperation between Russia and NATO is clearly there. No significant results were achieved during the brief US-Russian meeting in Shanghai, so Putin is looking forward to visiting Texas to meet George W. Bush in mid-November. If the United States and Russia are to receive any real benefits from cooperation, they have to come up with organizational solutions and not just exchange friendly statements.