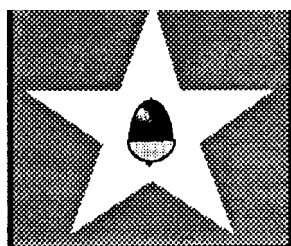


Conflict Studies Research Centre

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Russia's Reaction to the American Tragedy

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Russia's Reaction To The American Tragedy

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Synopsis: Encouraging Russian cooperation in the war against terrorism would enhance the effectiveness and legitimacy of US and NATO actions. Russia has influence and capabilities in Central Asia and elsewhere which are better capitalised upon than obstructed.

The First Reaction

The Russian leaders reacted instantly to the four terrorist attacks in the USA. Within 45 minutes of the first hit on the World Trade Centre President Putin called an emergency meeting of the power structures.¹ Minister of Defence Sergey Ivanov and Emergency Minister Sergey Shoygu were recalled to Moscow from trips within Russia.

The ministries of defence and internal affairs and the security apparatus were ordered to take preventive measures. The troops of the Internal Affairs Ministry were put on alert. Security at Russia's nuclear facilities was tightened and Aeroflot, Russia's state airline, cancelled its flights to the USA. The press spokesman of the Air and Air Defence Forces announced that all flights above Moscow and St Petersburg were cancelled.² Air defence forces and combat ships on the Kola Peninsula, the home of the Russian naval nuclear force, were put on a heightened state of alert. The ground troops in the area, part of the Leningrad Military District, were put on the highest state of alert and the nuclear-powered cruiser *Petr Velikiy* and the anti-submarine warfare ship *Admiral Chabanenko* were not given permission to return to their base after coming off-watch from the *Kursk* salvage operation. In the following days, other security measures were introduced around Russia.

President Putin unequivocally condemned the terrorist acts, adding that as a victim of terrorism "this pest of the 21st century", Russia understood the tragedy of the USA well. He called for joint cooperation in the struggle against international terrorism, ending his statement with: "We share and feel your anguish totally and completely. We support you".³ Putin had two telephone conversations with President Bush, on 11 and 12 September, discussing the methods of and "interaction" concerning combating international terrorism.⁴ At noon on 13 September Russia observed a

minute's silence, although no Russians were announced as being among those missing.

President Putin's TV appearance was followed by that of several Russian officials. All of them stressed the need for international cooperation in combating terrorism. Major General Aleksander Zdanovich, the head of the coordination programme of the Federal Security Service (FSB) called for abandoning double standards in combating terrorism and said that no country could fight international terrorism alone. According to General Zdanovich the FSB had established good contacts with the FBI but their practical approaches to specific actions against specific "extremist organisations" were different.⁵

Sergey Yastrzhembskiy, a presidential aide, described Russia as the victim of international terrorism and listed all recent bomb attacks on Russian territory. Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov called for international cooperation to fight terrorism. Colonel-General Vladimir Vasil'yev, Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs, reminded viewers that Russia had been calling for such action for some time.⁶ Dimitriy Rogozin, the chairman of the Duma International Affairs Committee, supported the USA but recommended patience in the search for the perpetrators and emphasised that the proposed National Missile Defense would not stop terrorist attacks. Russia agreed to the US request to postpone the exercises of the 37th Air Army in the Pacific, during the which TU-95 MF and TU-22 bombers were due to execute a series of missile attacks.⁷

Vladimir Putin repeated the call for international cooperation in combating international terrorism on 12 September and gave as an example the good cooperation between Russian and Israeli anti-terrorist structures. The same day he had a meeting with Prime Minister Mikhail Kasyanov and the Chairman of the Russian Central Bank, Viktor Gerashchenko, to assess the impact of the American tragedy on the Russian economy.⁸ The Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs issued his first statement only the day after the tragedy, calling both USA and Russia "to draw lessons from the tragedy in America".⁹ Colonel-General Sergey Lebedev, director of the Russian Intelligence Service, said that the events in New York and Washington "have confirmed the global nature of the threat of international terrorism and the need for actions to prevent it".¹⁰ All Russian leaders, without exception, strongly condemned the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, offered their condolences and help, and suggested cooperation in combating international terrorism.

In addition to the genuine revulsion and shock, many Russian officials expressed "we-told-you-so" views. Russians see themselves as victims of sustained international terrorist attacks: the operations in Chechnya and Dagestan since 1999 are officially described as 'anti-terrorist operations'¹¹. These views were reinforced by one of Vladimir Putin's closest subordinates and collaborators, Army General Nikolay Patrushev, the director of the FSB, who said that his service provided a "general warning" to their US counterparts about the possibility that Islamic extremists might also carry

out terrorist acts against the USA. "It seems," he added, "that individual special services did not pay proper attention to our views, or else they assumed that they would not be affected."¹²

Moscow's Concerns

Allegations of Western double standards when facing international terrorism are not entirely unfounded. In Chechnya, whose independence has not been recognised by any democratic state, the Russians face frequently foreign fighters, mainly Islamic, supported by funds from Islamic countries as well as Islamic groups and individuals. Moscow sees criticism of its own conduct of the Chechen conflict and the glossing over of Chechen atrocities by Western politicians and the media as profoundly unfair and points out that Western democracies choose to overlook the lack of democratic credentials of the Chechen fighters. The Russians find offensive the credence given in some Western media to the accusations that the terrorist bomb attacks in Russia in 1999 were organised by the FSB as an excuse for armed intervention.

Russia shares a concern with many other countries, fuelled by irresponsible speculations in the international media and recent experience, that the US will haphazardly strike foreign countries harbouring terrorists and will profit from the situation by trying to gain a foothold in one of the Central Asian republics which Moscow regards as its own exclusive zone of influence.

Recent actions by the NATO in the Balkans, and particularly Russian experience in dealing with NATO in the Kosovo crisis, have unfortunately confirmed the longstanding popular view in Russia that NATO, under the hegemony of the USA, is an expansionist, aggressive bloc which will use suitable pretexts to extend its sphere of influence and to exert its military might. NATO is seen in Moscow as a supporter of Moslem interests in the Balkans. These views are particularly prevalent among those in the military and security apparatus, but are widely shared at a political level. Condemnations such as those issued by the NATO-Russia Permanent Joint Council at its extraordinary meeting on 13 September are undoubtedly sincere, but NATO and the USA will find it more difficult to achieve and sustain real consensus in action.

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In its crusade against international terrorism, over the past two years Russia has been increasing its military support for those Central Asian states which have been suffering cross-border incursions and fundamentalist violence. The growth of the extremist threat has begun to breathe a little life into the CIS Collective Security Treaty, and anti-terrorist coordination mechanisms have been established. While the Central Asian states have certainly benefited from this Russian aid, Russian motives have not been entirely

altruistic: in defending the old USSR borders against such terrorism, which is closely allied to drug smuggling and other forms of crime, Russia sees itself as being in the front line of the struggle, which it would prefer to fight at a distance rather than in the streets of Moscow, where explosions have occurred. But there is also a remnant of imperialism in Russian attitudes.

Three days after the attacks, Russian Defence Minister Sergey Ivanov declared during a visit to Armenia that "there are absolutely no grounds, or even hypothetical perceptions about the possibility of NATO military operations on the territories of Central Asian countries that are members of the CIS".¹³ This statement, made without reference to any possible decisions which might or might not have been taken by the governments of the other countries in the CIS, shows the importance with which Moscow regards its CIS southern partners and the return of its imperial attitudes towards the independent states of Central Asia. Two, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, are not members of the Russia-led CIS Collective Security Treaty. Two, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, depend heavily on Russia for a modicum even of internal security. Three, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, potentially the most important in any conflict with Afghanistan, do not have common borders with Russia. The largest country, Kazakhstan, which does, is also the one where American airborne forces have engaged in Partnership for Peace exercises together with the small, relatively new multinational Central Asian battalion, 'Centrazbat'.

Central Asia is strategically vital for Russia. The nomination in June of retired Army General Vyacheslav Trubnikov¹⁴, the former director of the Russian Intelligence Service, as the First Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs with the CIS area as one of his special responsibilities, the transfer of Colonel-General Vladimir Yakovlev from the Strategic Rocket Forces to the HQ of the CIS forces with simultaneous promotion to Army General, and increasing attention paid to several joint CIS airforce, air defence and anti-terrorist programmes, all suggest that Central Asia will remain at the top of the list of Russian security and military concerns. Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, the three former Soviet republics bordering Afghanistan, are potentially vital players in the US attempt to get Usama bin Laden dead or alive, especially if Pakistan, under internal pressure and the threat of civil war, balks at offering full assistance to the USA.

Russia's strong insistence that the USA will not be launching its operations from Central Asian soil may be the beginning of an international game in which Moscow does not have all the cards.¹⁵ In spite of Moscow's effort to strengthen the links with the Central Asian republic – and Vladimir Rushaylo, the Secretary of the Russian Security Council is visiting all the regional capitals – the three republics may find any US requests for air corridors and temporary, possibly discreet, stationing of US troops and equipment a tempting proposal if the economic and political rewards are sufficiently attractive. Even by toying with the idea of helping the USA the republics will receive more attention from Moscow.

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The three states bordering Afghanistan have problems with Islamic extremists to varying degrees, which with Russian assistance they are succeeding in containing. All three republics are ruled by former Soviet apparatchiks with untested democratic credentials. A prominent US presence in the area with substantial economic aid would help them establish stronger security measures in the area and reinforce their rule. The local Islamic radicals would mount a spirited resistance but many of them, cut off from Afghan support and offered economic rewards, would probably become less violent. Such a presence, however, would have to tread extremely carefully if it also sought to establish more 'Western-style democratic practices'. Political opposition movements are almost non-existent, and there is little perceived need to reform political structures or attitudes.

The Russians would be pleased to see the Taliban and radical Islamic movements suffer defeat as long as they themselves are not seen to incur significant losses in a joint US-Russian operation and all US personnel leave Central Asia after a hopefully brief and successful campaign. Any signs that American troops, bases or facilities were there to stay would encounter Russian hostility and counter-pressure, as has happened in the case of Georgia.

Russia began diplomatic work immediately after the attacks. Moscow announced on 17 September that President Putin had had a telephone 'summit' with all regional leaders to discuss cooperation against international terrorism.¹⁶ Uzbekistan is not a member of the CIS Security Treaty and may take this opportunity to seek closer economic cooperation with the USA. President Karimov decided not to deny or confirm speculation that Uzbekistan would allow USA to use its territory for strikes against the Taliban.¹⁷ The presence of US troops would guarantee almost instant modernisation of several Uzbek military facilities, a temptation which very few Uzbek generals would be able to resist.

Turkmenistan has better relations with the Taliban than Uzbekistan or Tajikistan and it no longer participates in the work of CIS military organs. President Niyazov, who ranks as one of the world's least modest and tolerant leaders, may be tempted to use this rare opportunity to seek a closer relationship with the USA.

Tajik President Emomali Rakhmonov owes Russia more gratitude than do presidents Karimov and Niyazov. Russia has in Tajikistan the 6,000 strong all-volunteer 201st Motor Rifle Division and a strong contingent of border guards, both contributing considerably to Tajikistan's stability. The biggest threat to Tajikistan is currently from across the border with Afghanistan, where they reportedly face more than 10,000 men, half of them Turkmen, Tajiks, Uzbeks, Arabs and Chechens.¹⁸ The Tajik effort relies heavily on Russian troops and if it decided to grant the USA any facilities on its territory or to make air corridors available it would have to do so with Moscow's approval.

Each of these countries may also grant discreet rights for air surveillance missions only, and for temporary listening posts near the Afghan border. The latter measure may however be opposed by Moscow, afraid for its own facilities in the area. What all three leaders will have to consider is that whether or not the USA succeeds in its primary mission of eliminating bin Laden, it may leave the area with the resentful Taliban still in charge of Afghanistan; refugees and irreconcilable elements will certainly continue to plague the area even if the Taliban is dislodged. US public opinion may accept body bags as a result of an operation against bin Laden but will not accept American troops dying for Ashkhabad, Tashkent or Dushanbe. Central Asia will then be left to deal with the consequences and may be forced to rely once more on Russia, whose assistance may come at a hefty price.

How Can Russia Help?

While Russian support is not indispensable to American success in the short term, its public cooperation would significantly increase the chances of achieving both international consensus and a lasting reduction of terrorist activity over the longer term. Washington and its allies will need Russian support in the UN and other international organisations but in return Moscow will expect support in combating its own terrorist threat. This will include demands for a ban on official and unofficial meetings with the representatives of the Chechen leaders, and visa restrictions for Chechens attempting to enter Europe and North America. Russia will also suggest closer cooperation in other security areas.

Russian diplomatic assistance would be extremely useful in Central Asia. While not as influential as it was during the Soviet era, Moscow still has considerable influence in Syria, Egypt, North Korea, Yemen and several North and West African countries. The Russian diplomatic machinery is on the whole highly professional and messages delivered from Moscow directly, or indirectly in collaboration with the USA and the EU, will be treated seriously by allies and adversaries alike.

Moscow has much to offer on a more practical level too. The Russians have developed an excellent human intelligence network in the Middle East and their intelligence assets have been traditionally very active in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran. The Afghan experience cost Russia dearly in human suffering and money but allowed it to build a formidable intelligence and analytical base of the whole area. Many still serving Russian officers have combat experience in Afghanistan which could usefully be shared.

Russia's intelligence and counter-intelligence effort in Chechnya is growing in strength and their information on several radical Islamic groups could be of great value. Taking into consideration the delicate nature of intelligence work, Russia cannot be expected to offer everything she has, if only to avoid compromising her sources. However, Russia has not lost its status as an intelligence superpower and after almost a decade investigating the

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Chechens' mainly Islamic links the Federal Security Service coordinating operations in Chechnya, military intelligence (GRU), the Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR) and FAPSI, a Russian version of the American NSA, would be able to supply the USA and allies with information about specific groups and individuals, their international contacts and the countries in which they may be hiding.

The price would be active cooperation in combating Chechen and other Islamic extremist networks outside the former Soviet area, including the Middle East. FSB director Patrushev announced four days after the terrorist attacks that at American special services' request a group of Russian Security experts was to be sent to the USA.¹⁹

The antiterrorist campaign may offer a useful way of obtaining information from the NATO area by official and clandestine means, and advantage both within and outside it. However, any Russian cooperation with the USA may encounter difficulties even if it is given the green light at the highest level in Moscow. The resentment in the Russian power structures of US might, and the way Washington uses it, is obvious at all levels. This may suggest that even in the best political atmosphere a work-to-rule attitude may be adopted by those implementing the orders to cooperate. The accusations by high ranking officials in the Russian Ministry of Defence after the *Kursk* accident that NATO submarines had provoked the disaster, and the demand that therefore they should be allowed to inspect all NATO submarines are characteristic of the military's attitude and approach to relationships with NATO and the USA. As NATO found in the Kosovo crisis, if the Russians feel that their interests are threatened, for example in Central Asia, or worse, their potential and actual contributions played down or ignored, their willingness to cooperate may turn into outright hostility. Their potential for putting obstacles in the NATO path and encouraging others to do likewise is considerable.

The Effect on Russia

Russia may benefit substantially from the present crisis. If it can be seen to be contributing to a 'hearts and minds' campaign to woo would-be terrorists or those who shelter them into more peaceful paths, Russia's international standing as a front-rank player, and not just in the former Soviet area, will be assured. The price of oil and gas, Russia's main foreign currency earners, will remain high, and enable it to pay for more concrete means of ensuring its own and others' security. Russia will also continue its efforts to convince Western public opinion that the National Missile Defense programme is a waste of funds which could be spent on combating international terrorism.

Moscow may feel encouraged to use more drastic methods to suppress Chechen resistance. The Chechen extremists, whom Moscow has been trying to subdue militarily since the eighteenth century, nowadays do not differ significantly from the radical movements around bin Laden, have financial links to his organisation and, in many cases, are close to the most

radical Islamic movements. The Russians will expect the world to become more receptive to these arguments, until now frequently overlooked.

Moscow will continue media efforts to link the Chechens with international terrorism. Indeed, a disinformation campaign, or more delicately a massaging of the truth aimed at the world's democracies, the Russian population and the Chechens has already begun. The daily *Komsomolskaya Pravda* reported that the Chechen fighters began to fire with greater enthusiasm immediately after the news about the terrorist attack in the USA reached them. ORT TV announced that the FSB had found a "laser diskette" with a technical description of the Boeing 737 aircraft, which according to the network was the type hijacked in the USA, and a flying instruction manual. The same news bulletin quoted ITAR-TASS as reporting that the mother of one of the hijackers, Akhmed Alkhamdi, said that her son went to Chechnya two years ago to fight for Islam.²⁰

Russia's power structures will also benefit from the tension. They can expect more money, better training and more legal powers, as indeed might those in other countries. The Federal Border Guard Service, facing the impossible task of controlling the old Soviet and new Russian borders, will have to be given more resources. It will also be obliged to improve its cooperation with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the FSB. Travellers from and to Russia, including the commercial "shuttler" and Chinese (especially Uighur) entrepreneurs, will experience some difficult moments at the Russian borders. The freedom of movement of foreigners from Moslem countries living in Russia may be restricted and whole communities will be kept under close surveillance.

Safety and security in strategic and armament producing enterprises will become much stricter, with special attention being paid to the security of the nuclear power stations. The Russian Air Force cannot expect more combat aircraft, but it may be given a chance to develop its air reconnaissance capabilities. A call will also be made for more and better surveillance satellites.

The actions of the Russian internal power structures may tend to become more oppressive. The special forces units of the ministries of defence and internal affairs can expect a windfall, as can other programmes relevant to combating terrorism. Russia's short history of democracy, and the combination of new, stricter, laws and the strengthening of the organisations responsible for enforcing them may result in an oppressive political atmosphere and erosion of human rights. But then the interpretation of human rights may be looked at differently all over the world after these events.

Depending on the scale, nature and length of the impending conflict Russia might find itself closer to Western democracies if it works together with them against international terrorism. However, we may see an opposite effect, should Russia attempt to play NATO against the Islamic states and movements: the use of intelligence and security services to gain additional

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advantages, drastic erosion of human rights in Russia and large scale physical elimination of the Chechen. Such tendencies are already in evidence in some Russian responses to the American tragedy. While international action led by the USA will not have as a prime consideration the effect on Russia, there is a distinct possibility that if the diplomatic and information aspects are not sensitively handled, such negative factors may flourish, not just in Russia but in other countries too.

Central Asia



ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 12 September 2001 (www.kp.ru)
- ² *ITAR-TASS*, 11 September 2001 and *ORT*, 11 September 2001, 1800 (BST). All security organisations in Russia were put on higher state of alert.
- ³ *ORT*, 11 September 2001, 1800 BST. Vladimir Putin signed also the Resolution 1223 on border controls in Russia. *Novosti*, 12 September 2001.
- ⁴ *Interfax*, 12 September 2001.
- ⁵ *ORT*, 11 September 2001, 1800 BST.
- ⁶ *ORT*, 11 September 2001, 1800 BST.
- ⁷ *Ibid.* The exercise began on 10 September and was expected to end on 14 September.
- ⁸ 95-97% of Russian foreign trade transactions are in USD, *ORT*, 12 September 2001, 1800 BST.
- ⁹ *ITAR-TASS*, 12 September 2001. Russia, together with France, called on the UN on 12 September to adopt an anti-terrorist resolution during the current session. *Russia TV*, 12 September 2001, *BBC Monitoring Service*.
- ¹⁰ *Interfax*, 12 September 2001. Tatyana Samolis, General Lebedev's press secretary told the *Interfax* agency that that alleged meeting between the CIA and the SVR, after the attack, never happened, *Interfax*, 13 September 2001. Unspecified sources within the Russian security services said that an organisation called Al-Jama'a al-Islamiya may be behind the attack, *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 14 September 2001, *BBC Monitoring Service*.
- ¹¹ Russia is careful not to use the term 'Islamic terrorism'. For a useful account of Russian policy on Islam, the Taliban and violent extremism, see Dr M A Smith 'Russia and Islam', CSRC paper F73, August 2001.
- ¹² *Russian TV*, 15 September 2001, *BBC Monitoring Service*. In the same programme General Patrushev said that the Russians began to treat aerial threats to the Kremlin seriously after Movladi Udugov, a Chechen official, said in 1996 that an air attack on the Kremlin was possible. In another interview given by Patrushev the same day to the *ORT TV* channel Patrushev, in a clear allusion to Western attitudes towards the conflict in Chechnya, said that many of those who regarded terrorist acts in Russia as Russia's internal problems will now come to understand that they are problems facing the entire world community.
- ¹³ *ITAR-TASS*, 14 September 2001. Sergey Ivanov also said that there are "no grounds" for NATO military operations from Central Asia and that Central Asia "is within the zone of competence of the CIS Collective Security Treaty".
- ¹⁴ Vyacheslav Trubnikov leads the Russian team discussing with the USA the situation in Afghanistan, *ORT on line*, 19 September 2001.
- ¹⁵ Minister Sergeyev made reference to NATO, not US forces.
- ¹⁶ *ITAR-TASS*, 17 September 2001
- ¹⁷ When specifically asked by *ITAR-TASS* about the reports that Uzbekistan is prepared to open its air space and airfields to the USA the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs refused to comment. *ITAR-TASS*, 17 September 2001. The rumours were probably provoked by the call, made on 13 September, by Uzbek Foreign Minister Abdulaziz Komilov to set up in Tashkent an international centre for combating terrorism. Uzbekistan suffers from its own radical Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Islamic movement *Tovba*.
- ¹⁸ *ORT*, 17 September 2001, 1800 BST. The number of Afghan troops at the Tajik border decreased after the terrorist attacks, possibly because the Taliban decided to relocate them for future battles with the internal opposition. *ORT*, 18 September 2001, 1800 BST.
- ¹⁹ *ORT*, 15 September 2001, 1800 BST.

²⁰ ORT, 17 September 2001, 1500 and 1800 BST quoting ITAR-TASS quoting Saudi Al-Wattan. The misuse of information (inadvertent in some cases) such as two claims in two news programmes that the Boeing 737 was the type hijacked in the USA will be accompanied by selective choice of real news which could benefit the position of the Russian government: a phenomenon rarely seen in the Anglo-Saxon media.

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