

RUSSIA'S WARY WATCH ON THE EAST

RUSSIA AND NATO SHOULD PUT RIVALRIES ASIDE TO HELP STABILIZE CENTRAL ASIA



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Russian perspectives on counterterrorism in Central Asia¹ are shaped and forged by geopolitical perceptions of the region and transnational terrorism threats at large. Russia seeks to secure its role in the post-Soviet space, including Central Asia, as the regional leader in the development of counterterrorism strategies. Russia, while trying to define the goals of its counterterrorism policies in Central Asia, is not only seeking to counter transnational violent extremism and have a more secure neighborhood, but is also looking to increase influence and maintain hegemony in the region.

RUSSIA'S SECURITY PERSPECTIVE

The term “Central Asia” may be misleading in light of the political and economic heterogeneity of the region. Nonetheless, in the context of Russian foreign policy analysis, the category Central Asia is a legitimate and helpful construction because the Kremlin currently formulates its perceptions of, and policies for, this area as part of a coherent regional approach, with minor adjustments for closer economic cooperation with Kazakhstan and increased attention toward migration flows from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. Several important conclusions can be drawn on

the role and representation of the region, both for Russia in a regional sense and for other nation states at large.

Moscow's vision of Central Asia has been informed by two interrelated narratives. First, the region is viewed by the Kremlin as an integral part of the post-Soviet space, a zone of Russia's special interests. The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, approved by President Vladimir Putin on February 12, 2013, states that "priority areas of Russian foreign policy include the development of bilateral and multilateral cooperation with the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] Member States, further strengthening of the CIS as a basis for enhancing regional interaction among its participants who not only share common historical background but also have great capacity for integration in various spheres."² The theme of a common Soviet legacy occupied a particularly important position in Moscow's perceptions of Central Asia in the wake of the Soviet collapse, in the early 1990s, but its importance has gradually diminished. Viewing the region through the lens of common history and shared culture is not as important today. Nevertheless, Russia's perceptions of the post-Soviet space differ greatly from those of the United States, the European Union or China. For Russia, Central Asia is seen as a region of very important neighbors rather than as a part of the general global arena.

Second, the region, whose borders with Russia are not well-guarded, is considered critical to all aspects of Russian security, including the increased activity of transnational radical groups, drug trafficking, organized crime, illegal migration, interethnic tensions and environmental challenges. Russia sees threats emanating from the region differently than do other nation-states. The U.S. National Strategy for Counterterrorism says that "the United States does not face a direct terrorist threat from Central Asia but has an interest in maintaining the security of the U.S. logistics infrastructure supporting operations in Afghanistan, key strategic facilities, and in preventing the emergence of an al-Qaida safe haven in Central Asia."³ Russia is concerned with Central Asia not only because of hypothetical safe havens for international terrorists, but also because of economic integration projects, the plight of Russian and Russian-speaking populations, labor migration and home-grown radical Islamic trends.⁴ Russia's sensitivity to Central Asia stems from both history and geographical proximity.

The Russian Foreign Policy Concept emphasizes the dual nature of security threats emanating from Afghanistan through Central Asia: Transnational terrorism and other dangers coexist with the threat of political destabilization of the region. According to the document, "Russia will build up cooperation with the CIS Member States in ensuring mutual security, including joint efforts to combat common challenges and threats, primarily international terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, transnational crime, and illegal migration. Priorities here are the neutralization of the above-mentioned threats coming from the territory of Afghanistan and the prevention of destabilization of the situation in Central Asia and Transcaucasia."⁵

According to a new narrative that has emerged in Russian security discourse since 2011, attempts at democratization in developing countries with no traditions of democratic rule lead to instability and to an increase in terrorism. The Arab Spring and the experiences of Libya and Syria in particular have been interpreted in Russia as a new wave of "colored revolutions" inspired by the West and leading to chaos. Many Russian experts viewed the Arab Spring as a plot orchestrated by the West. There is much concern in Moscow that the Arab Spring might spread to Central Asia and, potentially, to Russian regions with significant Muslim populations. Moscow is apprehensive that the rise of Islamism in the Middle East may resonate with Central Asian and Russian Muslim populations. Estimates of the number of Russian and Central Asian fighters taking part in the Syrian civil war vary from several hundred to 8,000 people.⁶ The return of jihadi fighters to their homes in Central Asian states and Russia is viewed as a very real and immediate threat to national, regional and international security.

GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION

Central Asia is often perceived in Moscow as an arena of economic competition and a battleground for political influence among Russia, the U.S. and China. The three countries' relations encompass more than exchanges between influential and powerful states. These relations are characterized by a collision of self-definitions and of varying interpretations of other countries. This makes interactions on Central Asia among these three great powers particularly difficult. Many policymakers in Russia eye Washington with exceptional mistrust and hope for a Russia-China coalition to balance American power. Yet there is also a rising awareness of Russia's relative economic weakness vis-à-vis China and the risk of becoming a "junior partner" in the coalition.

The rivalry with the United States for political influence over Central Asia and a growing competition with China for economic dominance in the region affect Moscow's perspectives on counterterrorism. A shared history and significant societal ties between Russia and the Central Asian states provide Moscow with substantial leverage. Cooperation in the sphere of counterterrorism only strengthens Russian competitive advantages. However, Russian policymakers understand that they face serious geopolitical rivalry in Central Asia. Russia already perceived the former Soviet states as a ground of competition for influence and leadership in the mid-1990s, but American deployments in Central Asia in 2001 intensified unease about that development. This unease has had a lasting effect on Russian attitudes toward counterterrorism cooperation with the U.S. and Europe.

It is likely that Russian leadership was initially divided and generally apprehensive about the appearance of U.S. troops in Central Asian states in 2001; however, the Kremlin eventually consented. There are four possible reasons for the Kremlin's stance. First, the Russians saw that the U.S. was determined to do whatever it saw as necessary to fight terrorists in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks. This clearly included basing U.S. troops in Central Asia. Second, had Russia



Russian President Vladimir Putin, left, hosts an informal meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization in the Kremlin in May 2014. Joining Putin are, from left, Tajik President Emomali Rahmon, Armenian President Serzh Sargsyan, Kyrgyz President Almazbek Atambaev and Belarusian President Aleksandr Lukashenko. EPA



aspired to intervene, it had little leverage in Uzbekistan and few instruments to prevent the signing of the U.S.-Uzbek agreement on the base in Hanabad. Third, because Putin decided in 2001 to use the situation after 9/11 to radically improve relations with the U.S., his resistance to U.S. policies in Central Asia would have derailed this ambition. Fourth, Russia clearly shared an interest in the destruction of al-Qaida bases and the Taliban government. Moscow calculated that its fight against terrorists in Chechnya and on the Afghan-Tajik border would benefit greatly from a successful American operation in Afghanistan.

In spite of these considerations, the Russian decision to accept the U.S. military presence in Central Asia was difficult. Such acceptance was conditional on it being temporary and aimed solely at Afghan stabilization. Russia tried to show the world that the U.S. military presence in Central Asia had received a Russian stamp of approval. Then Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov said in the spring of 2004: “After September 11, our president contacted the heads of several states and recommended that they should allow American bases to be stationed on their territories for the anti-terrorism operation in Afghanistan. We understand that they will remain there for the entire period, and that this may be of a long-term nature.”⁷

However, by 2004 it became evident that the American presence might last longer than the situation in Afghanistan required. Then, First Deputy Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Trubnikov admitted: “The context is clear: an anti-Taliban operation is carried out there. We are proceeding from what the Americans are telling us – ‘we’ll leave when it ends.’ They won’t.”⁸ Trubnikov also explained why Russia opposes a longer presence: “I think the presence of states other than those comprising the region doesn’t suit us, no matter whether it is the U.S.A. or China. This is a sphere of our vital interests. There’s a limit.”⁹

Overall, Russian attitudes toward the 2001-2014 U.S. military presence in Central Asia were determined not only

by counterterrorism considerations, but also by a deep sense of rivalry with the U.S. and NATO. This attitude was evident when Moscow spent much of its political and economic leverage to persuade Kyrgyzstan to revoke U.S. basing rights at Manas air base in 2009. Manas had been used since 2001 as a NATO transit base and was the most important transshipment and refueling point in support of U.S. and NATO operations in Afghanistan. The U.S. presented the base as enhancing security for all, emphasizing that deployments in Central Asia, and Manas in particular, were essential for fighting transnational terrorism that threatens Russian, Central Asian and American security. Michael McFaul, then the U.S. National Security Council senior director on Russian and Eurasian affairs, characterized Manas as “a win/win/win” for the United States, Kyrgyzstan and Russia,¹⁰ but Moscow disagreed. After intense political bargaining and maneuvering, then-Kyrgyz President Kurmanbek Bakiyev agreed in 2009 to continue cooperating with the U.S., but the base was renamed the Manas Transit Center. In 2014, all soldiers vacated this main hub for U.S. operations in Afghanistan after the Kyrgyz government declined to extend the lease. Russia has its own air base 30 kilometers from Manas, near the city of Kant. The American departure tipped the balance of influence in Central Asia in Russia’s and China’s favor.

COUNTERTERRORISM PRIORITIES

Moscow’s vision of Central Asia as part of its neighborhood, where Russia must play the leading role, influenced the choice of counterterrorism instruments and formats. Russian counterterrorism policies share similarities and differences with those of Americans and Europeans. How, why, and by whom is something established as a security threat in a given country? What are the best strategies to counter terrorist threats? These are always political choices, not preordained realities. Different political actors may conceptualize national security in various ways and use



European Space Agency astronaut Alexander Gerst of Germany, from left, Russian cosmonaut Maxim Surav and U.S. astronaut Reid Wiseman join hands at the Gagarin Cosmonauts' Training Centre in May 2014. The United States and Russia cooperate in space despite troubled relations over Ukraine.

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these concepts differently in various forms of discourse. They may have different views on major security threats, security policy aims and instruments.

From the Russian perspective, the major security threats in Central Asia include not only al-Qaida and similar groups with global ambitions, but also local Islamic forces that seek to create alternative forms of government in the region.¹¹ This is partly a reflection of the Russian government's suspicions of civil society in general, both at home and abroad. Russia places more emphasis on strengthening Central Asian governments' capacity to combat terrorist threats and less on their ability to win hearts and minds. Moscow is more interested in supporting existing regimes than in strengthening institutions and civil society.¹² This may lead to a failure to make a clear distinction between terrorists and legitimate political opposition or nonviolent religious activity.

Concrete Russian counterterrorist policies in Central Asia include three major elements. First, Moscow assists the governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to increase counterterrorist capabilities by providing training, arms and financing to security services and armed forces. Second, Russia deploys its own armed forces in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to help protect borders and increase rapid reaction capabilities. Third, Moscow contributes to international counterterrorist cooperation in Central Asia through multilateral bodies and regional organizations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Russia has supported the creation of the CSTO Rapid Reaction Force, the adoption of the Convention against Terrorism by the SCO, creation of the CIS Anti-Terrorism Center and its program of action for 2011-2013 on combating terrorism, establishment of the Regional Counter Terrorism Structure (RCTS, formerly known as RATS) by the SCO, and adoption of a Joint Plan of Action on the Implementation of the United Nations Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy by the CSTO Security Council.

Agreements to restrict nonmember states from having bases in CSTO member nations have given Russia the potential to limit foreign powers from gaining a military foothold in Central Asia. However, though its role in the CSTO might seem to give Russia the ability to dominate the region, the reality is somewhat different: A member state can leave the organization when it no longer is of benefit or suspend its membership, as Uzbekistan did in 2012.¹³

International cooperation is absolutely essential to reduce the risk of terrorism and other forms of violence in Central Asia by helping to compensate for deficiencies within local security sectors. It is particularly important in view of the upcoming challenges to the region that include NATO withdrawal from Afghanistan, the return home of Central Asian foreign fighters from Afghanistan, and potential political instability associated with leadership succession in several Central Asian countries.

One of the most striking features of American-Russian interactions in 2001-2002 was the significant, though not complete, congruence of perceptions of terrorism and the war against it. Not only the elites, but the general public in the two countries, saw terrorism as a major threat. Throughout the 2000s, it became evident that Russia and the U.S. were not trying to make counterterrorism the foundation of a positive bilateral relationship. By 2014, the two countries had yet to agree on what political, religious and social factors further terrorism.¹⁴ However, the national interests of Russia and the U.S. do not collide in Central Asia. If the two powers stop viewing each other's respective counterterrorism policies in Central Asia as attempts to weaken the other side's position, the key obstacle to international cooperation in the area will be removed. □

The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the MacArthur Foundation.

1. Most experts confine the term for use specifically in reference to the five post-Soviet states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

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8. *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, May 12, 2004.

9. Ibid. For more detailed analysis of Russian policies toward American deployments in Central Asia, see Zevelev, Igor. "Russian and American National Identity, Foreign Policy, and Bilateral Relations." *International Politics*, Vol. 39, No. 4 (2002).

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