

“Russia: Counterterrorism Partner or Fanning the Flames?”

Russia’s Relationship to Insurgent and Terrorist Groups

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Insurgency, Terrorism, and Russia’s Perspective on International Affairs

To understand Russia’s approach to insurgent and terrorist groups, it is necessary to take a step back and consider Russia’s perspective on international affairs more broadly, and how that contrasts with the U.S. and European approach to world politics.

American policies over the past decade and a half have rested on the recognition of Russia as a key global player, whose cooperation is crucial to managing key international issues. Beyond Russia’s veto power in the UN Security Council, Russia has had a stake in many of the issues at the center of international relations in the past two decades. The U.S. considered Russia a key partner in the war on terrorism and in transit operations for the war in Afghanistan. Similarly, it was seen as a key partner to roll back the Iranian nuclear program. Western powers also sought Russia’s cooperation to manage the unresolved conflicts in the post-Soviet space. Even after Russia’s invasion of Georgia in 2008, the U.S., Russia and France continue to co-chair the negotiation process to resolve the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict. And, of course, the Obama Administration thought Russia’s influence over the Assad regime in Syria made its cooperation essential to western goals in that conflict.

Across these areas of interaction with Russia, western leaders have depicted relations with Russia in terms of a win-win situation, where the West and Russia share common interests. Where Russian behavior has suggested otherwise, Western diplomats have focused on explaining to Russia, and to the wider public, why Russia’s “true” interests should lead it to cooperate with the West. In the many cases where these urges have proven futile, Western leaders have decided to “compartmentalize:” to seek to isolate areas of agreement from areas of disagreement. Until recently, western leaders have assumed that the Russian leaders, too, have honorable intentions, or at a minimum, operate with their own country’s best interests in mind.

When even this approach has failed, as it invariably has, Western leaders have tended to seek explanations as much in their own behavior as in Russia's. If Moscow will not work with us, the reasoning goes, we must be doing something wrong. If Moscow does not trust us, we must seek ways to rebuild confidence – this was the assumption of the Obama Administration's "Reset" launched in 2009. Only as a last resort, and as a result of great frustration, have Western leaders concluded that their efforts have failed because Russian leaders' policies actively seek to undermine American interests and security.

Since Vladimir Putin came to power, Moscow's approach to international affairs has been based on a fundamentally different logic than the Western approach. The Russian leadership has focused on the task of rebuilding Russia's power and influence on the global scene – and in particular, in reasserting an exclusive sphere of influence over the former Soviet space “ – but not only,” to use former Russian president Dmitry Medvedev's phrase following the invasion of Georgia in 2008. Key to this ambition has been to reduce what Russian leaders view as the Western, and particularly American, “hegemony” in world affairs.

To a considerable extent, Russian leaders are informed by a worldview that sees the West, and particularly the United States, as an aggressive and arrogant force that seeks world domination at the expense of the marginalization of others. While U.S. actions in the Middle East may have contributed to this perception, it is by no means reserved for the United States: when the EU launched the Eastern Partnership, Russia saw this as a threat to its historical sphere of influence, and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov blamed the EU of trying to build a “sphere of influence.”¹

The character of the Russian government is an important factor in determining its international behavior. It is by now well-documented that Russia's is not only a hard authoritarian regime, but a strongly kleptocratic one.² As James Sherr has explained, the character of the regime has strong foreign policy implications:

An overarching aim can be ascribed to Russia: the creation of an international environment conducive to the maintenance of its system of governance at home ... The problem now, as in the Soviet past, is that ‘national interest’ means *regime* interest first and foremost, and any audit of Russian policy that ignores this reality is artificial.³

This informs Russia's approach toward the West: Moscow's rivalry with the West is not just a nineteenth century-style geopolitical struggle for influence. Moscow views the West – and particularly the EU and NATO as institutions – as a danger not just to its interests, but to the survival of its regime. This is not because Russia fears NATO's military power. It is because of the power of attraction of the normative

¹ Valentina Pop, “EU Expanding Its ‘Sphere of Influence,’ Russia Says”, EUObserver.com, March 21, 2009. (<https://euobserver.com/foreign/27827>)

² Karen Dawisha, *Putin's Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014.

³ James Sherr, *Hard Diplomacy and Soft Coercion: Russia's Influence Abroad*, London: Royal Institute for International Affairs/Chatham House, 2013, p. 96.

principles underlying these institutions. As Sherr puts it, “the more the EU’s norms and practices gain adherents and traction, the more incongruous Russia’s model of governance appears.”⁴

As a result, Russian policies actively seek to undermine the attraction of the West internationally. Both to its own public and to the world, Moscow seeks to show western democracies to be decadent and chaotic; to undermine their legitimacy. As author Peter Pomerantsev puts it, the aim is to show that “nothing is true and everything is possible.”⁵

These aims are achieved in part through information warfare, including television and news outlets such as RT and Sputnik; but also through direct support for both far-right and far-left political forces in Europe that oppose NATO and EU integration, and support Russian policy goals. Intervention in the U.S. election fulfills the same goal. It is not about supporting one candidate or the other: it is about generating chaos, crippling the functioning of the political system, and undermining the legitimacy of the American system of government. Almost by definition, this means that if Moscow sought to support one particular party or individual *before* an election, it must switch sides and undermine that same person or party *after* the election. This is why, after the 2016 election, the same Russian trolls that are accused of having worked to undermine Hillary Clinton now sought to undermine the legitimacy of Trump’s election.

While Western leaders have tended to give Russian leaders the benefit of the doubt, the Russian approach has been the opposite: a fundamental distrust for the intentions of the West. In this sense, like Western leaders, Russian leaders have tended to ascribe their own intentions to their counterparts. Since Russian leaders seek to maximize their power and influence at the expense of the West, they have showed an inclination to assume the west is doing exactly the same. That is why Lavrov termed the EU’s rather innocuous Eastern Partnership an attempt to build a Sphere of Influence.

This divergence in political mentality derives, no doubt, from the divergent political culture of Soviet Russia, which framed the worldview of the current leadership crop – itself disproportionately with a past in the security services. Indeed, their approach derives from the Leninist conception of politics as a zero-sum game, defined in terms of who will prevail over whom – summarized in the Russian phrase “*Kto-kogo?*” American writer and diplomat Raymond Garthoff has summarized the divergence between this and the western mentality succinctly:

The cold war was a zero-sum game in which the gains of one side were automatically losses to the other, ruling out genuine compromise, reconciliation, shared interests, and conflict resolution by any other means than prevailing over the other. In Marxist-Leninist terms, this was encapsulated in the phrase *Kto-Kogo?* Who will prevail over whom? In analytical terms, the communist version posited a “correlation of forces” between adversaries, a version of the balance of power with the important distinction that while the given relationship at any moment would be in flux, the ultimate objective and result

⁴ Sherr, p. 97.

⁵ Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing is True and Everything is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia*, New York: Public Affairs, 2014.

would be not an equilibrium balance, but victory for the side that prevailed when the correlation ultimately tipped decisively. This conception was rarely recognized in the west, and when it was it was almost always interpreted in terms of the military balance of forces, which was *not* the Marxist-Leninist conception.⁶

In sum, the West has sought relations with Russia on a win-win basis seeking common interests, but it has tended to misjudge what the Russia leadership's interests are – in part because of a tendency to extrapolate what Russia's interests *should* be if Russia operated as a western country. By contrast, Russia has increasingly seen relations with the West as a zero-sum game, in which it has been Russia's aim to undermine the western-led international order, as well as sow division within western institutions themselves.

This does not mean the West has not made its share of mistakes. The U.S. invasion of Iraq, the recognition of Kosovo's independence, and the Libyan intervention that led to the killing of Muammar Qaddafi can all fairly be criticized for failing to abide by international standards, and of being examples of western unilateralism. The point, however, is that in neither of these situations was the West's aim, let alone its primary objective, to undermine Russian interests. By contrast, Moscow has continuously seized on every western mistake, ascribed the worst of intentions to it, and used it as a precedent to achieve its own unilateral goals at the expense of western interests.

Russia and Ethnonationalist Insurgents

The former Soviet space provides the most overt example of Russian subversion of western interests and international norms, as it is an area where Russia has overt claims to geopolitical domination. Following Vladimir Putin's ascent to power, there was an initial spring in Russia-West relations. Many welcomed a younger, more effective leader who seemed able to put Russia back together. And following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States, Russia immediately seized the opportunity to portray itself as an ally in the fight against terrorism. Yet significant differences between the West and Russia continued to mount in parallel, and were centered on the post-Soviet space, which formed the focus of Putin's policies.

Putin reaped a rapid benefit from his support for the anti-terror coalition: the West, collectively, responded by dropping most of its vocal criticism of Russia's warfare in Chechnya. Seeing Western concessions, Moscow voiced vociferous allegations that both Azerbaijan and Georgia supported Chechen separatists, and went so far as to claim that a thousand Taliban fighters had crossed Azerbaijani and Georgian territory to get to Chechnya. No evidence to corroborate this, or even the presence in Chechnya of such fighters, was ever produced. Still, Moscow followed up by gradually increasing pressure on Georgia. The Kremlin had demanded a right to use Georgian territory against

⁶ Raymond Garthoff, *A Journey through the Cold War: A Memoir of Containment and Coexistence*, Washington: Brookings Institution, 2001, p. 393-4.

Chechen rebels since 1999. Following 9/11, Moscow sought to apply the doctrine of pre-emptive strike on Georgia's Pankisi gorge, where several thousand Chechens, including several dozen fighters, had sought refuge. Moscow accused Tbilisi of harboring rebels, and threatened to take action to root them out.

The timing of these Russian claims was no accident. In September 2002, the U.S. movement toward military action in Iraq was well under way. At that very moment, in fact on the first anniversary of 9/11, Putin threatened military action against Georgia, thereby trying to link Georgia with international terrorism. Simply put, Putin tried to establish a quid pro quo: if America can attack Iraq, Russia can attack Georgia – irrespective of the polar differences between Saddam Hussein's Iraq and Georgia, a weak but pluralistic and pro-Western republic.

Thankfully, the U.S. did not engage in horse-trading with Russia. Russian intervention was averted by a U.S. Train and Equip Program for the Georgian military, which enabled it to reassert control over the Pankisi gorge in the fall of 2002 – and thus remove the rationale for Moscow's threats. But over the next several years, Moscow gradually stepped up its pressure on Georgia, using what we now call hybrid warfare – a combination of economic warfare, diplomatic pressure and subversion, as well as the manipulation of Georgia's unresolved conflicts. By 2007, the escalation included the use of force against Georgian territory on two occasions, and the escalation to Russia's premeditated invasion of Georgia in 2008. During this invasion, Moscow again took a page from the American playbook, when Sergey Lavrov in a phone conversation with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice demanded regime change in Georgia. Putin went so far as to explain to French President Nicolas Sarkozy that because the Americans had hung Saddam Hussein, he could hang Georgian President Saakashvili. The operation in Georgia, of course, was a precursor to Russia's military actions in Ukraine six years later.

But even before Ukraine, Moscow moved against other U.S. interests in the post-Soviet space. Its particular focus was Kyrgyzstan, where the U.S. had a military base. The focus on Georgia, Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine is no coincidence: these were the three states that had experienced "color revolutions" between 2003 and 2005 – the popular ouster of corrupt and ineffectual governments. These revolutions were welcomed in the United States as a sign of democratic development in the region. But to Russia, they posed a mortal danger: the expansion of successful democratic government along Russia's borders would have endangered the continued dominance of a kleptocratic, authoritarian government over Russia itself. As a result, Moscow decided that the color revolutions had to fail, to ensure that its own regime security stayed intact.

For this purpose, Moscow on one hand backed up authoritarian governments across the region, and instilled in them the fear that Washington was out to overthrow them. On the other, it moved to actively undermine the governments of Georgia, Ukraine, and Kyrgyzstan. In regard to the latter, Moscow actively worked to ensure the removal of the remaining U.S. base in Kyrgyzstan. Bishkek's refusal to follow Moscow's line on this issue led Moscow to support a coup d'état, which brought down the government of Kurmanbek Bakiyev in 2010. The U.S. base was subsequently closed down.

The conflict in Ukraine is, in a way, the consequence and culmination of the Western policy toward Russia in the former Soviet space. Having seen little resistance to its steps to perfect tactics of hybrid warfare against smaller post-Soviet states, there was little to restrain Moscow from taking the plunge in Ukraine in 2014. In this case, Moscow's policies went further than they had previously: instead of supporting existing insurgent elements abroad, Russia now created them *ex nihilo*. There had been no organized insurgent forces countering Ukrainian sovereignty in Crimea or the Donbass. Russia famously annexed Crimea after dispatching "little green men" to the territory; in the Donbass, Russia actively created the militias that would declare the "People's Republics" of Donetsk and Luhansk by mobilizing, training and arming local Russian nationalist and criminal groupings.

Russia and Islamist Terrorism at Home and Abroad

Russia is often portrayed as an ally in the struggle against Radical Islamic terrorism. Since the rise of the Islamic State several years ago, observers and politicians in both Europe and the United States have increasingly pointed to the need to work with Russia against this common threat – even if this means ignoring or downplaying Russia's territorial grabs in Eastern Europe, or its other efforts to undermine American interests. However, closer examination of Russian policies shows that Moscow has a highly ambiguous relationship to Islamic extremism. When it suits its interests, the Kremlin can crack down on Islamic terrorists. But more often, it appears to view Islamic terrorists as a force to be manipulated to advance its interests and undermine America's. As will be seen, this holds true for Russia's relationship to Islamic extremists both at home and abroad.

Afghanistan

Reports emerged in 2015 of growing Russian contacts with and support for the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. In December 2015, President Putin's Special Envoy for Afghanistan openly stated that Russia's Interests in Afghanistan "objectively coincide" with the Taliban.⁷ While Moscow claimed that interest was to counter the growing role of ISIS in Afghanistan, a Taliban spokesperson explained the real rationale. Speaking to Reuters, the unnamed "senior Taliban official" explained that the Taliban had been in contact with Russia since 2007, long before ISIS existed. He lamented that these contacts "did not extend beyond 'political and moral support'" but added that "we had a common enemy...we needed support to get rid of the United States and its allies ... Russia wanted all foreign troops to leave Afghanistan as quickly as possible."⁸

This, of course, flies in the face of the notion of Russia as an ally in Afghanistan. Yet that very notion – that Russia backed the U.S. war effort in Afghanistan to begin with – is flawed. In fact, already in the early days of the military campaign against the Taliban, Moscow acted to deny the U.S. the ability to

⁷ "Russia's Interests in Afghanistan Coincide with Taliban's in Fight against ISIS: Agency Cites Diplomat", *Reuters*, December 23, 2015.

⁸ "Ties between Russia and the Taliban Worry Afghan, U.S. Officials", *Reuters*, December 7, 2016.

achieve its goals. President Putin called every head of state in Central Asia and informed them that they would need to seek Russian permission for any cooperative venture with the United States. After Uzbek president Islam Karimov ignored this piece of Russian advice, other regional leaders followed suit and made bilateral agreements with the U.S. anyway. But Russia's efforts in Afghanistan did not stop here, because Moscow inserted itself directly into the war in Afghanistan. Whereas Russia had no role in the military effort to overthrow the Taliban, it capitalized on its long-standing links with the Northern Alliance, particularly its leader Mohammed Fahim, and implemented what Frederick Starr has termed "an aggressive plan to preempt America's growing role in Afghanistan."⁹ When the Taliban retreated from Kabul in November 2001, President Bush and other American officials personally pleaded with the Northern Alliance leaders not to take the city, since that would prevent the emergence of a broad-based government that included proper representation of the majority Pashtun population, from which the Taliban had sprung.¹⁰ President Putin, by contrast, urged Fahim to do exactly that, and provided both international cover as well as twelve transport planes full of Russian troops and equipment to back up Fahim. As a result, the Northern Alliance established itself as the dominant force in Kabul, and essentially hijacked the new Afghan government. This played an important role in generating Pashtun resentment at their marginalization from power, and in turn provided fuel to the Taliban insurgency. As Starr concludes, "to none of this did the U.S. administration raise the slightest public objection. If there were private objections they were simply dismissed."¹¹

Similarly, restrictions on transit through Russia forced the U.S. to rely almost entirely on the air corridor across Georgia and Azerbaijan for logistical support to the operation in Afghanistan. Yet when time came for Obama's "surge" in Afghanistan, the U.S., building on the "Reset", once again focused on Russia as the main conduit for what would be called the "Northern Distribution Network". We now know, thanks to the above-mentioned Taliban commander, that Moscow was simultaneously tramping up its relationship with the Taliban to undermine America's war effort in Afghanistan. More recently, U.S. military officials have confirmed that Moscow is not only supporting the Taliban politically, sending weapons to support the extremist fighting force that is killing American soldiers and working to undermine U.S. efforts to turn Afghanistan into a secure country.¹²

Chechnya

Between the mid-1990s and the early 2000s, the conflict in Chechnya morphed from a contained, nationalist rebellion to a sprawling jihadi insurgency. Counterintuitively as it may seem, Russian policies have contributed directly to this development. In a parallel to the Bosnian conflict, Russian rhetoric mirrored that of the Serbs: against western criticism of Russia's human rights record in Chechnya,

⁹ S. Frederick Starr, "Russia's Ominous Afghan Gambit", *Wall Street Journal*, December 11, 2001.

¹⁰ Tony Karon, "Can the Northern Alliance Control Kabul?", *Time*, November 12, 2001.

(<http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,184221,00.html>)

¹¹ Starr, "Russia's Ominous Afghan Gambit."

¹² "Russia is Sending weapons to Taliban, Top U.S. General Confirms", *Washington Post*, April 24, 2017.

(https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2017/04/24/russia-is-sending-weapons-to-taliban-top-u-s-general-confirms/?utm_term=.bef13e7c36e6)

Moscow painted itself as a misunderstood defender of Europe against the threat of Islamic radicalism, the “green wave.” But more than just arguing for their case, Russian officials actively worked to make the reality of the conflict conform to their vision of it. Thus, there was a remarkable pattern in Russia’s priorities during the second Chechen war, from 1999-2003: it prioritized targeting the nationalist Chechen leadership rather than the jihadi elements within the insurgency. Therefore, on the battlefield, Russia targeted field commanders like Ruslan Gelayev, as well as Chechen President Aslan Maskhadov, whom Russian forces killed in March 2005. On the diplomatic front, Russian diplomats and lawyers furiously prosecuted and sought the extradition of secular leaders like Akhmed Zakayev from the United Kingdom and Ilyas Akhmadov from the United States. By comparison, Islamist Chechen leaders have fared much better. Among exiles, Movladi Udugov remains alive, among the few remaining members of the first generation of Chechen leaders to survive. Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev was killed in Qatar by Russian agents, but only in 2004.

In fact, there is considerable evidence tying some of the most virulent Jihadis in the North Caucasian resistance to the Russian intelligence services. This is the case for Shamil Basayev, publicly Russia’s public enemy number one before his death in 2006, which was likely caused by an accidental detonation of explosives in a truck he was driving.¹³ Allegations of Basayev’s GRU connections during the Georgia-Abkhaz war are well-established. In the period between the two Chechen wars, Basayev played an important role in undermining the rule of the nationalist Chechen President, Aslan Maskhadov. Together with the Jordanian-born jihadi Samir Saleh Abdullah Al-Khattab, Basayev had established an “Islamic Brigade” in southeastern Chechnya that attracted foreign fighters, and openly challenged the authority of Maskhadov’s government. While Maskhadov sought a dialogue with Moscow to jointly deal with this challenge, it is by now clear that Moscow had no objection to the rise of the radical faction within Chechnya. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that Moscow actively enticed Basayev and Khattab to engage in their ill-fated invasion of neighboring Dagestan in August 1999, which provided Moscow with a rationale for restarting the war in Chechnya that fall. That local conflict – and the very murky apartment bombings in Moscow the next month, both of which led to the second Chechen war – was an inextricable part of the rise of Vladimir Putin to power.

Both Russian and Western investigative reporters and scholars have unearthed considerable evidence that the “family” – i.e. the oligarchs surrounding Boris Yeltsin – used their relationship with Basayev to nudge the Chechen extremists toward their invasion of Dagestan. Several – including respected Hoover Institution scholar John Dunlop – corroborate the reporting that French and Israeli intelligence confirmed that high-level Russian officials met with Basayev in a villa in southern France owned by arms dealer Adnan Khashoggi in July 1999, a month before the incursion into Dagestan.¹⁴ Not staying at that, American scholar David Satter documents how Russian “internal forces assigned to guard the border

¹³ “Basayev’s Death May Have Been an Accident,” Prague Watchdog, July 10, 2006; “Basayev Didn’t Save Face,” Kommersant, July 11, 2006, available from www.kommersant.com/page.asp?idr=527&id=689111.

¹⁴ John Dunlop, *The Moscow Bombings of September 1999: Examinations of Russian Terrorist Attacks at the Onset of Vladimir Putin’s Rule*, Stuttgart: Ibidem-Verlag, 2012, 70–71. Also Boris Kagarlitskiy, “S terroristami ne razgovarivaem: No pomogayem? [We do not negotiate with terrorists. But do we help them?],” *Novaya Gazeta*, January 24, 2000; Karen Dawisha, *Putin’s Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 2014, p. 200.

[between Chechnya and Dagestan] had been withdrawn shortly before the Chechens invaded, so the force led by Basayev and Khattab entered Dagestan without resistance.”¹⁵ The point here is not to ascertain whether Basayev was a fully-controlled Russian operative, or whether the relationship was more *ad hoc*: the point is that leading figures in Moscow actively participated in the manipulation of Islamic terrorists on Russia’s own territory.

Equally clear evidence is available in the case of Arbi Barayev, one of the most viciously militant as well as most criminalized of Chechnya’s warlords. Barayev was one of the key forces seeking to undermine Maskhadov’s leadership in the interwar era; it was his group that kidnapped and beheaded foreign telecommunications workers in 1998, effectively forcing out the small international presence in Chechnya. Similarly Barayev’s forces engaged in firefights with Maskhadov’s troops in 1998. Following the renewed warfare, Barayev lived freely in the town of Alkhan-Kala, under Russian control, until his death in 2001—despite the fact that he was responsible for gruesome, video-recorded murders of captive Russian servicemen that would preview the tactics of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and ISIS. As several observers have noted, his opulent residence was only a few miles away from a Russian checkpoint near his native Alkhan-Kala, while his car had an FSB identification which allowed him to race through Russian checkpoints.¹⁶ Tellingly, Barayev was killed by a GRU hit squad only after the FSB’s then-head of counterterrorism, General Ugryumov, had died. The apparent conclusion was that Ugryumov provided a cover for Barayev, and the former’s death made it possible for the GRU to take Barayev out.

Given the nature of the Chechen conflict, evidence can at best be inconclusive. But circumstantial evidence suggests two things: First, that during the second war there was no clear and unified chain of command. Detachments of the Russian army, GRU, FSB, and Ministry of Interior played different roles in the conflict, roles that were poorly coordinated; moreover, they each appeared to keep ties with some Chechen commanders, while combating others. Second, the policies of the Russian leadership itself contributed to change the nature of the conflict from a nationalist rebellion to one where the enemy was Islamic jihadis. While this is likely in the long run to be of greater danger to Russia, it did succeed in making the conflict fit into Moscow’s desired narrative. Maskhadov and the Chechen nationalist leadership was respected in Western circles, being granted meetings with Western officials and maintaining strong support among Western media, civil society, and human rights organizations. The jihadi elements, needless to say, did not and do not enjoy this status. By targeting the nationalist faction and covertly protecting or encouraging the jihadi forces in the North Caucasus, Moscow shoehorned the conflict into the template of a “war on terror”.

Syria: Applying the Chechnya Model

¹⁵ David Satter, *Darkness at Dawn: The Rise of the Russian Criminal State*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003, p. 64.

¹⁶ Sanobar Shermatova, “The Secret War between Russian Intelligence Agencies,” *Moscow News*, August 8, 2000. Also see Khassan Baiev, Nicholas Daniloff, and Ruth Daniloff, *The Oath: A Surgeon Under Fire*, New York: Walker & Company, 2004.

In Syria, the U.S. went to great lengths to solicit Russian cooperation – so much so that the U.S. Secretary of State, John F. Kerry, accepted to wait for three hours for a meeting with Vladimir Putin.¹⁷ While the U.S. sought the removal of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Russia was the strongest supporter of the Assad regime on the international scene. To this effect, Russia found a perfect opportunity to intervene in fall 2013, when President Obama appeared on the path to begin military action in Syria but reneged on his earlier stated “red line” that would trigger U.S. intervention if the Assad regime used chemical weapons. This led to a serious loss of credibility for the American president, and a marked return of Russia as a power player in the Middle East.

Indeed, it is against this background that Russia’s military deployment in Syria should be seen. The Russian leadership concluded that the U.S. did not have a Syria strategy, and that Turkey, which wanted to intervene to topple Assad, would not move without the U.S. in lockstep. As George Friedman has argued, Russia’s intervention in “Syria was not about Syria”. It was motivated in part by saving the Assad regime, but equally by “showing that it could” to the U.S. and to a domestic audience following being bogged down in Ukraine:

It demonstrated to the United States that it had the ability and will to intrude into areas that the United States regarded as its own area of operations. It changed the perception of Russia as a declining power unable to control Ukraine, to a significant global force. Whether this was true was less important – it needed to appear to be true.¹⁸

This is relevant to a discussion of Russia’s role as a counter-terrorist partner because Moscow applied a number of lessons from its war in Chechnya. As noted, during the second Chechen war Moscow applied most of its resources to defeat the nationalist, moderate elements of the Chechen resistance – rather than targeting the radical Islamist elements. Similarly in Syria, the Russian intention all along was to leave a choice between the Assad regime and ISIS, a situation in which western leaders would grudgingly accept the Syrian regime as the lesser evil.¹⁹ It is precisely for this reason that the Russian bombing overwhelmingly targeted not ISIS, but Syrian opposition groups aligned with the United States, Turkey, or other Arab allies. In other words, whereas the U.S. and Europe ideally want to defeat ISIS and ease Assad out of power in a negotiated settlement, Russia wants to eliminate any military force on the ground that could help achieve that objective. The goals of the West and Russia are simply incompatible. Yet in spite of this, the U.S. and Europe continue to seek ways to convince Moscow to cooperate on ways to resolve the Syrian conflict.

¹⁷ Shaun Walker, “Russia and US agree to hold Syrian peace conference”, *Independent*, 7 May 2013. (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-and-us-agree-to-hold-syrian-peace-conference-8606793.html>), “Russia and US agree to hold Syrian peace conference”, *Independent*, 7 May. (<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/russia-and-us-agree-to-hold-syrian-peace-conference-8606793.html>)

¹⁸ George Friedman, “Why Putin Went into Syria”, *Geopolitical Futures*, March 15, 2016. (<https://geopoliticalfutures.com/why-putin-went-into-syria/>)

¹⁹ Andrew Foxall, “To See Syria’s Future, Look at Chechnya”, *American Interest*, December 4, 2015.. (<http://www.the-american-interest.com/2015/12/04/to-see-syrias-future-look-at-chechnya/>)

Conclusions

Russia's behavior internationally as well as domestically suggests that its attitude toward insurgency and terrorism conflict fundamentally with the United States. For Russia, insurgency and terrorism are instruments of hybrid warfare that may at times be fought, and at times supported, depending on what suits the perceived national and regime interests of the Kremlin. Furthermore, the record suggests that Russia views these issues in the light of a competition for influence in the world, in which Moscow knows it cannot meet the United States eye to eye. To maximize its influence, therefore, the Kremlin sees insurgency and terrorism as forces to be manipulated for the purpose of weakening America's position in the world, undermine U.S. allies, and maximize Russian influence in world affairs. This is a matter the United States cannot fail to respond to. While the United States may need to work with Russia on a case-by-case basis, it must understand that Russia views all its instruments of statecraft as interconnected, serving a common purpose; and that Russia's aims are seldom, if ever, compatible with those of the United States – simple because the reduction of American and Western influence in the world remain a key goal of Russian policy.

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