

RUSSIA'S RETURN TO CENTRAL ASIA FOLLOWING SEPTEMBER 11

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Abstract:

The present study attempts to analyse whether Russian foreign policy towards Central Asia has altered after September 11 attacks; if it did, how it changed and what its implications for the region will be. It is argued that though immediately after 9/11 Russia welcomed American presence in its "backyard", after a while to keep Russian pragmatism in its relations with Central Asia has been difficult. Since the war in Iraq, particularly, Russia has launched a comprehensive effort to bring Central Asia under its control using military and economic instruments. However, whether Russia's efforts for exclusive hegemony in Central Asia will fail or succeed still remains in question.

Özet:

11 Eylül Sonrası Rusya'nın Orta Asya Dış Politikası

Bu çalışma, 11 Eylül sonrasında Rusya'nın Orta Asya politikasının değişip değişmediğini, değiştiyse hangi yönde bir değişikliğe uğradığını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Çalışmada, 11 Eylül'ün hemen sonrasında Rusya "arka bahçesindeki" Amerikan varlığına ses çıkarmadıysa da, kısa bir süre sonra bu durumun Rusya'da ciddi rahatsızlıklara yol açtığı savunulmaktadır. Nitekim, İkinci Irak Savaşı'nın başlamasından günümüze kadar geçen zamanda Rusya Orta Asya'daki varlığını sağlamlaştırmak için birtakım ekonomik ve askeri araçları devreye sokmuştur. Ancak, bu çabalar Rusya'nın bölgede yeniden eski hakimiyetini sağlamasına yetecek mi bu henüz belli değildir.

Keywords: Russian foreign policy, Central Asia, September 11, Second Iraq War.
Anahtar Sözcükler: Rus dış politikası, Orta Asya, 11 Eylül, İkinci Irak Savaşı.

INTRODUCTION

Russia's post-September 11 position in the Central Asian region has been quite difficult. The Russian government granted the United States access to facilities that the Russian military still controlled in areas that were Soviet only a decade ago. However, few among Moscow's foreign policy and military elite welcomed the U.S. military presence in their strategic backyard.

Thus, the new situation after 9/11 caused considerable confusion and contradictory reactions in Russia. On the one hand, there was a recognition that American military actions in Afghanistan, and the broader campaign against terrorism, would support the security of Russia, and other countries of the region in a dangerous and potentially destabilizing military and political activities. On the other hand, there were fears that the United States, once stepped into this region, may stay. It was very difficult for Russia to decide which of the two alternatives would be worse.

In this paper it is attempted to analyse whether Russian foreign policy towards Central Asia has altered after September 11 attacks; if it did, how it changed and what its implications for the region will be. It is argued that though immediately after 9/11 Russia welcomed American presence in its "backyard", after a while to keep Russian pragmatism in its relations with Central Asia has been difficult. Since the war in Iraq, particularly, Russia has launched a comprehensive effort to bring Central Asia under its control using military and economic instruments.

With this purpose in mind first I made a few brief points about Russian security thinking concerning Central Asia. Secondly, I elaborated three distinct approaches in Russia faced with events after September 11 were. Lastly, I touched upon Russia's move in Central Asia after the war in Iraq.

I. RUSSIAN FOREIGN POLICY THINKING CONCERNING CENTRAL ASIA

Before answering the question of Russian relations with Central Asia, and how they are altered by the events of September 11 and their aftermath, a few brief points about Russian security thinking concerning Central Asia should be mentioned.

First point is that, Russian policy towards Central Asia since the end of Soviet Empire has been primarily preoccupied with preserving Russian political, cultural, economic, and security influence in the region without

bringing an excessive burden on the country's economic situation. From 1993, (after Kozyrev period), Russians referred to the region as part of Russia's "near abroad," which meant a special region in the hierarchy of Russian foreign policy priorities. It is asserted by leading Russian officials that Russia has a distinctive set of economic and security interests in this region which other foreign powers should accept. Russian officials tended to see American engagement in the region in zero-sum terms, i.e. any gains for the United States automatically meant a loss for Russia. As a result, considerable efforts were made to blocking or limiting American political, economic, and military involvement in Central Asia. The fear in the Russian foreign and security circles was that American involvement in the region, particularly in the development of energy resources, meant simply the opening way to an ultimate American military presence. The belief in Russia was that American corporations and the Pentagon would go hand in hand: where American corporations go, the Pentagon would quickly follow (Zviagelskaia, 1995: 3-22).

Secondly, from the mid 1990s the Russian elite began to appreciate that alongside with the international developments Russian security priorities were also changing. Consequently, in the new Russian security doctrine, it was asserted that the major threats to Russia's security no longer came from NATO, in the form of a conventional or nuclear attack on Russian territory (http://eng.globalisation.ru/live/article.asp?rubric_id=1616&id=1650).

1997 security doctrine underlined that the emerging new threats to Russian security came mainly from the Caucasus and Central Asia. In short, the real threats to Russia security were the instability and turmoil along Russia's southern borders (Internal Russian government document, 1997). Third point about Russian security thinking concerning Central Asia is that in Russia from mid 1990s, security issues began to be defined in terms far broader than simple military balances (Lapidus, 2001). We can categorize them in three titles:

Firstly, terrorism and the flows of weapons, of drugs, of refugees came to be viewed as major new threats to security. The drug trade took on particular importance because of its role in financing civil wars and insurgencies across the entire region, beginning with the civil war in Tajikistan and extending to the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan (Theses of the Council of the Foreign and Defense Policy, 2003: 3-14).

Secondly, Russian elites have also become increasingly concerned about the dangers of nuclear proliferation and of biological and chemical weapons in the hands of terrorists in the region. They welcomed American efforts to remove nuclear warheads from the three other successor states that possessed them—Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan— and acquiesced as well in

American efforts to remove stocks of fissile materials from Kazakhstan. More recently the threat of biological terrorism has become an increasing concern. The Soviet government had developed a large-scale secret research program on biological warfare and engaged in the development and testing of biological agents such as anthrax on the territory of Uzbekistan, among other sites. With the shrinking of the Aral Sea, one of those sites— Uzbekistan's Vozrozhdenie Island— poses a serious hazard to the safety of populations in the region, and the United States is working with the government of Uzbekistan to find ways to neutralize this material. (Theses of the Council of the Foreign and Defense Policy, 2003: 3-14).

A third set of Russian interests concerning Central Asia has been economic. Central Asian region is not only one of the major sources of oil gas, but it also competes with Russian energy resources in attracting Western investment. Russian policy concerning Central Asian energy reserves has been defined in zero-sum terms. That is Russia has tried to minimize energy development in this region, both by directing foreign investment towards different regions of Russia and by blocking alternative new pipeline routes that would carry energy from Caspian region and Azerbaijan directly to western markets by by-passing Russia (Kök, 1999).

II. RUSSIAN RESPONSE TO THESE CHALLENGES

In dealing with this region, thus, Russian foreign policy displayed a mixture of economic and business realism mixed with geopolitical pressure. In part, this was because security concerns prevailed in Russia's preoccupations on its southern borders, and traditional thinking remains influential in security thinking. In Russian national security concept, among the major threats to Russian security, instability in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and armed conflict in Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Chechnya, Abkhazia, and Nagorno-Karabakh (Internal Russian government document, 1997).

Faced with the above challenges, three different approaches have been competing for predominance in shaping Russian strategic policy. According to Igor Torbakov's analyses, these are Westernizer approach, conservative neo-urasianism and pragmatist-nationalist idea, being the latter the most dominant one at present (Torbakov, 2003).

The first group, so-called Westernizers, comprises of those who advocate "strategic partnership with the United States." They believe that US military presence in Central Asia and the Caucasus does not pose a threat to Russian

interests, addressing to Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov's words: "A threat to Russia is not a danger of nuclear catastrophe or the US and NATO aggression. A threat to Russia lies in the Caucasus and [Russia's] Asian frontier" (Torbakov, 2003: 1). In Westernizers' opinion, with the destruction of al Qaeda and Taliban regime, the USA removed also the biggest threat to Russia's security.

Westernizers believe that the development of energy resources is the key to the region's welfare and stability where they need foreign –mainly Western- investment. Thus, according to them, Moscow should give up attempts to rebuild a strategic and economic sphere of influence in the post-Soviet area, and concentrate rather on the economic and social development of North, Northeast and Far East Russia –where there is a real Chinese threat- with the help of foreign investors (Theses of the CFDP, 2003: 14-25).

The second powerful approach is the conservative neo-Eurasianism. It can be viewed as the opposite polar of the Westernizer view. Eurasianists dislike US involvement in the CIS region and the idea of partnership with America. This approach is especially dominant in the defense and security circles, which both continue to resent Russia's retreat from the former Soviet republics while replacing it with the US military presence.

The main difference of conservative neo-Eurasianist thinking from the 1920s' Eurasianism is that unlike the latter, the former accept the idea of Moscow's economic and political integration into the Western world. Yet, they say, in integrating with the West, Moscow should be "militantly competitive rather than appeasingly cooperative".

The third and the most dominant approach is nationalist pragmatist idea. The pragmatists seem to acknowledge America's leading role in world politics. They expect, on the other hand, that the West would accept Russia's right to assert its will within its own sphere of influence, i.e. the CIS region. Pragmatists maintain, however, that Russia's major political leverage dealing with its "near abroad" should not be raw military force, but economic dependence of the CIS countries on Moscow. Sergei Solodovnik, a researcher at the Center of International Studies at the Moscow Institute of International Relations argues, for example, that "debts should be swapped for property in the CIS countries.

This should be done without fail and with the legal guarantees of international bodies” (cited in Torbakov).

The pragmatist nationalists say that it is Russia that is primarily threatened by instability on its southern borders. Thus, Russia has every right to assert its dominance in the vast region of Central Eurasia, which Moscow for decades governed these counties, to maintain stability and order.

Furthermore, the nationalist pragmatists argue that Russia’s assertive policy in the former Soviet republics is in accordance with the Western standards and within the new concept of world order. Consequently, Moscow’s attitude towards its “backyard”, they maintain, should not bring a risk of a major rift with the United States or the European Union. (Gvosdev, 2003: 17)

In accordance with the above Russian interests and concerns, immediately after the 11 September attacks, there was, understandably a disquiet about the prospects of a major American economic and military presence in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Behind this attitude, there was also a “cost&benefit calculation”, which clearly persuaded President Putin. “That is American reinforcement of the stability of the Central Asian countries and of Russia’s southern borders could be of considerable benefit at a time when Russia alone is incapable of managing the new threats in the region.” (Torbakov, 2003: 2)

The debate in Moscow over the direction Russian foreign policy is far from over. Pragmatist nationalists has had the upper hand till the Iraq war in Moscow. The US attack against Iraq and the US’s other unilateral actions, however, strengthened the Eurasianist position in Russia.

III. STRATEGIES OF RUSSIA IN APPLYING “PRAGMATIST APPROACH” IN CENTRAL ASIA

It should be underlined that Russian foreign policy under Putin sought both close and active relations both with the West and with Eurasia. This can be seen in his speech of the 24th September 2001 (Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 25 September 2001: 3) which laid out Russian foreign, security and military policies after the 9/11 attacks. Thus, Putin’s support to the US against terrorism after 11 September did not mean Russia loses interests in Eurasia.

Though difficult to apply “pragmatist” view in the relations with the countries of Central Asia, Vladimir Putin put aside Yeltsin period’s vague and

unrealistic plans for regional cooperation and evaluated the region in a pragmatic way by applying the following policies:

First, Moscow has signed various bilateral deals on military cooperation, free trade, etc. with Central Asian countries to create its “coalition circle”. Second, the Russian oil and gas companies have gained an active presence in the Caspian region with Putin's blessing. They bought assets and signed long-term delivery deals -with Turkmenistan in the end of 2002, for example. However, during Yeltsin period the energy oligarchs were mostly busy fighting among themselves, rather than dealing with beyond Russia's borders (Wallander, 2002). Thirdly, Russia has secured its own military presence in Central Asia, through an airbase in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, for example.

IV. RUSSIA AND CENTRAL ASIA AFTER THE WAR IN IRAQ

After 11 September attacks, some of Putin's policies concerning Central Asia have failed. For example, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization proved totally unable to respond to post-9/11 events. Uzbekistan, moreover, has become the closest ally of The US, which deteriorated seriously its ties with Russia.

Furthermore, since the war in Iraq, Russia has concentrated its efforts as counter policies to America's presence in Central Asia and the CIS in order to bring the region under its control by using military and economic instruments

IV.1. Russian Political-Military Elite's Objections to American Presence in Central Asia

The Russian military-political elite continue to agonize over Russia's defeat in the Cold War and the US military-economic presence in former Soviet republics, including Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Georgia. Thus, the defense and security communities, particularly, are unwilling to accept the legitimacy of America's presence in Russia's sphere of influence. Russia's elite regards American presence in the CIS as a threat to Russian interests.

The war against Iraq reintensified such fears of Moscow. Accordingly, it coordinated several visible coercive moves in Central Asia. For example, it has secured military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan by mainly pressurising them to accept such Russian “protection”. It also facilitated the attempted coup in Turkmenistan in November 2002.

These policies aim, on the one hand, to counter American presence in Central Asia, and on the other hand they aim to give a response to Washington, which did not make any concession to gain Russian support over the war in Iraq. It implies that Russia gains nothing from partnership with America. These policies are primarily supported by the foreign and defense ministries, the least reformed of any post-Soviet institutions in personnel or outlook. Moreover, in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and even Azerbaijan Putin has supported the foreign and defense ministries since they try to comply with Moscow (Blank, 2003a).

Russian media reports confirm that America's victory in Iraq, Washington's refusal to make concessions to gain Russian support, and Moscow's growing fear of being ousted from the CIS triggered the change in Russian policy.

IV.2. Various efforts

These coordinated moves intensified primarily on the states most open to Russian political, economic and military pressure, namely Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

In November 2002, Turkmenistan declared that the attempted coup against Saparmurad Niyazov was facilitated by Russian special services. It happened just before a meeting of state presidents of Turkmenistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan in Ashgabat. They were to meet to start a feasibility study on a gas pipeline that would carry Turkmen gas via Afghanistan to Pakistan's port of Gwadar. Building such pipeline would reduce Turkmenistan's dependence on Russia's pipelines in natural gas exports. However, the coup reminded Niyazov Russia's intention and ability of persuading him to continue to ship Turkmen gas through Russian pipelines. As a result, Gazprom and Russian special services' coordinated pressure brought its reward: a new deal where Turkmenistan had to agree to transport its gas through Russia. This deal will ease Putin to sustain a Russian-led gas cartel on exploitative terms that would keep Caspian gas under its control (Blank, 2003b).

Moscow has also compelled Central Asian governments to accept air and land bases with the pretext to defend against terrorist attacks as well as to create foundation of a CIS-wide new military organization that Moscow is creating against America's presence there. This Organization of the Collective Security Treaty of the CIS (OCST), which was established on 28th February 2003, is intended to be an alliance with a clear bloc structure and charter that will copy NATO's Article V, calling for automatic use of force in the event of threats to any other member state. Moscow is insisting to create a rapid reaction force which could be deployed automatically and not after lengthy consultations

(Nezavisimaya Gazeta, 29 April 2003: 6). In Kyrgyzstan, Russia established an air base at Kant as a counter to American base in Bishkek. This marks a significant shift in Russian-Kyrgyz relations. Moreover, as six American F-18 jets arrived in Kyrgyzstan on 20 April 2003, Russia's Duma disavowed a promised rescheduling of Kyrgyzstan's \$ 133 million debt to Moscow. This led Akayev, the Kyrgyz head of state, to announce that American bases could not conflict with Russian interests and it would not mean limiting Russian influence in his country (Asia Times, 22 April 2003: 4). In Tajikistan, Russia forced Dushanbe to accept a permanent Russian base there. As another effort, Moscow has also begun criticizing coalition operations in Afghanistan of being ineffective, which will give Russia a good reason to send more troops to the area, probably to the bases in Tajikistan and Kant. (Blank, 2003c).

On October 2 2003, Russian Ministry of Defense (MOD) released a blueprint for the development of the armed forces. While not representing a radical departure from the military doctrine of 2000, which was a product of the military's preoccupation with NATO expansion, the new doctrine reflects Russia's focus on terrorism and other 'soft security' threats, and its renewed ambition to dominate the post-Soviet space.(Trifinov, 2003)

Defense Minister Sergey Ivanov has said that 2004 would be a year to reassert Russia's position in the CIS (Cohen, 2004).

The Russian Duma December 2003 election results clearly indicate that Great Power rhetoric is back among the Russian elite. Last December, the big winners were the socialist/nationalist newcomer Rodina (Motherland) and Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democrats. Both have an aggressive agenda of "defending" Russian-speakers, "people who belong to Russian culture", or "feel affinity to Russia" in the words of Dmitry Rogozin, the Rodina leader. (Cohen, 2004b: 2)

Furthermore, Vladimir Putin said on 12 February 2004 in a nationally televised speech that "the breakup of the Soviet Union is a national tragedy on an enormous scale (<http://www.polit.ru>).

Likewise, Putin's continuing efforts to establish a "common economic space" among CIS economies called the Eurasian Economic Association (EurAzEC) indicate Russian aspirations to control the economy of the region. On 19 September 2003, Russia and three of its trading partners – Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan – signed an agreement on a Common Economic Space (CES). (The Financial Times, 22 October 2003: 3)

Last but not least, SCO's decision to place the SCO's anti-terrorist center in Tashkent provides both China and Russia with a security presence in Uzbekistan, would lead to surround and pressurize Uzbekistan, the most independent and strongest actor, with Russian satellites and to undermine Islam Karimov's pro-American policies in Uzbekistan. (Cutler, 2004)

CONCLUSION

Russian policy towards Central Asia since the end of Soviet Empire has been primarily preoccupied with preserving Russian political, cultural, economic, and security influence in the region without bringing an excessive burden on the country's economic situation. Vladimir Putin, particularly, put aside Yeltsin period's unrealistic plans for regional cooperation and tried, though difficult, to adopt a pragmatic way by applying the several policies.

Yet, the war in Iraq triggered in Russia the fear of being ousted from Central Asia. As a result Russia adopted a set of moves that will reassure its hegemony in the region.

These policies do not necessarily aim to recreate the Soviet Union. But they do aim at curtailing American presence in Central Asia by increasing pressure upon local states which would eventually cause Washington to leave the area and Moscow to dominate the region. For this reason, Russia has launched a set of coordinated attempts to create a Russian-dominated sphere of influence by securing the military-economic-political subordination of local states to Russia that would give Russia the opportunity to monopolize access to and influence over their energy resources and defense policies.

However, recent Russian policies towards Central Asia would bring further militarizing Central Asia's politics and stimulating its division into competing blocs. They would ultimately cause to declining U.S.-Russian relations.

The question, however, still remains: will Russia's strivings for exclusive hegemony in Central Asia fail or succeed? Considering Russia's military weakness, limited economic resources and America's strategic plans concerning Eurasia will mean that it is not realistic to see Russia as the hegemon of the region for years to come.

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