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Russia and Georgia: counterinsurgency or old-fashioned bullying?[†]

Recent geopolitical events have allowed the current Russian administration under president Putin to repackage its so-called counter-terrorist and counter-insurgency policies. The Kremlin's stance following the White House's declaration of a "war on terrorism" has enabled it to parlay nominal political and minimal operational support into a significantly improved position with regard to Washington. As a side-effect of this support it has become easier for the Moscow administration to use severely repressive methods against separatist movements, predominantly in the Chechen, Dagestani regions, but there have been announcements of possible military intervention in the independent neighbouring state of Georgia. Moscow has made allegations recently that the ethnic separatists it is fighting in Chechnya and Dagestan are linked to Osama bin Laden and to other Muslim extremists – even in Bosnia and Herzegovina. How accurate or even realistic such ideas of a pan-Islamicist network undermining Kremlin interests remains a valid question given the absence of a "smoking gun" that would link disparate separatists and terrorists. Nevertheless, the rhetoric has been significantly increased of late and presages potential military intervention and even conflict with one of Russia's "near abroad" neighbours.

Russia's Repositioning and Subsequent "Counter-insurgency" Operations

After more than 5 years of increasingly chilly relations with the West, Moscow has over recent months radically altered its international standing and stance towards international institutions such as NATO and the European Union. Whilst as a result of the United States' and NATO's military campaign against Milosevic's regime and the West's policies of institutional expansion Russia removed itself repeatedly from joint fora such as the NATO Joint Permanent Council, after September 11th, its foreign policy decisions have brought it very close to Washington. By demonstrating political solidarity with the US after the heinous attacks of last year and by not protesting at Washington's intention to base operations out of the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, Moscow has won itself pride of place amongst large nations involved in the war on terror.

After rapidly taking a position alongside America and not attempting to block its operational manoeuvring in the Central Asian "near abroad", Russia has – often after using phrases and terms employed by President Bush with regard to al Qaeda – significantly ratcheted up its military operations against separatists in the disputed areas of Chechnya and Dagestan. Subsequently many even mainstream commentators have seen the original Russian stance as executed in bad faith so as to be able to

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deflect existing criticisms of domestic military and anti-humanitarian excesses and the increase the use of such tactics.

Georgia and Russian Allegations of Harboursing Terrorists

The newest iteration of Russia's declining relations with its neighbours is intrinsically linked to the war on terror. Whilst on holiday in Soci recently, President Putin demanded the creation of a buffer zone in the territory between the Federation and the independent republic of Georgia. The demand is based on the supposition that fighters from Chechnya and Dagestan are regrouping and coordinating their actions out of safe areas inside of Georgia. Actually on the night of September 11th, Putin went on to threaten his neighbour to the effect that if Tbilisi does not take the necessary steps to eradicate or capture and extradite those terrorists allegedly linked to atrocities such as the apartment block bombings in Moscow, then the Kremlin will be forced to execute a military incursion on Georgian territory against said "terrorists."

Externally it appears that this instance of grandstanding may eventually backfire, however, given Washington's recent commitments to Tbilisi. As a result of the obvious problems that do in fact exist in the Pankissoye Gorge with bandits and armed irregulars, the US took the decision recently to send a small deployment of special forces "advisers" to Georgia to assist in developing its indigenous counter-terrorist capabilities and to tactically assist in ongoing operations aimed at securing the lawless area. Since President Bush has made statements to the effect that Tbilisi is taking the necessary action and that the US fully supports its policies, it is hard to imagine that the Kremlin would now risk a measure as controversial as a totally unilateral military intervention in a country where US troops are deployed.

Much of the stand-off may, however, be explained in terms of recent history and the changing relations between the two premiers, Putin and Shevardnaze. Whilst the latter was elevated into his current position at the head of the newly independent nation of Georgia with the express support of Moscow, in recent years as Tbilisi has tried repeatedly to define its international position independent of Moscow's influence, relations have soured to such an extent that Moscow has been seen by some as being behind at least some of the repeated attempts on Shevardnaze's life. Add to this the fact that the Chechens Russia so wishes to neutralise now are in fact Russian citizens and were in many cases armed and supported by Moscow in the 92/3 war of independence in Abkhazia, this means that Russia is at least as culpable for the creation of the current problem, if not more than Georgia itself is. Nevertheless, some Russia press sources have already reported that the Russia General Staff is already formulating the plans for an intervention in the neighbouring state.

Despite the fact that the Georgians have recently sent 1,000 troops into the gorge where most of separatists are said to be hiding, this measure was not accepted as serious enough a venture from Moscow's point of view. On the contrary, the Russian authorities helped spread a rumour that a recent separatist operation involved the ferrying of fighters in Georgian military helicopters. Given the sensitivity between the two nations at the moment this is hard to credit, yet since that date Colin Powell has gone on record to say that in this particular instance a Russia strike into Georgia may



constitute justified self-defence (a echo perhaps of the White House own newly introduced preventative defence policy.)

For the moment it seems that Russia may be winning the war of words with Georgia, Even so, given that US troops are already involved in Georgia, the prospect of bombing seems remote. As a result the Pankissoye Gorge will likely remain a region of low-level conflict for the foreseeable future.

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