

Central Asia and Afghanistan in Russia's Strategy

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RUSSIA REMAINS A LARGE COUNTRY to be reckoned with, even though the Soviet Union's disintegration diminished its international weight. With the larger part of the Soviet Union's western regions becoming independent states, Russia's eastern regions and the eastern vector of its foreign policies acquired much more importance.

Today, Russia should pay particular attention to Central Asia and the southern sector from which strategic threats emanate. The Russian Federation has no serious enemies among the largest states (a unique situation!) wishing to destroy it or, at least, undermine its might. If certain, not quite adequate, rulers of neighboring states (still fighting "Soviet expansionism") develop similar ambitions they will soon discover that this is beyond their power.

This should not be taken to mean that there are no serious threats to Russia's security or even its continued existence; today, these threats come not from states but from transnational movements, ideologies and organizations which preach them. The most dangerous of them are born in the south, in the AfPak knot: terrorism fed by radical Islamism, huge flows of drugs which (according to sources) have already turned about 5 million Russians into drug addicts. In some regions of Russia the ideology of radical Islamism stimulates the majority (but not all) terrorist groups and inspires extremist and separatist movements.

Afghanistan

THE WORLD community has already realized that the Afghan dilemma

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defies any more or less simple solution. Today, it is hard to say who and what did more harm to the state and plunged it into chaos: the Afghans who removed their fairly judicious king; the Soviet Union which brought in its troops to defend the “revolutionary gains” and then abandoned its Afghan allies to their fate; corrupt Afghan groups which took up arms to settle their squabbles; the Taliban which destroyed cultural values and supported Al Qaeda or the external forces which defeated the Taliban but could not rout it and bring law and order into the country. We should always bear in mind that the external forces were moved in to fight the Taliban, first, in response to 09/11 and, second, that the ISAF (International Security Assisting Forces) still coping with the task of stabilizing the country were set up on an unanimous UN SC resolution. Americans play the leading role yet since 2003 NATO has been in command, even though not all 40 countries involved in the counterterrorist operation are NATO members.

Today, after ten years of enormous efforts the ISAF still does not have total control: Taliban guerrillas retain their grip on some of the regions. The fact that the majority of the Taliban supporters and, probably, the Al Qaeda leaders camp across the border, in Pakistan (in areas outside the reach of government) does not simplify the situation. There is a vicious circle: until the central government moves into the mountains along the border to assume total control, solution will remain as elusive as ever. Islamabad cannot or does not want to move its army into these regions; a similar attempt of the international coalition will shatter the shaky stability in Pakistan and complicate matters further.

President Obama who knows that there is no military solution would like to pull the troops out. Those who suspect that Washington (as ill-intentioned as ever) which entrenches in Afghanistan ostensibly to fight terrorism seeks control over Central Asia (these ideas are popular in the circles close to the Russian and Chinese defense and security bodies) are indulging in yarn-spinning pure and simple. As a presidential candidate, President Obama pledged to take the American troops out of Afghanistan; today, the majority of Americans wants the same. The state of American finances does not allow its government to squander money on the war with no end in sight. To wish and to be able to act according to one's wishes are two different things: if the Taliban regains power as soon as the Americans have left the U.S. prestige will be damaged beyond repair while the situation will go back to the year 2001. It will become obvious that America cannot defeat terrorism.

Very much as usual the U.S. military are talking about a victory round the corner if more troops, more money and more efforts are poured into the operation. We heard all this from the Soviet military who had to beat ignominious retreat. More likely than not, Washington will do the following: it will gradually replace its troops with the Afghan military and will leave behind military bases to be used as strongholds to be able to rebuff the Taliban if the situation aggravates. In 2014, the administration will announce that the operation has been completed and the troops pulled out. The key military bases, however, now hastily knocked together, will be manned by Americans.

Time will show whether this strategy succeeds in Afghanistan as it has succeeded, on the whole, in Iraq. In Afghanistan, however, the situation is somewhat different: there is the destabilizing factor of Pakistan, the mountainous terrain and complete disintegration of the old state structures.

A gradual pullout will deprive the Taliban of a chance to regain the lost ground fast; it stands no chance of a prompt triumph in the multinational country. As a basically Pashto movement (in a country where the Pushtoons in the majority) it is not popular among the Tajiks and Uzbeks with armed forces of their own; they are resolutely against the Taliban. Protracted guerilla warfare might follow with provinces, their governors and armed contingents changing allegiances.

On the whole, the ISAF continued presence in Afghanistan suits Russia's interests: Afghanistan is the main source of threats, terrorism and drugs in the first place. According to the Federal Drug Control Service of the RF, Afghanistan produces 800 tons of heroin every year, 35% of which is used in Russia, where the number of drug addicts is great and continues to grow. A victory of the Taliban in Afghanistan will create a serious threat of radical Islamism spreading to Central Asia and further on to Russia.

In ten years of the anti-Taliban operation, the areas under opium poppy increased by about 40 times. This happened not because the U.S. plans to channel drugs to Russia to capitalize on the results (another myth popular among "patriots") but because the ISAF prefers to act cautiously. Afghan peasants live on opium poppy which means that once deprived

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of the only sources of subsistence they will side with the Taliban. This explains Russia's policy: while insisting that struggle against drugs should become more resolute it helps in many ways (except direct military assistance) the counterterrorist coalition. The ills of Afghanistan (drug trafficking being one of them) can be cured by concerted efforts needed to raise the standard of living; the peasants should be offered alternative sources of subsistence while the Afghan leaders should be helped in their efforts to build up an effective state system. The international community and the main players (the U.S., China and India) agree that this should be done. Recently, the big neighbors of Afghanistan have been displaying much more interest in dealing with Afghanistan's numerous problems. India allocated over \$2 billion to promote restoration and development. Indian experts are talking about coordinated actions with Russia; China has launched a training program for the military and civilian personnel and is actively developing the country's natural riches. Cooperation with the ISAF and economic and political cooperation with Afghanistan will help ISAF pull out and stabilize the country.

Russia and Central Asia

DRUGS, RADICAL ISLAMISM and terrorism arrive to Russia from Afghanistan via Central Asia. Destabilization in this part of the world will bring these threats even closer to Russia's borders and will aggravate the situation. The region, however, is important for Russia in many other ways. As the main part of the previously united country, Russia has preserved its strong influence in Central Asia even if the Russian leaders have admitted that Moscow has no monopoly on the region. America is increasing its political impact while the European Union and China have moved to the forefront in the economic sphere; India, Iran and Turkey rely on the traditional cultural and ethnic contacts to carry weight with the Central Asian capitals. Today Beijing is an important trade partner of Kyrgyzstan and the second largest trade partner of Tajikistan (in both countries Russia is still in the first place yet China is the largest importer) and the third largest trade partner of Kazakhstan (after the EU and Russia). The only gas pipeline which does not connect Turkmenistan and Russia goes to China.

Naturally enough, Russia, which rejected expansionism Soviet-style, would like to preserve its influence in the region without trying to subjugate the independent Central Asian states and impose a certain political

system on them. Unlike the Soviet Union and the United States, it does not rely on ideology in its foreign policy; it has no intention to impose on others its development model and its values (which Russia itself has not yet fully defined). It tries to act in conformity with its national interests. In Central Asia they are:

(1) minimization of the threats emanating from the south;

(2) more active economic cooperation; the Central Asian states are Russia's important trade partners, especially in the sphere of energy fuels;

(3) more active integration. An absence of expansionist plans does not mean that the people living in the post-Soviet expanse would frown at closer economic and political integration. The borders and barriers which divided overnight the formerly united country irritates those who used to live together; they interfere with economic cooperation at the basic level. This explains why all sorts of economic and political integration projects are developing, more or less efficiently, in the CIS countries; such are EurAsEC and the CSTO. The Customs Union is the most successful of them. Kazakhstan has already joined it while several other Central Asian countries would like to join. The members of the Customs Union are not divided by customs barriers which simplifies personal contacts;

4) preservation of cultural unity and the Russian language as well as interest in Russian culture and protection of the interests of Russian citizens.

Russia's desire to ensure its national interests in Central Asia contradicts neither the interests of the regional states nor the interests of other big players. In fact, the interests of these powers and groups – Russia, China, India, the United States, and the EU – in the region are very similar. Those who talk about “chessboards” and “great games” based on inevitable and uncompromising rivalry among the external players are either indulging in wishful thinking, or know next to nothing about the real state of affairs or are seeking cheap popularity.

The main players in Central Asia share at least three interests:

political stability (none of them needs a political upheaval which might bring radical Islamists to power);

secular regimes;

accelerated economic development, the sine qua non of political stability.

Moscow, Beijing, Delhi, Washington, and Brussels share these interests; this means that economic and cultural activity of each of them in Central Asia should not be interpreted as threatening the interests of oth-

ers (this is typical of the conservatives, in Russia and elsewhere, still thinking in the Cold War terms). Chinese and European investments in Central Asian economy and support for cultural activities and R&D do not undermine Russia's interests there; they promote the local countries economy and culture. Any interference from the position "neither for oneself nor for the others" irritates local people; anyway, today, this approach is hardly productive. Russia should demonstrate more efficiency and pour more money into similar programs.

The fact that the basic interests of the states involved are identical does not rule out economic rivalry. All sorts of companies from different countries work on the local markets; there are big state corporations operating in the energy sphere, not infrequently with the help of corresponding governments. This does not mean, however, that the states are locked in uncompromising rivalry. Even the closest of allies might occasionally disagree on economic issues: in 1982-1983, for example, America and Canada found themselves engaged in a potato war; the U.S., UK, EU and some of the Latin American countries were drawn into a banana war. No matter how acute, economic conflicts never spill over to politics which rest on a solid foundation of allied relationships. The Russian government should defend the national companies and their interests everywhere, Central Asia included, yet this should not degenerate into political conflicts in the spheres where the states have common fundamental interests.

Democratization and human rights belong to a different sphere; though desirable, democratization in underdeveloped countries frequently means a choice between stability and chaos which might bring radicals of all hues to power rather than between democracy and authoritarianism. Seen from the West the problem looks ideological – democratization here and now despite the consequences; so far, support for pragmatic approach in the West is fairly limited. This explains why the ideas of the main external players in Central Asia are not always identical; some of them do not want the "harmful liberal ideas" spilling over into their territories.

It is interesting to see how the revolutionary wave in the Arab world will affect, if at all, the political situation in Central Asia: the local political culture is not very close, let alone identical, to that in the Arab world. With the exception of Kyrgyzstan, the Central Asian countries, very much like the pre-revolutionary Arab world, are ruled by corrupt authoritarian more or less harsh regimes. Islam is the main religion in all these countries yet their populations with a long Soviet experience are much more secular than in the Arab world.

Sooner or later political scientists will have to specify whether the developments in the Arab world were specifically Arabic or they could be described as part of the worldwide anti-authoritarian revolutions which might develop into the “fourth wave” of democratization. The answers will depend, to a great extent, on whether these movements create democratic or authoritarian regimes with Islamist hues. So far, Kyrgyzstan has demonstrated that democratization is possible even though a threat of destabilization, mounting nationalism and xenophobia remains real.

Uzbekistan is the weakest link: in the country ruled by an inflexible regime of a family type similar to those toppled down in North Africa destabilization cannot be excluded; it has already survived several attempts to remove it. Tension is very tangible in Tajikistan; outwardly serene Turkmenistan might spring a surprise on the world. Sustainable economic development makes Kazakhstan relatively stable yet the time of power transfer is moving closer. Kyrgyzstan which has survived two revolutions faces possible chaos and disintegration rather than another bout of anti-government riots.

In any case, Russia and the other extra-regional players need stability in the region; the events in the Arab world have demonstrated that despite strong support from outside the authoritarian regimes are not eternal. Sooner or later corruption and nepotism of the ruling clans will bring popular discontent to the boiling point beyond which all rational arguments will prove futile. Russia and other states with interests in Central Asia should bear this in mind; a joint program of economic and political modernization looks like the best option which calls for cooperation of the main forces and players who should develop a shared awareness of potential dangers.

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