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The New Battleground: Central Asia and the Caucasus

Following his first meeting with President Vladimir Putin in June 2001, President George W. Bush heaped praise on his Russian counterpart, hailing a new era in relations between the two countries and claiming he had gained a sense of the Russian leader's soul. Just three and a half years later, however, the strategic partnership forged between the two leaders in the wake of the September 11 attacks faces a new obstacle. Recent geopolitical developments, combined with expanding strategic agendas in Moscow and Washington, are ushering in a new era of competition in Russia's near abroad of Central Asia and the Caucasus.

At least three factors are fueling the unfolding tug of war between Moscow and Washington. The first is the new strategic emphasis the United States has placed on Central Asia and the Caucasus as part of the global war against terrorism. This focus has propelled Washington to expand its military and strategic foothold in both regions. The second is Russia's domestic economic priorities, which have prompted Moscow to intensify its focus on acquiring a critical energy mass among the fragile former Soviet republics. The third factor is Putin's assumption of sweeping policymaking authority and the concomitant rise of an increasingly assertive, neo-imperial foreign policy in the Kremlin.

For most of the last century, the Soviet Union dominated the political landscape of what is today Central Asia and the Caucasus. The end of the Cold War did little to alter this state of affairs. Although prompting the Kremlin to disengage from much of the Middle East and Latin America, it did not dim Moscow's involvement in the newly sovereign states of Arme-

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nia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Nor did the end of the Cold War extinguish the imperial aspirations of many Russians, who continue to dream of a return of their country's former holdings. Yet, this wish has been called into question since September 11. The global campaign against terrorism launched by the United States following the attacks on New York and Washington has expanded the U.S. military presence in Russia's near abroad to unprecedented proportions.

Moscow has watched these moves with growing trepidation. Putin supported Washington's initial plans, breaking with many in Moscow to endorse a U.S. military presence in his country's backyard. The steady expansion of this presence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, however, has lent credence to Russian fears that, despite assurances that the United States will withdraw its forces once Afghanistan is "stabilized," Washington, in fact, plans a regional deployment of indefinite duration. Over time, such perceptions, accompanied by a fear of waning Russian influence, have sparked a series of geopolitical contests in the countries that make up the post-Soviet space.

Washington Looks East

The current U.S. presence in the region is a relatively new phenomenon. Throughout the 1990s, policymakers in Washington paid only sporadic attention to Central Asia and the Caucasus. Notable exceptions included the Clinton administration's support for regional energy projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline and the U.S. military's 1997 designation of Central Asia as an "area of responsibility" under the purview of the U.S. Central Command. The U.S. government's interest in this part of the world, however, has changed since September 11. Beginning in late 2001, as part of its campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan, the United States codified military basing agreements with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, hammered out a deal with Kazakhstan for overflight rights and materiel transshipments, and acquired contingency use of the national airport in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.[1] The Bush administration also dramatically broadened economic assistance to the region, nearly tripling aid to Uzbekistan alone (to some $300 million) since October 2001.[2] By the official end of combat operations in Afghanistan on May 1, 2003, the United States had established forward bases housing a combined total of close to 3,000 troops in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan and had begun close cooperation on tactical and intelligence matters with all Central Asian states except Turkmenistan.[3]

If Afghanistan prompted Washington's initial interest in Central Asia and the Caucasus, the Pentagon's strategic transformation has preserved its attention. Under the guidance of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, the

U.S. military has commenced a sweeping overhaul of strategic priorities. For much of the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union had by and large not been reflected in the strategic posture of the United States, which chose simply to substitute the Russian Federation for the USSR as its principal potential adversary, albeit a smaller and poorer one. By contrast, the Bush administration, drawing on the recommendations of the 2001 Quadrennial Defense Review, shifted the government's attention to developing capabilities designed to assure allies; dissuade adversaries; deter aggression; and, if necessary, decisively defeat undeterred enemies.[4]

The post-Soviet space has become a principal front for U.S. military transformation.

These new priorities, in turn, have directed the military posture of the United States away from the static, adversary-based model that dominated much of the previous century toward a strategy designed to achieve assurance, dissuasion, deterrence, and defense against *any* potential adversary in *any* environment. This fundamental change was enshrined in the National Security Strategy released by the White House in September 2002, which boldly declared that "[a] military structured to deter massive Cold War–era armies must be transformed to focus more on how an adversary might fight rather than where or when a war might occur."[5]

The post-Soviet space has become a principal front for this transformation. In his 2002 report to the president and Congress, Rumsfeld pointed out that, "[a]long a broad arc of instability that stretches from the Middle East to Northeast Asia, there exists a volatile mix of rising and declining regional powers."[6] In response, the Pentagon has launched a global realignment of its defense posture designed to gain strategic control of this arc through an expanded military presence in those theaters.[7]

This shift in focus has prompted a broad U.S. diplomatic and military initiative in Central Asia. In Uzbekistan, Washington's primary ally in Central Asia, a sweeping grant of authority for military operations has solidified the Pentagon's strategic presence, which now consists of an estimated 1,500 U.S. troops, cooperation with the Uzbek military on antiterrorism efforts and border security, and substantial joint initiatives on counterproliferation. Washington also has opened discussions regarding more permanent basing arrangements and deeper military-to-military cooperation with Kyrgyzstan, where the Pentagon currently houses some 1,300 service members supporting ongoing operations in Afghanistan.[8] In addition, the United States committed millions of dollars for equipment purchases and training for Kazakhstan's military and, since the summer of 2003, has financed the

construction of a cooperative military base in the Caspian port city of Atyrau.[9]

These efforts have been mirrored in the Caucasus. The United States has assumed a central military role in Georgia, launching the $64 million Georgia Train and Equip Program in May 2002 as a means to enhance the anti-terrorism capabilities of Georgia's military and alleviate tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi over the sporadic Chechen presence in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge. Pentagon officials have also made overtures to Georgia's new president, Mikheil Saakashvili, related to his country's pro-Western political direction, a move that has already spurred the start of significant military reforms in Tbilisi.

Similarly, Washington has pledged some $10 million to Azerbaijan to strengthen its border security, improve its communications infrastructure, and help its government carry out security operations aimed at countering the spread of weapons of mass destruction.[10] The Bush administration also initiated a series of joint military exercises in the Caspian Sea designed to train Azerbaijan's naval fleet to protect the oil-rich nation's offshore drilling platforms.[11] At the same time, Pentagon planners have opened talks with Baku about establishing a major, cooperative military-training program and raised the possibility of basing U.S. forces in the country.[12]

The United States has even made inroads with Russia's closest partner in the Caucasus—Armenia. In April 2004, the Bush administration codified an agreement on enhanced military cooperation with Yerevan, and U.S. government officials subsequently opened preliminary discussions about joint military exercises between the United States and Armenia, to be held in the near future.[13]

The Energy Imperative

The Pentagon's push east, meanwhile, has been matched in Moscow by a new economic necessity. Russia has become a bona fide energy superpower rather suddenly, surpassing Saudi Arabia as the world's leading oil producer in February 2002. Since then, the Kremlin has translated its newfound energy clout into an ambitious foreign agenda, pledging to provide the United States with 10 percent of its oil imports by the end of the decade[14] and putting Russia on track to become the fifth-largest oil supplier to the United States, after Canada, Saudi Arabia, Mexico, and Venezuela.

An unlikely source has called such hopes into question. Since it began in the summer of 2003, the very public clampdown by the Kremlin on Russia's second-largest oil company, Yukos, and its billionaire former chief executive officer, Mikhail Khodorkovskii, has rocked the foundations of Putin's eco-

nomic plans. Domestic political considerations may have been the primary motive for the Kremlin's offensive (Khodorkovskii had bankrolled two Duma party factions before the December 2003 parliamentary elections and even intimated that he himself might eventually run for president), but the economic impact has been far-reaching.

First, the campaign against Yukos has succeeded in rattling investor confidence. Given the unpopularity of Russia's oligarchs, as well as the growing boldness of Putin's authoritarian domestic policies, many fear that the Yukos affair could merely be a prelude to a larger government offensive designed to eliminate political opposition and consolidate the Kremlin's control over vital Russian economic sectors. In turn, investors have signaled their unease: from a net inflow of some $4.6 billion in the first half of 2003, investment in Russia has seen a dramatic reversal, with capital flight topping $5 billion in the first half of 2004.[15]

> Moscow does not appear committed to economic integration with the West.

Second, the Yukos case has shed light on Moscow's lack of commitment to economic integration with the West. The crackdown coincided with serious bids both from ChevronTexaco and ExxonMobil to acquire major stakes—25 percent and 50 percent, respectively—in the Russian oil giant. All this suggests that the Kremlin's efforts were, at least in part, timed to head off the expansion of a Western foothold in the Russian energy sector. Russian officials' subsequent talk of vastly increased governmental control over the country's energy sector has only reinforced such speculation.

In turn, as funding for energy exploration and infrastructure development has dried up, Russian officials have begun to recognize the limits of their energy potential. According to German Gref, Russia's economic development and trade minister, Russian oil production has now basically plateaued, and it is expected to rise less than 5 percent annually for the next four years or more.[16] For Russia's president, whose 2004 State of the Federation address pledged double-digit increases in the nation's gross domestic product by the end of the decade, this reality only adds impetus to expanding control over Russia's energy-rich former holdings as a way of making up the deficit.

Russia's Imperial Impulse Returns

Moscow's reemergence in the post-Soviet space has also been driven by the revival of an old idea: Russia as empire. This concept has been present in Russian political life for centuries, and the end of the Cold War did little to

mute Russia's historically expansionist tendencies. In fact, calls for a Greater Russia, championed by advocates such as Nobel laureate Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and by political thinkers including the controversial geopolitician and Eurasia Movement founder Aleksandr Dugin, reemerged shortly after the Soviet Union collapsed. Under Putin, however, these impulses are beginning to be put into practice.

Domestically, the expansion of executive power has made Russia's imperial resurgence possible. Through a variety of legislative and administrative measures, Putin has succeeded in virtually monopolizing policymaking authority. The outcome of the December 2003 elections effectively eliminated legislative checks on his executive authority. The pro-Kremlin United Russia Party was the runaway victor in the parliamentary race, garnering roughly half of all 447 seats in the Russian lower house (Duma). As a result, the party has assumed direction of all Duma committees dealing with foreign affairs and defense, transforming much of the Russian legislature into an enabler of the Kremlin's policies.

Under Putin, imperial impulses are beginning to be put into practice.

Simultaneously, key appointments to government posts and periodic institutional purges have enabled Putin to create a vibrant subculture of former KGB officers within the Kremlin bureaucracy. These so-called *siloviki* today occupy upward of 60 percent of the key decisionmaking positions within the Russian government and constitute an important bloc of political support for official presidential policies.[17] Together, these dynamics have given Putin a sweeping mandate to pursue his neo-imperial aspirations.

The mechanism for pursuing such policies can be found in the draft military concept that the Russian Defense Ministry unveiled in October 2003.[18] The so-called Ivanov Doctrine, named after its chief architect, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, constitutes a dramatic overhaul of Russian strategic priorities and military practice. Among the primary threats to Russian security, the document identifies "the expansion of military blocs and alliances to the detriment of the military security of the Russian Federation or its allies" and "the introduction of foreign troops (without the agreement of the Russian Federation and the authorization of the UN Security Council) onto the territories of states, which are adjacent to and friendly toward the Russian Federation." Clearly, both dangers are thinly veiled references to the recent strategic inroads made by Washington.

In response, the doctrine embraces the use of preemptive military force as a means not only to address military threats but also to maintain access to regions of vital economic or financial importance. As such, it represents a blue-

print for the post–September 11 preservation of Russian influence in the post-Soviet space, a policy that the Kremlin has wholeheartedly endorsed.

Moscow has not wasted any time translating these principles into policy in other ways as well. In Uzbekistan, Kremlin officials have managed to conclude a series of new deals related to arms and the defense industry, substantially strengthening military ties between Moscow and Tashkent. Russia has also codified a framework accord that effectively puts Moscow at the helm of a large portion of Tashkent's military policy. Similarly, in October 2003, in a sign of the Kremlin's new forward presence in the region, the Russian military opened its first foreign base since the fall of the Soviet Union in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, only 20 minutes from that country's capital.[19]

Russia has also commenced an intense diplomatic offensive toward Kazakhstan, with Putin's January 2004 visit resulting in a significant strengthening of strategic ties between the Kremlin and its former satellite.[20] Just one month later, Russia and Kazakhstan inaugurated a joint action plan for security cooperation, which defined bilateral cooperation between the two countries as well as their respective roles in regional security structures such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization.[21]

Russian fears of Western encroachment have been fanned.

Russia has even reinforced its presence in Tajikistan, announcing in July 2004 that its vaunted 201st Motorized Infantry Division will soon have a permanent base in the Central Asian state.[22] Additionally, in early 2004, in a clear coup for the Kremlin, the government of Tajik president Imomali Rakhmonov granted Moscow military basing rights in his country "on a free of charge and open-ended basis."[23]

In the Caucasus, Moscow has embarked on a campaign designed to undercut Georgia's emerging role in the region. As part of this effort, the Kremlin has fomented separatist tendencies within Georgia's autonomous regions (most recently in South Ossetia) and is even rumored to be behind covert efforts to sabotage the emerging Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan energy pipeline. In late 2003, for example, a leading British paper charged that Russia's military intelligence organ, the Glavnoye Razvedovatelnoye Upravlenie (GRU), was allocating funds to bankroll eco-terrorists or Chechen rebels in attacks on the energy conduit.[24]

Russia's approach to Azerbaijan has been more subtle. Through a variety of diplomatic carrots and sticks, ranging from offers of military aid to the abrupt cessation of gas supplies, Moscow has attempted to woo Baku away from its West-ward trajectory.

At the same time, Defense Minister Ivanov has taken pains to stress Moscow's commitment to a long-term presence in Armenia. These efforts include signing a new accord on military cooperation between Moscow and Yerevan in November 2003, giving Russia the use of military bases in the Caucasus republic, and announcing the Kremlin's plans to modernize Armenia's military forces by expanding training programs and weapons transfers.[25]

Russia is also broadening its regional presence by other means. It has outlined plans to increase its armed forces in the Caspian Sea region and, in a throwback to the gunboat diplomacy of Soviet times, has launched a series of regional maneuvers of its Caspian fleet.[26] In early June 2004, Russia also commenced large-scale military exercises, dubbed "Mobility 2004," in a clear signal to the countries in its near abroad that Moscow possesses both the will and the firepower to project force. Even though the maneuvers took place in the Russian Far East, the Russian Foreign Ministry made clear that the exercises were actually intended to demonstrate to neighboring states and to the United States that "any place is within our reach."[27]

Moscow's moves are about much more than simply rolling back U.S. influence. Russian officials, in the words of Putin himself, are at least in part "now working to restore what was lost with the fall of the Soviet Union, but are doing it on a new, modern basis."[28]

The Conflict to Come

The friction resulting from all of these developments has brought Central Asia and the Caucasus to center stage on the Russian and U.S. strategic agendas. As Putin told an extraordinary session of the country's Security Council in July 2004, "We are facing an alternative—either we'll achieve a qualitative strengthening of the CIS [Commonwealth of Independent States] and create on its basis an effectively functioning and influential regional organization, or else we'll inevitably see the erosion of this geopolitical space." The latter, Putin made clear, "should not be allowed to happen."[29]

The addition of a new regional player has only reinforced Russia's sense of siege. With the most recent round of accession in the spring of 2004, NATO has dramatically widened its scope and reach in Russia's near abroad. This expansion has been matched by a rising activism in the Caspian and Black Sea regions. The Atlantic Alliance is now angling to become a guarantor of security for countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus, a fact that NATO formally articulated at its June 2004 summit in Istanbul with the announcement of plans to put a "special focus" on engagement in both regions.[30]

It is not surprising that the situation has fanned Russian fears of Western encroachment. Russian policymakers have begun to worry, with some justification, that NATO's new reach might in the future make it possible for the West to meddle in areas of the Russian Federation that were previously off limits. The Kremlin is actively moving to formulate a strategic response. As Yuri Baluyevsky, the new chief of the Russian General Staff, has written, "A powerful military stationed at our borders with no declared objective poses a threat to any non-NATO country.… Sensible leaders would realize this and prepare to counter the threat."[31] For its part, the United States has only strengthened its commitment to engagement with Central Asia and the Caucasus as part of its plans to realign its global military posture to address post–Cold War threats more effectively.[32]

U.S. and Russian regional priorities are incompatible in the long term.

The ultimate outcome of the emerging geopolitical tug of war between Moscow and Washington is still far from certain. Russia and the United States may yet be able to establish a modus vivendi of sorts in the post-Soviet space, based on a mutual interest in neutralizing the threat posed by regional terrorist groups. Indeed, this objective has been given new urgency in the aftermath of the bloody massacre of schoolchildren in Beslan, Russia, in early September 2004.

Nevertheless, the recent events in Beslan can just as easily serve as the harbinger of far greater friction between Russia and the United States. Russian officials have since unveiled a new counterterrorism strategy that internalizes the principle of military preemption and have expressed their right to "eliminate terrorist bases in any region of the world."[33] More ominously, Putin has used the tragedy as an excuse to further centralize government power by altering the process for the selection of Russia's 89 regional governors. There is little doubt either in Washington or in Moscow that such measures are likely to contribute to a more aggressive Russian presence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

Remedial measures, such as a cooperative counterterrorism strategy for the region or direct U.S. investment designed to revitalize Russia's ailing energy infrastructure, could certainly diffuse some of the pressure at least temporarily, but policymakers in Washington would do well to recognize the long-term incompatibility of U.S. and Russian regional priorities. For the Kremlin, remaining the dominant player in the post-Soviet space is not simply a matter of political prestige; this role has increasingly become an economic necessity. For the White House, meanwhile, the continued independence of the fragile regional republics, not to mention their pro-Western political orientation, remains critical to the long-term success of the global war against terrorism.

The dueling strategies of the Russian and U.S. governments will do more than simply determine the political evolution of Central Asia and the Caucasus. Given the stakes, they are likely to test the very limits of the strategic partnership between Moscow and Washington.

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