



THE POST-SOVIET STATES AND THE POST-SADDAM MIDDLE EAST

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The war in Iraq, which Russia opposed, has highlighted a Russian strategy increasingly willing to confront U.S. policies and interests, both in the Middle East and in Central Asia. From Moscow's standpoint, there is great concern over growing U.S. influence in countries once allied with or even part of the USSR. This wide range of issues deserves careful attention and could take center-stage in future U.S.-Russian relations, with the possibility of serious friction between Washington and Moscow.

The partnership forged by the United States with Russia after September 11, 2001 is in danger and this problem has been deepened by the fallout from the U.S.-led war with Iraq.(1) Russia has cooperated with the United States on the Performance-Based Roadmap for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. But revelations of a continuing Russian supply of arms and potential WMD technology to Iraq and Iran, Moscow's very blunt opposition to the war, and Russia's intelligence-sharing with Iraq are upsetting this relationship, as well as Anglo-Russian relations.(2) If Russia continues such provocative policies, it will risk increasing American suspicion of its motives, though U.S. rhetoric is still in a forgiving mode.(3)

Nevertheless, that impending retribution has not deterred Moscow from its chosen course. Russia is too proud and too powerful to feel that it needs American absolution for following its own interests. And more importantly, such great power rhetoric is a weapon used by the military-foreign policy elites in Russia to mobilize popular support, assert their institutional interests, and gain economic assets.

But Russia is not the great power that the USSR once was. It is only a portion of the Former Soviet Union (FSU), an area

which can accurately be described as a potentially volatile set of regions threatened by Islamic insurgency and externally backed subversive movements. The course and outcome of the Iraq war and subsequent reconstruction may have as one result an intensification of a U.S.-Russia struggle for influence over the military, political, and economic destiny of the Transcaucasus and Central Asia.(4)

At the same time, a protracted U.S. presence in Iraq could obligate the United States to prolong its deployments in the FSU. And if this occupation is contested by an insurgency in the country that could certainly inspire "copycat" rebellions in Central Asia or the Caucasus. Undoubtedly, if such efforts were to succeed they would have seriously destabilizing effects, not only in the Middle East, but also in the FSU. Thus, we can conclude that while the war against Iraq did not directly enhance the security of Georgia, Azerbaijan, or Central Asia, the war did not allow the United States to remove forces from those states either.

Moscow's heavy-handed efforts to coerce Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to grant it additional basing rights implies a bid to return these countries to Russian hegemony. This, in turn, presses the United

States to maintain a direct role there to counter this effort.(5) Such an American presence is also encouraged by concern over the rising incidences of violence in Afghanistan and a possible attempt by the terrorist groups to create "second fronts" to the U.S. presence in Iraq.(6) There is also concern that such groups may find external safe havens, as happened with the Afghan government's assistance to insurgent groups in Central Asia and the Caucasus such as the Chechens, the Islamic Movement for Uzbekistan (IMU), and al-Qa'ida. Many charge that Pakistani elements are still sheltering terrorists, possibly even bin Laden himself.(7)

However, Pakistan is not alone. There is much evidence suggesting an intelligence relationship between Russia and the IMU which habitually attacked Uzbekistan, Moscow's rival in Central Asia, from its protectorate of Tajikistan. It has also been reported that Russian troops repeatedly escorted the group's members across the border.(8) Although this Russian-IMU relationship cannot be conclusively proven, there is decisive evidence of earlier Russian support for insurgency in Georgia and Azerbaijan, and for assassination plots against the leaders of those two states.

It is also quite plausible that Russia's SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service) helped facilitate the attempted coup against Sapirmurad Niyazov, the quasi-Stalinist ruler of Turkmenistan in November 2002.(9) In that case, Moscow was seeking to intensify pressure on Turkmenistan to conform its exports of natural gas to Russian preferences in order for Moscow to realize its goal of a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) gas cartel under its leadership.(10)

Nor do the challenges to the region's security end with efforts at foreign subversion. The organizations that have grown up under al-Qa'ida, Taliban, or Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) sponsorship are clearly willing and able to

carry out international operations from bases in the FSU. Therefore, the war against Iraq will not end the war against global terrorism that emanates partly from Central Asia and has some presence in the Caucasus including both Chechnya and Georgia. The recent discovery of ricin in Georgia underscores the potential for very serious threats in this part of the world.(11) In the final analysis, if either Central Asia or Afghanistan remain insecure, then the other one will remain insecure as well.(12)

There is already abundant evidence that Iran is making serious efforts to instigate a Shi'a movement and takeover of Iraq based on pro-Iranian parties under its influence, if not control.(13)

Indeed, the growing likelihood that the United States will retain bases for air and ground forces in Iraq is likely to bring about an enhancement of local and regional American military capabilities which could project power into the FSU, if not an increase in actual deployments there.(14) Although the Bush administration has strongly denied it is seeking air bases in Iraq, the British are apparently already building one at Basra and there is strong pressure for such bases throughout the U.S. military-political community.(15)

Certainly, one purpose of these bases is to augment America's capabilities for projecting, sustaining, and maintaining force deployments throughout the southern FSU and to reinforce them from Iraq or vice-versa.(16) Russia is campaigning against any increase of U.S. influence in this region by pressuring the states there, even to the possible point of instigating domestic instability. Its economic policy, as the new gas deal with Turkmenistan suggests, seeks very one-sided gains with these weaker countries.(17) Moscow is continuing to seek the creation of an essentially closed economic bloc in the FSU. In its 1999 official submission to the EU of its strategy for relations with that

organization, the Russian government stated:

As a world power situated on two continents, Russia should retain its freedom to determine and implement its foreign and domestic policies, its status and advantages of a Euro-Asian state and largest country of the CIS. The development of partnership with the EU should contribute to consolidating Russia's role as the leading power in shaping a new system of interstate political and economic relations in the CIS area...[Russia] would oppose any attempts to hamper economic integration in the CIS [by the EU], including through 'special relations' with individual CIS member states to the detriment of Russia's interests.(18)

The victory in Iraq did not alter U.S. needs to maintain commitments in Afghanistan or a presence in several FSU states. The current strategic challenges to U.S. interests in the region include the following considerations:

--The war against global terrorism is by no means over. The Taliban appears to be reconstituting itself. Attacks against U.S. forces and the government in Afghanistan are rising and there are clear signs that the opposition in Pakistan supports these attacks and is sheltering bin Ladin.(19) With Afghanistan lacking stability, and warlordism and terrorist penetration reviving, it appears unlikely that America or NATO will be able to withdraw forces from there anytime soon. Without stability in Afghanistan, Central Asia comes under immediate threat.

--The "non-terrorist" or indigenous threats to the security of states in the former Soviet Union have not been lessened by the war in Iraq. If anything,

should an uprising against the American occupation occur that employs forms of unconventional warfare, this could lead to more threats against American and allied forces in the FSU and Afghanistan.

--There are numerous structural factors which could be exploited to attack U.S. forces, assets, allies, and interests. They include: insecure borders; ethnic, religious, and territorial conflicts; local authoritarian regimes that easily manipulate these conflicts; massive poverty alongside spiraling wealth for a few; massive official corruption; powerful transnational criminal organizations; weak militaries and crime enforcement agencies; and high degrees of environmental degradation leading to rivalries over water and energy.

--Moscow has long argued that the United States can only stay in its bases for the duration of the war against terrorism in Afghanistan. This opposition to the U.S. presence in territory Moscow regards as vital to its interests has been a constant feature of Russian policy since the inception of cooperation with the United States. Moreover, China and Iran have also both frequently voiced opposition to the U.S. position in Central Asia and are cooperating with each other against U.S. interests there.(20) Russia's recent efforts to intensify its military presence in Central Asia and military ties to those states in a more formalized alliance bespeak its growing apprehension concerning American power in general and its presence in the FSU in particular.(21)

Consequently, a protracted presence in Iraq or in Central Asia could lead to strong strategic ties among Russia, Iran and China or between the Middle East and Central Asia with the aim of forcing the United States out of the area. Iran and Russia are clearly unhappy about the U.S. presence in Iraq, and China has hardly been enthusiastic. Admittedly, this is something of a worst-case scenario, but even acting on their own, any of these countries could

undertake actions that would greatly complicate and endanger U.S. security in the Middle East, as Iran did in Lebanon in 1983. Another possibility would be to furnish support, either overt or covert, for attacks upon the U.S. positions in Central Asia.

U.S. naval forces are in Azerbaijan and ground forces are in Georgia precisely to ward off pre-existing threats. U.S. naval forces in Azerbaijan are meant to deter Iranian threats against Azeri oil and Russian threats to Azerbaijan's coastal assets, while U.S. forces in Georgia are there to help defeat the menace of terrorists in Georgia. In both cases, the U.S. presence is also designed to help train and modernize those states' armies and navies.

The external rivalries in the CIS and around Central Asia are so intense that in some cases they have already spawned classical alliances for war. For example, India and Iran have recently formed an alliance that gives India "the right to use Iranian military bases in the event of a war with neighboring Pakistan, in exchange for India providing Tehran with military hardware, training, maintenance and modernization support."(22)

On the other hand, there are also possibilities for leadership and cooperative relations with other actors who in Central Asia, especially as expressed at the November 2002 Prague summit. Those regions are no longer "out of area," and both NATO and Central Asian states are seeking deeper and broader contacts among their respective armed forces.(23) Furthermore, Russia has already accepted the potential benefit of this presence for the moment and raised the possibility of cooperation with NATO in Central Asia. As Russian President Putin stated in May 2002 at the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO, comprised of Russia and Central Asian States):

We said at our private discussions today that issues of a military-political nature are also more and

more frequently on the agenda within the framework of our organization. The same goes for political issues. It means that we are ready for and open to cooperation with our partners in other similar organizations. It means that the Collective Security Treaty [signed at this meeting-author] could be an element in the forming of new security systems in the world, including in contact with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.(24)

Russia's military has been resisting this cooperation and potential complications arising from the U.S. presence in Iraq would fortify their opposition and the force of their argument within Russian policymaking circles. The military, having been chastised by Putin for its misguided analyses and doubting the speed and ease of U.S. victory in Iraq, is seeking to regain ground.(25) Consequently, and in the absence of American payoffs to Russia to support the war against Iraq, they have persuaded Putin to push strongly to unify Central Asian militaries under Russian sovereignty and defense policies to Russia's policy.(26) Russian officials make no effort to conceal their opposition to any sign of them pursuing an independent military policy.(27) Should the military prevail in this policy debate, agreements on cooperation regarding regional conflicts that were an important element of the U.S.-Russian partnership will in effect be voided.(28)

China, too, has been alarmed at NATO's rising profile in Central Asia, a factor in its decision to initiate regular consultations with that organization in 2002.(29) Yet the Chinese government opposes the U.S. military presence in Central Asia, which it regards as a threat to its increasingly important interests there.(30)

Rising Russian and Chinese suspicions and moves toward more antagonistic stances vis-à-vis the United States does not bode well for regional cooperation. For instance, even while discussing partnership on regional security issues with Washington, Putin and the Russian military were striving to create a CIS military alliance modeled after the USSR's relationship with its Eastern European satellites.(31) Such an organization would preclude effective Western bilateral or multilateral cooperation with the armed forces of member states.(32) By such measures Russia is trying to reduce the use of U.S. troops to train local forces in these countries, one of the main purposes of a U.S. military presence in the area.(33) In several cases, the United States troops have been

While CIS states are generally not known for strong tendencies toward the extreme anti-Americanism based on Islamist appeals (with the exception of Chechnya) seen in Afghanistan or Arab countries, such forces do exist and are connected to al-Qa'ida or state sponsors--Chechens to Saudi Arabia, and Hizballah and other groups to Iran. There are probably rogue elements within Pakistan who can provide significant assistance to them as well. The Taliban is launching regular attacks on U.S. forces and enjoy substantial protection from regional elements of Pakistan's government, especially in the Northwest Frontier Province.(35) Under such circumstances, forces now stationed in the FSU could become targets for attack that would jeopardize the logistical bases and chains of U.S. and allied forces there.

Those types of attacks could also distance local states from supporting America, sway public opinion and create a situation requiring more U.S. troops in Central Asia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the Transcaucasus to secure airbases or port facilities and perhaps to protect friendly regimes. This, in turn, though, would create

more pressure on the host governments to remove the forces.

One positive note is a lowering of oil and gas prices following the war. Despite being major producers of these commodities, many Central Asian states can neither produce nor distribute enough to meet their own needs and are thus importers whose fragile economies suffer when prices rise.

Aside from the direct security of U.S. forces and the struggle for influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia, a number of other post-Saddam issues will affect U.S.-Russian relations. One of them is the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to regional states, especially Iran, the United States has been increasingly frustrated with Russia's refusal to cease proliferation to Iran.(36) Another is potential Russian opposition to other U.S. actions in the region. After all, if Putin called the war in Iraq the greatest crisis of the post-Cold War world and a colonial war, what might he do in future crises?(37) Moscow has tried to build up the UN's power both to project its own influence and to constrain U.S. actions.(38)

While much of the bilateral problems stem from differing interests, Moscow can also credibly claim that it has not been sufficiently consulted by Washington. To Moscow's chagrin, the United States disregarded messages that Russia could be induced to support this war or be neutral if it was duly compensated for doing so.(39) Failure to work out some arrangement guaranteed strong public Russian opposition, which might have been avoided.

Russia's principal interests, which will factor into its own policy and bilateral relations with the United States, are:

--Russia wants a partnership with the United States involving regular joint consultation, compromises that meet both sides' interests, and an avoidance of situations where Russia is called on to

surrender to Washington's demands.(40) It wants mechanisms to ensure the United States does not disregard its preferences and interests. As two analysts, Angela Stent and Lilia Shevtsova, put it, this would require that the United States, "Put aside its principle of ad hoc coalitions and adopt a policy of long-term, active engagement with Russia based on the premise that Russia should be a part of what Russians call 'Western Civilization.'"(41)

--A major way to achieve this goal, Russia perceives, is that the UN should be the arbiter of any use of force by the United States. The exclusive right of the UN to authorize the use of legitimate force (other than in self-defense or in internal matters like Chechnya) has been elevated to a central principle of Russian foreign policy.(42) This was seen in Russia's policy on the Iraq issue.(43)

--An important though less significant issue is Russia's hope to return to a major role in the Middle East. This is no mere matter of prestige but also involves profitable arms sales, oil contracts, and even money-making deals to export WMD supplies. Russia looks especially to Iran and Syria to buy its weapons and to Iraq for opportunities in the oilfields.

--Moscow also considers Iran an ally. Russia fears increasing pressure from the United States on Tehran directly or on the Russians to reduce their relations with Iran. U.S. criticism of Iran due to concerns over WMD proliferation (with equipment largely purchased from Russia), its involvement with terrorism, and its interference to destabilize Iran has deeply concerned Russia.(44)

--Russian interests in Iraq include future access to the Iraqi energy market (including receiving new Iraqi contracts for developing fields) and repayment of old Iraqi debts.

Russia has striven to work as America's strategic partner since September 11, 2001. This has never meant total acquiescence to

U.S. policies but does mean expanded American military access to the FSU and Afghanistan, intelligence-sharing, and reduced Russian opposition to NATO's expansion and to withdrawal from the ABM treaty. Russia's military and foreign policy elites do not like any of these provisions and have constantly sought to erode, undermine, limit, and obstruct them. For his part, Putin has to mediate between such pressure and his hope that cooperation will force the United States to acknowledge and accept the legitimacy of Russian international security interests.

In Russia's view, this partnership also means there will be no use of U.S. forces (other than self-defense, as after September 11, 2001) outside of UN-approved ventures. Russia was so eager to avoid a war in Iraq that, according to the Russian General Staff, it was trying to organize a military coup against Saddam to avert a war and thus exclude the United States from Iraq.(45) The war created enormous Russian political opposition (not unlike the U.S.-led NATO operation in Kosovo) that put considerable strain on the partnership with Moscow. Despite the war's brevity, the resentment generated over the many months preceding the conflict will not fade quickly.

If that Russian opposition translates into opposition to a U.S. presence in Central Asia and the Transcaucasus, it could lead to an upsurge of gun-running and intelligence cooperation with various anti-American forces in the area, even including some of the anti-regime elements in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Certainly, in the past, Russian intelligence agencies have had some rather interesting relationships with many of these groups.(46)

Russia's economic interests point in many directions simultaneously. Virtually all its official pronouncements state that the purpose of foreign policy is to create conditions auspicious for the reconstruction of Russia's economy.(47) Moreover, the

oil and gas sector is the crucial sector of Russia's economy, providing almost 40 percent of Russia's hard-currency earnings and the basis of its foreign trade surplus. This makes members of the energy lobby, who do not always have uniform interests, the most powerful, important lobby in Russian politics. Regarding Iraq, Moscow wants to recover the \$7 billion owed to it by Baghdad and it often claims to have actually lost \$30 billion since 1990. But, equally importantly, its oil firms see the potential to earn billions more in revenues if they can work in unhampered fashion in Iraq.(48)

Russian observers understand that, despite the lucrative profits Russian firms have made by circumventing the UN embargoes, in a post-Saddam Iraq, that debt is probably unrecoverable. At the same time, Moscow and its oilmen fully grasp that Washington will now have leverage over the reconstruction of the Iraqi energy industry and thus a major card to play in determining global output and price levels. With this new-found leverage on Russia's energy-producing sector, the United States may force Russia to reduce future opposition to its policies.

On the other hand, the United States could offer Moscow more access to American or Western markets or financing for the reconstruction of the Russian energy infrastructure, thus ensuring that Russia's energy receipts (and correspondingly its entire economy) are not too adversely affected by this downward pressure on prices. The United States would also then be able to encourage and regulate the degree to which Russian oil firms participate in Iraq's reconstruction and perhaps devise creative ways for Moscow to recover the Iraqi debts.

In the past, the United States tried to coerce Russian firms to support the dissidents in Iraq if they wanted to recover those debts and presumably enjoy good relations with America.(49) This

temporarily cost these firms access in Saddam's Iraq.(50) Because this was a short, victorious, and purely conventional war, the political heat on the United States and its supporters dissipated relatively quickly. As a result, these industries will likely lobby the United States to be allowed in on postwar reconstruction contracts, recovery of debts, new markets to the West (including the United States), and investment in their infrastructure.

Should there develop a long drawn-out struggle over reconstruction with rising civil violence, especially one that generates intense hostility in Europe, Russia, and in Islamic communities, this could affect the economics of the situation. It would raise the costs of reconstructing Iraq afterward, thereby delaying its return to the market, possibly creating shortages or sharp price rises. While this could be very good for Russian suppliers, and hence the country's exports, it would also raise domestic prices, creating immense pressures upon the government in Moscow to oppose Washington regardless of the energy lobby's interests. Of course, should the local Russian economy be harmed, the foreign and defense policy elites who are strongly anti-American would be strengthened.

Clearly a successful and relatively rapid reconstruction of Iraq's state and economy will allow Washington to minimize the risks and costs associated with the possible rise of a "second front" of terrorist attacks on American or allied assets, forces, or interests. The same may hold true for limiting the damage to what remains of the U.S.-Russian partnership, which suffered terribly due to the war in Iraq. While Washington probably could not have escaped some of these risks and diplomatic tensions, its quick victory will reduce their cost and allow it to maintain other troop deployments in the FSU at current levels.

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The views expressed here do not represent those of the U.S. Army, Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

NOTES

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