

RUSSIA IN CHECHNYA AND SYRIA: PURSUIT OF STRATEGIC GOALS

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In recent months, as Russia has stepped up its involvement in the Syrian civil war, there has been a flurry of analysis by Western observers of Moscow's possible objectives. On a spectrum of interpretations concerning Russian actions are claims that the Kremlin's main concern is ensuring the survival of the Assad regime. Others assume broader strategic foreign-policy goals, including no less than a "grand bargain" with the West over the Ukraine crisis and Moscow's re-admission into the club of Western nations.¹

In light of the limited transparency of Russian strategic thinking, this paper suggests that useful insights can be drawn from historical comparison. The Kremlin has justified its involvement in Syria using a reductionist counterterrorist narrative. It has described the Islamic State (IS) as a new fascist-type evil threatening the civilized world and has imposed an overarching counterterrorist framework on the Syrian conflict, essentially reducing it to an "IS vs. Assad" struggle. Such a discursive strategy is not new. Following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11), the Kremlin conflated the threat emanating from Chechnya at the time with a transnational Islamist terrorist threat. In both the

Chechen and Syrian conflicts, Moscow's counterterrorist argument has thus consisted of two parts:

1. Since the terrorist threat Russia faces is *civilizational*, other concerns (such as political negotiations to solve the conflict) are secondary.
2. Any distinction between "good" and "bad" opponents in the conflict is to be rejected.

Certainly, within the broad contours of this strategy, there are important contrasts between the post-9/11 context and the current one. Chechnya and Syria represent very different situations for Russia. At the time of the Second Chechen War, Chechen separatism and terrorist attacks threatened Russia internally; they were perceived by the government as a possible catalyst of spillover to other Russian regions, leading to disorder and state collapse. In a series of interviews in 2000 for an authorized biography, President Vladimir Putin declared,

The essence of the ... situation in the North Caucasus and in Chechnya ... is the continuation of the collapse of the USSR.... If we did not quickly

do something to stop it, Russia as a state in its current form would cease to exist.... I was convinced that if we did not immediately stop the extremists [in Chechnya], then in no time at all we would be facing a second Yugoslavia across the entire territory of the Russian Federation — the Yugoslavization of Russia.²

Russia, today, equally fears regional spillover from civil war in Syria, especially the infiltration of radical Islamist extremists into Central Asia and Russia proper. However, Russia is still an external player in the Syrian war and does not perceive its development as a potential threat to the very integrity of the state.

Since both the Chechen and Syrian wars have raised the spectre of state disintegration, scholars have rightly highlighted the structural similarity between the Russian government's position regarding Chechnya 15 years ago and the Syrian regime's position regarding the Syrian opposition today.³ Yet, important insights can be drawn from a different comparison: that between Russia's discourses on its "wars on terror" in Chechnya and Syria and its expectations of generating rewards for these wars from the United States.

RUSSIA'S CHECHNYA DISCOURSE

Since late 1999, Russia had been embroiled in its second war in Chechnya. Unlike the first,⁴ the second war was framed exclusively as a terrorist threat — and one with international dimensions. Putin elaborated his views in an interview in July 2000: "Today we are witnessing the creation of an extremist international along the so-called arc of instability stretching from the Philippines to Kosovo."⁵ Throughout 2000, he pushed the idea of a concerted campaign against international terrorism,

also to be found in Chechnya, with international partners.⁶ Nevertheless, by the spring of 2001, the conflict in Chechnya, so important to Putin's rise to power in 1999, had lost domestic popularity and generated heightened international criticism.⁷

Following 9/11, the George W. Bush administration's proclamation of a Global War on Terror (GWOT) against transnational Islamist terrorism created an opportunity for Putin to change the international perceptions of Russia's war in Chechnya. The Kremlin claimed the terrorist threat emanating from that North Caucasus republic was as universal in nature as the al-Qaeda threat and exaggerated the direct links between the two. Putin's immediate expression of empathy with the American people ensured that the "atmospherics of Moscow's interactions with Washington would be overwhelmingly positive."⁸ On September 11 itself, he called his counterpart Bush and later stated to the press, "The event that occurred in the United States today ... is a brazen challenge to the whole of humanity, at least to *civilized* humanity."⁹ In the weeks after 9/11, the Kremlin would explain its support for the American-led antiterrorist coalition by reiterating that Russia, too, had been a victim of terrorism and specifically drawing parallels to the September 1999 bombings.¹⁰ Russian backing for the military campaign in Afghanistan, Moscow would argue, should therefore be seen as fully consistent with previous and ongoing attempts to contain the rise of Islamic extremism in Afghanistan and Central Asia and its spillover into Russia's Muslim regions, especially Chechnya.

Russia's discourse on Chechnya — with its repeated emphasis on an alleged transnational dimension of the terrorist threat that made the war against terror a

shared Russian-American endeavor — can be traced through scores of government statements, interviews and press releases.¹¹ Appearing in Yerevan two days after 9/11, Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov expressed the hope that “the world will now understand what Russia has been up against in Chechnya,” while Prosecutor General Vladimir Ustinov announced that his office possessed materials linking Chechens and Osama bin

Laden.¹² On September 18, in a speech at the Nixon Center, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov called for the

creation of a global system for countering terrorism, arguing that the United States and Russia “are now united into a single front.”¹³ President Putin himself argued in his address to the Russian nation on September 24, “Chechen developments ought not to be regarded outside the context of efforts against international terrorism.”¹⁴ Sergei Ivanov noted on the same day, in a meeting with Condoleezza Rice, that “Chechnya and Afghanistan are branches of the same tree.”¹⁵

Over subsequent months, the Kremlin would ensure that the connection between Chechnya and the GWOT featured prominently in the Bush administration’s thinking as its strategy for fighting that war took shape. Following the invasion of Afghanistan, the Kremlin held weekly press conferences to support claims that Chechens had links to the Taliban and provided the largest contingent of al-Qaeda’s foreign legion in Afghanistan.¹⁶ Such propaganda heavily influenced American media coverage at the time, causing “a veritable

Chechen rumor industry” to emerge.¹⁷ Admittedly, Russia’s use of the al-Qaeda-Chechen nexus, as instrumental as it might have been, partly reflected an existing reality. There were indeed attempts by individual radical Islamist opponents of moderate Chechen leader Aslan Mashkadov to forge links with the Taliban.¹⁸ Moreover, during the Second Chechen War, Mashkadov “buried the hatchet” with some of the Arab

jihadi fighters who were attempting to spread their Wahhabi brand of Islam in Sufi-oriented Chechnya in

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order to more successfully confront their mutual Russian enemy. Other developments at the time that might have helped consolidate perceptions of linkage between Chechen fighters and Islamist terrorist cells elsewhere were the efforts of the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) to undermine the regime of President Karimov.¹⁹ In short, by the time of the second war, Chechen nationalism had become harder to differentiate from Chechen Islamic extremism. Russia’s discourse on fighting a “war on terror” in Chechnya was not purely propaganda, but links between Chechen fighters and al-Qaeda were nonetheless opportunistically played up by the government. The Kremlin’s discourse must be judged a bit illogical, especially considering that it had historically been so adamant in proclaiming Chechnya an “internal affair.”²⁰ Putin skillfully seized the opportunity following 9/11 to distort discussions on Russia’s problems in the North Caucasus by overemphasizing its transnational terrorist dimension.

Moreover, Russia argued that there can be no distinction between “good” and “bad” terror, between what were allegedly “freedom fighters” and “real” extremists.²¹ Russian official discourse likened the entire Chechen population to combatants and all combatants to potential terrorists, absolving Moscow of its obligation to protect them during its military operations.²²

IS VS. ASSAD

Russia’s recent threat discourse on Syria, like its narrative on Chechnya, has exhibited moralizing overtones. Indeed, President Putin has appeared eager to present himself as leading a George W. Bush-style “war on terror”²³ in Syria. Russia claims that its actions are aimed at supporting the regime of Bashar al-Assad, who represents both the only legitimate and the most effective force to fight the terrorist threat presented by IS. That threat, according to Moscow, is not confined to the Middle East, but endangers Russia and the entire civilized world,²⁴ as did previous totalitarian ideologies like Nazism. Indeed, the IS-fascism analogy has formed a distinct layer in Russia’s threat discourse. Recently, anchorman Dmitry Kiselyov claimed the IS-Nazi comparison offered a “very precise” rationale for the Russian bombing of Syria: “What this means is that Russia is saving Europe from enslavement and barbarism for the fourth time. Let’s count! The Mongols, Napoleon, Hitler and now ISIS.²⁵” In September, Russian Federation Council Chair Valentina Matviyenko had equally branded IS a “new format of fascism” during a press conference in St. Petersburg: “As a result we received a terrible threat not only in the Middle East Region; we received a terrible threat to the world as a whole.”²⁶

The civilizational-threat argument was

featured not only in the Russian media, but also in the discourses of the Foreign Ministry and the Kremlin. President Putin himself, in his much-anticipated September 2015 speech to the UN General Assembly, proposed an “anti-Hitler”-type coalition to fight IS.²⁷ The Russian Orthodox Church has backed Russian airstrikes on Syria, supporting the government’s threat narrative by emphasizing that terrorism is the most significant threat humanity is currently facing and that a fight against terrorism can even be called a holy fight.²⁸ In this context, it should be noted that some have accused Russia of pursuing a religious, sectarian war, interfering in intra-Muslim affairs on the Shiite side.²⁹ However, Moscow has forcefully argued against such claims, presenting its actions over Syria as aimed at restoring intra-Muslim unity³⁰ and downplaying differences between its own approach and that of its main critic, Saudi Arabia.³¹

Furthermore, as was the case with Chechnya, Russia has rejected any distinction between good and bad opponents. The conflation of different opposition groups with extremist Islamist militias fighting inside Syria has been key to the Kremlin’s narrative. Russia has stated frequently that there are no “moderate” rebels in Syria to support³² and that members of the Free Syrian Army are “hard to find,”³³ though it more recently appears to have entered into a dialogue with some representatives of the latter.³⁴

As in the Chechen case, such discourse has allowed Moscow to impose one overarching frame of reference (counter-terrorism) onto the entire conflict. The reductionist tale of a grand ideological struggle between the civilized and the non-civilized, the terrorized and the terrorists, Assad and IS, diverts attention from

the root causes of the Syrian civil war, its complexity and the necessity of a comprehensive political approach to ending it. Following 9/11, Russia's Chechnya discourse attempted to do exactly the same.

It is also notable that invocations of the fascist menace formed an integral part of Russia's threat narrative during its involvement in Eastern Ukraine last year, when the Kremlin argued that ethnic Russians were under threat from "neo-Nazis and anti-Semites."³⁵ However, there seems to be limited evidence of a direct and concerted attempt by Russian authorities to discursively link the purported fascist threat emanating from Ukraine and IS into a single narrative. Such linkages are largely made by the ultra-nationalist fringe.³⁶

MOSCOW'S INTERESTS AFTER 9/11

Following September 11, Putin raised the threat emanating from Chechnya to a higher order, linking it to the U.S. Global War on Terror to deflect criticism of Russia's fierce domestic counterterrorism struggle. However, Russia pursued broader strategic objectives in the U.S.-Russian relationship. Its narrow concerns included international criticism on Chechnya, U.S. support for counterterrorism, and the removal of the Taliban from Afghanistan. Its strategic goal was recognition of its "great power" status, with implications for Russian policy autonomy in its near-abroad and at home. In order to ascertain Russian strategic goals behind its "war on terror" rhetoric and mitigate the difficulty in distinguishing between "real interests" and mere propaganda in political discourse, I conducted interviews (not for attribution) with more than 15 U.S. officials in the first George W. Bush administration who were formulating policy towards Russia/Eurasia at the time of the Second Chechen War, as

well as with some Russian diplomats active at the time.

Narrow Interests: "The World Will Now Understand..."

Prior to 9/11, there was much international criticism of Russia's conduct in the Second Chechen War. Take, for instance, the outrage over the siege of Grozny by Russian forces in late 1999. At the time, President Clinton warned that "Russia's fight against terrorism is right, but the methods being used in Chechnya are wrong."³⁷ There was strong international condemnation on a number of occasions during the assault on Grozny, such as after the attack on its Central Market in October 1999, which left scores dead,³⁸ or in December when Russia issued an ultimatum to civilians to leave the city or be considered enemy targets.³⁹

Rather than constituting mere propaganda, Russia's counterterrorist discourse on Chechnya linking Russia's own efforts to the Global War on Terror was thus intended to justify Moscow's actions. There was also a hope for increased counterterrorism cooperation with the United States. The Kremlin welcomed Western support in finding and freezing the funds of pro-Chechen groups abroad, closing their information centers and extraditing Chechen warlords and Arab mercenaries who found refuge abroad.⁴⁰ There was an expectation of military cooperation and intelligence sharing, too, with potential rewards for both sides. Whereas certain Russian "capabilities could powerfully complement U.S. intelligence resources,... for its part, Russia would likely welcome access to selected American satellite imagery and signals intelligence."⁴¹

Finally, reduced criticism of Russia's war in Chechnya and greater U.S.

counterterrorism assistance aside, Russia welcomed U.S. military action against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Acquiescing to U.S. demands for Russian assistance on Operation Enduring Freedom, Putin “used the U.S. military to destroy the Taliban regime without having to burden Russia with the long-term cost of Afghan reconstruction and nation-building that would certainly ensue.”⁴² Throughout the 1990s, Russia had viewed the Taliban as a threat, yet a proposal to cooperate against them had been rejected by the Clinton administration. Following 9/11, Putin hoped to meet a significant security objective that Russia had been unable to achieve alone.⁴³

Broader Strategic Interests: Russia as the Natural Analogue to the United States

Leaving these domestic and regional counterterrorism concerns aside, Russia likely attached additional strategic objectives to its threat discourse. These objectives might not have been clearly articulated in official speeches, yet they transpired in the broader strategic dialogue between the two countries at the time and were mentioned repeatedly by the officials I interviewed.

Putin and Bush had left their first encounter in Slovenia in June 2001 with the impression that better relations between Russia and the United States could be achieved. The success of their meeting came as somewhat of a surprise, given that the group of foreign-policy officials advising Governor Bush during the presidential campaign — the “Vulcans” — had argued that Russia should be treated as simply one among other great powers, meriting neither constant high-level attention nor special status.⁴⁴ The Vulcans had intended a reorientation of America’s Russia policy, claiming that President Clinton had wasted too

many efforts on the Russia agenda.⁴⁵ After the June 2001 Slovenia Summit, however, Bush famously recalled that he “looked the man [Putin] in the eye ... and was able to get a sense of his soul.”⁴⁶ Optimism among U.S. policy makers for greater cooperation with Russia thus predated 9/11 and then intensified afterwards. American officials felt there was a serious possibility that Russia could become a more constructive partner and believed that counterterrorism could be a catalyst for further rapprochement.

Rhetorically (and militarily) joining the Global War on Terror in this environment, Moscow hoped for amicable relations between two “great powers.” This meant that the United States was to respect Russian influence over its near abroad and to no longer criticize its domestic human-rights record. The Kremlin hoped its GWOT partnership would ensure that whatever changes NATO went through, Russia would become more attached to its political structures.⁴⁷ Some also contend that Moscow believed it “could join the West and still preserve its traditional personalized regime with one-man rule and a lack of independent institutions.”⁴⁸ Increased Western support for Russia’s economic reform⁴⁹ and its campaign to join the WTO⁵⁰ might also have been expected.

MOSCOW’S OBJECTIVES IN SYRIA

As noted, in its current Syrian involvement, Russia’s threat narrative has assumed a civilizational character (“fascist threat”) and entails the conflation of different opposition groups with extremist Islamist forces (“there is no moderate opposition”). Moscow’s more immediate objectives in this context are to keep Assad in power and weaken IS, as well as divert attention from the war in Ukraine. Some Western experts speculate that a broader

strategic ambition might amount to changing the bilateral dialogue with the United States over Ukraine as well as over Russia's position within the international community more generally.

Narrow Interests: Assad Must Stay

Unlike its Chechnya narrative, Russia's current discourse is not aimed at deflecting criticism of domestic counterterrorism. Instead, the goal is to justify support for Bashar al-Assad and ensure the survival of his regime and, by extension, Russian security and economic interests in Syria.⁵¹

Even though the Syrian operation is officially branded as an anti-terrorist one, evidence on the targets

of Russian airstrikes leaves little doubt that the main driver is to support the Syrian armed forces.⁵² Only following the crash of a Russian passenger jet over the Sinai peninsula in October 2015 and terrorist attacks in Paris one month later — both of which IS claimed to have committed — did Russia step up its airstrikes on IS-controlled areas in Syria.

What explains this support for the Assad regime? Scholars have noted that, since the beginning of the Syrian uprising, considerations of domestic political order play an important role in Moscow's calculations, rather than any concern with Assad's personal fate. Not only is the nexus between the disintegration of Syria and the likely resulting regional "spillover" a cause of concern. More important, Moscow

rejects calls for Assad's departure as yet another case of the Western community imposing standards of political legitimacy on a sovereign state to enforce regime change, with possible implications for Russia or other authoritarian members of the Commonwealth of Independent States.⁵³ According to this logic, an uncompromising stance in relation to the Syrian crisis has also been politically necessary for the consolidation of Putin's domestic support.⁵⁴ How does Russia's reductionist counter-terrorist discourse facilitate Moscow's

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objective? By tarnishing all opponent groups in Syria with essentially the same "IS-terrorist brush," Russia can, first, justify any support for the regime

as moral and, second, fall back on the argument that there is no moderate opposition to work with.

Certainly, the Kremlin also hopes to weaken the Islamic State. Russia has long been concerned with the threat radical Islamism poses domestically. According to official statistics, around 2,700 citizens of the Russian Federation have joined IS.⁵⁵ Some Russian experts, like Alexej Grishin, warn of much higher numbers, alleging that up to one million Russian Muslims are ready to support IS.⁵⁶ Cases of students, like Barbara Karaulova, leaving Russia to join the ranks of extremists elicited an enormous amount of media attention inside Russia,⁵⁷ though experts warned not to exaggerate the significance of the incident.⁵⁸ Since the Kremlin is concerned

with pre-empting radicalized Islamists from returning to the North Caucasus and other Muslim regions of Russia, where they could generate greater unrest and even pose a terrorist threat, Russia's Syria strategy should thus also be understood as "fight them there, not here."⁵⁹ Putin himself expressed this idea rather crudely in his General Assembly remarks on IS: "Now that those thugs have tasted blood, we can't allow them to return home and continue with their criminal activities. Nobody wants that, right?"⁶⁰

If we are to fully assess Russian objectives tied to its counterterrorist narrative on Syria, we should also note that the recent enormous media focus on IS has diverted attention from the Ukrainian war theater, where Russia's involvement made it a pariah in the eyes of many in the international community.⁶¹ Experts have claimed that Russia can now use the uproar generated by its escalation in Syria to camouflage what is happening in Ukraine⁶² (though such allegations have been termed absurd by Foreign Minister Lavrov⁶³). Considering the domestic dimensions of Russia's discourse, pivoting to Syria has thus given the Kremlin a new basis for patriotic mobilization: "Rather than fighting fascists in Kiev, Russians are now told that they must make sacrifices in order to fight terrorists in Syria."⁶⁴ Indeed, the shift in Russian state media coverage from Ukraine to the Syrian conflict has been significant. Also, observers have drawn attention to the fact that Russia's conflict with Ukraine was not mentioned in Putin's yearly State of the Nation address in early December 2015.⁶⁵

Broader Strategic Interests: "Thaw" or Even "Grand Bargain"?

As was the case in a post-9/11 context, it is entirely conceivable that Russia

today pursues broader strategic objectives. Some experts suggest that, at a minimum, Moscow hopes to shift the dialogue over the Ukraine crisis and Western sanctions by changing facts on the ground in Syria.⁶⁶ According to this logic, if Russia successfully turns the war tide against IS through its support for Assad, this would lead the West to gradually let the sanctions against Moscow lapse. A thaw in U.S.-Russian relations could ensue. Others make more ambitious claims, arguing that the Kremlin seeks no less than a grand bargain with the West. Carrying the banner in the fight against IS, Russia will in return ask for a seat at the table in talks on a new security architecture that would reduce NATO's clout, leave Ukraine neutral and give Russia a prominent place.⁶⁷ Such reasoning assumes that the real goal of Moscow's counterterrorist narrative — as was the case after 9/11 — is to force America to recognize Russia as an equal partner.

As noted, much of the present expert debate focuses on ascertaining which of the above objectives are paramount for Russia. However, it is a somewhat fruitless intellectual exercise to second-guess the precise value of different goals in the minds of those making Moscow's Syria policy. What we can do, however, is formulate plausible expectations regarding whether the Kremlin's presumed objectives can in fact be met, by looking at the results Russia's counterterrorist narrative yielded after 9/11.

POST-9/11 BALANCE SHEET Narrow Interests: Washington Softened Its Rhetoric on Chechnya, but...

Whereas the United States had repeatedly criticized Russian conduct in Chechnya before 9/11 and had been especially wary of perceived Russian attempts to use

the threat of radicals in Afghanistan as a pretext for extending its influence into Central Asia,⁶⁸ attitudes softened after the attacks. At a briefing on September 26, 2001, White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer announced: “Chechnya’s leadership, like all responsible political leaders in the world, must immediately and unconditionally cut all contacts with international terrorist groups, such as Osama bin Laden and the Al Qaeda organization.”⁶⁹ A few months later, Colin Powell proclaimed, “Russia is fighting terrorists in Chechnya, there’s no question about that, and we understand that.”⁷⁰

Given the changed mood in Washington after September 11, meetings with the Chechen government in exile occurred less frequently,

and there were efforts to cut off financial flows to Chechen radicals. The United States officially designated

three Chechen groups as terrorist organizations, pressed Georgia firmly to drive Chechen rebels from its Pankisi Gorge region, and muted criticism of Russian military conduct.⁷¹ The Chechen problem gradually slipped off the agenda at various international meetings (EU-Russian summits, the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the UN Human Rights Commission) or tended to arise only as a peripheral matter.⁷² There was a recognition within the Bush administration that certain Chechen groups were purveyors of the same *kind* of extremism that lay at the heart of 9/11; this suggests some endorsement of Russia’s narrative. Russia’s discourse also

resonated with those in the administration who accepted Moscow’s claims about an al-Qaeda-Chechen nexus, which the Clinton administration had paid little attention to. The success of the Kremlin’s discursive strategy probably reached its pinnacle at the G8 Summit in Canada in June 2002, where President Bush commended President Putin as “a stalwart in the fight against terror.”⁷³

Yet, softened U.S. attitudes on Chechnya sustained Russia’s line of argument only so long. Expressions of U.S. support after individual terrorist attacks in Russia — the 2002 theater siege in Moscow⁷⁴ or the 2004 Beslan hostage crisis⁷⁵ — always remained embedded in a wider understanding of the local dimensions of the conflict

in Chechnya. The administration’s official position “remained consistent: a recognition of Russia’s territorial integrity and

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right to legitimate security operations to defend itself, yet critique of the human-rights situation inside Chechnya and repeated stressing that a political process was needed to end the Chechen conflict.”⁷⁶ Rice, in remarks in early 2002, equally emphasized “that not every Chechen is a terrorist and that the Chechens’ legitimate aspirations for a political solution should be pursued by the Russians.”⁷⁷

What additionally undermined a sustainable convergence in views between the United States and Russia were perceptions of the way Russia fought the Chechens. Western capitals did not dispute Russian claims that counterterrorist action was

needed per se but criticized the nature, scale and effect of the measures employed. There was an abhorrence of the large-scale bombardments of densely populated areas, the disappearances of Chechen suspects, and the large numbers of refugees and casualties.⁷⁸

Adding to U.S. unease about the Kremlin's Chechnya narrative was the worry that Russia was looking for a pretext for military action inside Georgia's Pankisi Gorge area. After 9/11, the Georgian Foreign Ministry officially warned that it would not tolerate any military action launched by Russia against Chechens on Georgian territory. There was a wariness of Russia's attempts to opportunistically exploit the al-Qaeda-Chechen nexus to move into Georgia. Yet there was also a recognition of the substance of some Russian allegations about terrorists hiding on Georgian territory. Together these provided the rationale for increased U.S. military assistance to Georgia, which came in the form of a Train and Equip Program (GTEP) in early 2002.⁷⁹

An awareness of the legitimate grievances of the Chechen people, perceptions of excessive Russian military conduct, as well as worries about an opportunistic Russian use of its threat discourse for objectives in Georgia, all led the United States to continue advocating for a political solution to the conflict. In short, Russia's own narrative was never fully adopted. The perceived lack of full-scale support for its terrorist predicament was often interpreted as evidence of Western hypocrisy and a betrayal of the post-9/11 understanding between Moscow and Washington. In an interview in mid-2003, for example, Sergei Ivanov advised "those who recommend that we launch talks with

Maskhadov ... to start talks with Mullah Omar. It's the same thing."⁸⁰

Coming to Russia's goal of increased counterterrorism cooperation, official reviews routinely praised the U.S.-Russia Working Group on Afghanistan for its efforts.⁸¹ Russian observers, however, noted that mistrust permeating the security services of both countries obstructed really effective cooperation.⁸² In my conversations with Russian experts on post-9/11 counterterrorism cooperation, a rephrased Russian joke from the Brezhnev era was invoked several times to express the Russian mood on the matter: "The Americans pretend that they are really sharing information with us, and we pretend that we're acting on the basis of that information."

Moreover, if a major objective of Russia's association with the Global War on Terror had been to see the Taliban gone, Moscow was set up for yet another disappointment. As far as the Kremlin was concerned, Afghanistan was far from taken care of when the U.S. focus shifted towards Iraq. Given the unfinished Afghanistan business, Russia remained concerned about the ongoing U.S. military presence in Central Asia and sought clarification on its duration. In November 2002, Russia established an air base in Kant, Kyrgyzstan, and reached new security and military agreements with that country and Kazakhstan. Also, during his December 2002 tour of Asian countries, Putin promoted the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as a long-term stabilizing factor in Central Asia, implying that the U.S. military presence in the region should be temporary.⁸³ Throughout, there was a Russian angst that a U.S. presence in Central Asia would be clandestinely transformed from temporary to permanent.

Broader Strategic Interests: Not the Natural Analogue to the United States

Russia's broader strategic objectives were also frustrated. Early on in the "Putin-Bush relationship," Russia was angered by U.S. missile-defense plans and unilateral abrogation of the ABM Treaty — one of the remaining vestiges of Russian superpower status. However, the Kremlin yielded to the Bush initiative, while trying to save as much face as possible.⁸⁴ At that time, as pointed out, both sides still thought there was much to gain from cooperation. Yet, following initiatives in late 2002 to include the Baltic states in NATO, the Kremlin became increasingly frustrated, feeling Washington was not treating Russia like an equal partner. Western criticism of the Yukos affair and restrictions on Russian media freedom exacerbated this impression. Eventually, a firm belief among Kremlin elites that the West had staged the popular uprisings in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004 did great damage to the U.S.-Russian relationship. Moscow's reactions to these "color revolutions" attested to its unease with U.S. efforts at democracy promotion, perceived to extend beyond the Middle East into Russia's own neighborhood.⁸⁵

What, then, is the connection between the limited resonance of Russia's post-9/11 counterterrorist narrative on Chechnya with a U.S. audience, on the one hand, and Moscow's inability to meet its broader strategic objectives in the U.S.-Russian relationship, on the other? Certainly, Washington's unwillingness to grant Russia its expected "status" cannot be ascribed merely to its perception of a rather porous nexus between the Chechen war and the Global War on Terror. This unwillingness might also have been a function of changing priorities in GWOT. As the U.S. focus

shifted from Afghanistan to Iraq (and Russian support for the United States became less critical), Chechnya simply became less relevant to the U.S.-Russian dialogue. In this context, Russian expectations that "weaving" its Chechnya discourse into the GWOT narrative could yield benefits in areas as strategically important as NATO expansion or missile defense seemed rather far-fetched.

NO GRAND BARGAIN?

As argued above, following 9/11, Russia was ultimately unable to achieve its goals, even though the overall context of U.S.-Russian relations was ripe with optimism at the time. Despite a willingness in both Moscow and Washington to improve relations, Russia's threat narrative linking Chechnya and global terrorism carried insufficient clout for Russia to meet its regional counterterrorism goals or its broader strategic objectives. What results, then, can we expect from Russia's discourse on Syria today?

To start with context, most observers expect the confrontation between the United States and Russia to be drawn-out. Dmitry Suslov warns that the "limited systemic confrontation" between Russia and the United States is "for the long haul,"⁸⁶ and Dmitry Trenin explains the conflict as one about principle, extremely unlikely to be resolved in the foreseeable future.⁸⁷ This pessimistic sentiment is echoed by U.S. experts on the American-Russian relationship.⁸⁸ As important as it has been to highlight the differences between Russia's "wars on terror" in Chechnya and Syria at the beginning of this paper, it is just as critical to bear in mind the stark contrast between U.S.-Russian relations after 9/11 and those of today. Thus, leaving aside how appealing Russia's counterter-

rorism arguments might be, the backdrop for Russia's receiving compensation from the United States in return for its self-proclaimed leadership against terrorism is simply much less promising today than after September 11, 2001.

Moreover, if Russia's conflation of the Chechen strife with a global terrorist threat never fully resonated with a Western audience and did not lead to U.S. policy changes, Russia should not expect its characterization of IS as a fascist threat to have the desired impact. Following the international criticism elicited by President Putin's invocation of the analogy at the UN General Assembly in September 2015, Russia's Foreign Ministry had to scramble to clarify that Nazism and IS undoubtedly represent distinct evils, yet are comparable for being without parallel in their time.⁸⁹ Moreover, if the United States were not convinced by the Russian argument that "there are no good and bad terrorists" in Chechnya, it also does not buy into Russia's conflation of moderate with extremist opposition forces inside Syria today. Instead, since the beginning of Russian airstrikes in late September, Washington has reiterated its commitment to support "moderate" Syrian rebels fighting against the Assad regime,⁹⁰ most recently in its decision to send Special Operation Forces to train and advise a few of them. Admittedly, there has been some rapprochement in the two sides' positions. Following multilateral talks in Vienna in late 2015 on the Syrian war, Russia and the United States called

for "additional consultations" on a mutually agreed-upon, comprehensive list of "terrorists" in Syria,⁹¹ tasking Jordan with writing an initial draft.

Given 1) the degraded U.S.-Russian context in which Russia's counterterrorism discourse is evoked today, and 2) the limited appeal of the IS-fascism analogy and conflation of different Syrian opposition groups, the Kremlin should be cautious about expecting its current rhetoric to generate strategic gains in the U.S.-Russian relationship, including a "deal" over Ukraine. Nonetheless, Russia's more narrow regional goals (especially ensuring the medium-term survival of the Assad regime) could well be achievable.⁹² Of course, Russian success here does not solely depend on whether the West subscribes to Russia's narrative on the Syrian conflict. Russia's ability to prop up the Assad regime will not just vary with the appeal of its reductionist counterterrorism narrative, the focus of this analysis but only one element to be reckoned with. Instead, Russia can change "facts on the ground" in Syria and has already done so,⁹³ even if Washington is totally at odds with how Moscow portrays the conflict. While Russia's actions, for instance its deployment of military capabilities, will be consequential in their own right, the point of this paper's Chechnya-Syria comparison has been to suggest that Russian discourse by itself is unlikely to generate significant long-term rewards for Moscow.

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They agree to his terms for the Donbas in exchange for Russia's cooperation in the war against ISIL," in Adrian Karatnycky and Alexander J. Motyl, "Putin Tries to Change the Subject," *Politico*, October 9, 2015; and "It cannot be excluded that in the back of Putin's mind, ... talks on Ukraine could ensue around the Levant talks. In this way, the Ukraine crisis could be addressed in any grand deal. The ensuing talks could even lead to a grand deal on Ukraine." In Gordon M. Hahn, "Putin's Arab Gambit Just Got More Bold: The Syria/Levant Jihadi Crisis," September 10, 2015, <http://gordonhahn.com/2015/09/10/putins-arab-gambit-just-got-more-bold-the-syrialevant-jihadi-crisis/>.

² Fiona Hill, "The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad," *Foreign Affairs*, March 25, 2013.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ For accounts on the First Chechen War, see Carlotta Gall and Thomas De Waal, *Chechnya: Calamity in the Caucasus* (NYU Press, 1999), and Anatol Lieven, *Chechnya: Tombstone of Russian Power* (Yale University Press, 1999).

⁵ Vladimir Putin, interview with the French weekly *Paris-Match*, July 6, 2000, http://archive.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2000/07/06/0000_type82916_128924.shtml. The new threat perception also featured in "The National Security Concept of the Russian Federation," approved by Presidential Decree No. 24 of January 10, 2000, <http://www.mid.ru/ns-osndoc.nsf/1e5f0de28fe77fdcc32575d900298676/36aba64ac09f737fc32575d9002bbf31?OpenDocument>.

⁶ Rouben Azizian, "A Marriage of Convenience: Russia and U.S. Foreign Policy," *Asian Affairs: An American Review*, January 1, 2003.

⁷ Vladimir Shlapentokh, "Is the 'Greatness Syndrome' Eroding?" *Washington Quarterly*, January 25, 2002.

⁸ Bobo Lo, *Putin and the Evolution of Russian Foreign Policy* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 117.

⁹ Putin, quoted in Azizian, "A Marriage of Convenience," 151. Emphasis added.

¹⁰ One year into the GWOT, the Nord-Ost Theatre siege of October 2002 in Moscow provided a new parallel that Russia could point to. See Graeme P. Herd, "The Russo-Chechen Information Warfare and 9/11: Al-Qaeda through the South Caucasus Looking Glass?" *European Security* 11, no. 4 (Winter, 2002).

¹¹ Examples can be found in the "Newline of Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty — September 2001," <http://www.rferl.org/archive/en-newline/20010101/683/683.html>.

¹² Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newline September 14, 2001, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1142485.html>.

¹³ Igor Ivanov, "Speech at the Nixon Center," September 20, 2001, quoted in Roy Allison, *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 87.

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¹⁵ Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Newline, September 25, 2001, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1142492.html>.

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