

# International Terrorism in the Southern Tier: Perceived or Real Threat to Russia's Security?

Ekaterina Stepanova  
November 2000  
PONARS Policy Memo 167  
Carnegie Moscow Center

The struggle against international terrorism has become one of Russia's top declared foreign policy priorities. The threat posed to Russia's security by international terrorism is usually described as the consolidation of extremist forces along the southern flank of the former Soviet Union. This so-called "Southern Tier" is viewed as an arc of constant instability and Islamic extremism, with "large centers of international terrorism" (guerrilla training camps), full of "mercenaries from the Arab countries and Chechnya."

## **International Terrorism and Islamic Extremism**

In official discourse, "international terrorism" and "Islamic extremism" are used almost interchangeably--both have become Russian code words for the activities of Chechen separatists. These, however, are far from mere synonyms: while Islamic extremism is certainly one of the dynamic factors in international terrorism, the rise of the former cannot be explained simply as one of the manifestations of the latter, and vice versa.

The difference is clear to every major actor in the region--Russia's political-military leadership being no exception. Russia's seeming obsession with "the threat of international terrorism coming in the form of Islamic extremism" is, to a certain extent, manipulated for political purposes. In the case of Chechnya this manipulation is more or less understandable. Official claims that the Chechen conflict is part of an international battle against Islamic terrorists support the governmental strategy of presenting the threat to Russia's territorial integrity as the main rationale for the war (a strategy that of course has its own downside: persistent neglect of internal reasons for the conflict). As the focus moves to Central Asia, the use of aggressive anti-terrorist rhetoric is usually explained by Moscow's interest in driving Central Asian states closer to Russia. I would, however, argue that by excessive manipulation of the "threat of international terrorism" in the Southern Tier, Russia itself runs the risk of becoming an object of manipulation by competing forces both in and outside the region.

## **The Case of Afghanistan and the Taliban Movement**

The way the problems of confronting international terrorism are both manipulated and misunderstood is best demonstrated by the case of Afghanistan, which is commonly

identified as a center of international terrorism and a safe haven for Islamic militants. The Taliban movement that now controls most of Afghanistan is constantly accused by the US, Russia, and much of the rest of the international community of exporting terrorism. It receives repeated calls to "dismantle its terrorist infrastructure"--partly on the grounds that the Taliban continues to offer refuge to Osama bin Laden, identified by the US as "terrorist number one."

Regardless of the bin Laden case (an issue on which the Taliban's position is politically flexible), it is wrong to view the Taliban as a terrorist movement altogether. Strictly speaking, it is not even "the Taliban" any more, and certainly not just the radical Islamist militia of the early- to mid-1990s that was recruited from theological students and manipulated by Pakistan with tacit US approval. What is currently known as "the Taliban" has, in fact, become the Pushtun national front. The Taliban's military victories are partly explained by the fact that its forces were joined by almost all ethnic Pushtuns of the former armed forces of Afghanistan (80-85% of all personnel), who brought with them tons of Soviet-made arms, munitions, and military equipment. Only the Pushtuns, who historically controlled most of Afghanistan and constitute approximately 60% of the population, can serve as a unifying force for that war-torn country. It is the Taliban's ethnically Pushtun character that enabled the movement to secure support from many other tribes and to get control of more than 95% of Afghanistan (the greatest degree of control achieved by any party).

It is true that many Pakistani citizens, referred to as "mercenaries" by the international media, are fighting in the Taliban ranks. They are, however, mostly ethnic Pushtuns who hold Pakistani passports only formally. The British Empire divided Pushtun-populated areas equally between Pakistan and Afghanistan; Pakistan's Pushtun population is far from loyal to the Islamabad government. Pakistan's strong support for the Taliban was to a large extent dictated by the need to immediately get rid of the hundreds of thousands of Afghan refugees (mostly of Pushtun descent) who contributed to the instability of Pakistan's western provinces.

While the most recent successful offensives by the Pushtun-dominated Taliban clearly had a stabilizing effect on Afghanistan, they have also brought Taliban forces to the borders of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). This has raised concerns about 1) whether the Taliban movement presents a genuine security threat to neighboring states; 2) how great is its expansionist potential; 3) whether there is any threat of its moving northward; and 4) what the implications are for Russia.

### **Is Russia Threatened?**

The simple question "*Will the Taliban cross the Tajik-Afghan border?*" has a simple answer: "*No.*" There is no indication that Taliban forces plan to go beyond the borders of Afghanistan into the former Soviet republics of Central Asia, let alone that they are planning to attack Russian forces in Tajikistan. It is also a matter of capabilities: the Taliban government, constrained by the need to solidify its control over Afghanistan, can

hardly afford a full-scale cross-border military attack. Apart from economic and military sanctions, there are other international constraints: as long as Taliban forces do not go further than Afghanistan, the world community is patient with their activities. If the Taliban goes north, it can forget about international recognition. More importantly, however, it is the ethnically Pushtun character of the movement that sets objective limits to where the Taliban can advance. As soon as Taliban forces move to territories populated by ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks, the Pushtun factor would start to play against them, not for them. In northern Afghanistan, mostly inhabited by Tajiks and Uzbeks, the Taliban is likely to face a long partisan war even after a formal victory.

If the Taliban poses any threat to regional security, it is in a different direction. The dominance of Pushtuns in Afghanistan has all the potential to reignite the Pushtun issue in relations with Pakistan (no Afghan government has ever recognized the border with Pakistan--the so-called Durand line). The Taliban has sufficient forces to gain control of the Pushtun-populated western provinces of Pakistan. That is why the idea of a joint Afghan-Pakistani front, played up by the leaders of the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance, seems implausible. (The Northern Alliance--the United National Islamic Front for the Salvation of Afghanistan--was formed in 1992 by various Mujahideen parties to topple the Communist President Najibullah.) From this perspective, the Taliban is more interested in strengthening than undermining its borders with Central Asian states.

### **The Islamic Threat**

While Russia's official jargon puts Central Asian states on the front line of the fight against international terrorism and Islamic extremism, what actually worries Russia is the potential of Taliban successes to stimulate the rise of radical Islam in Central Asia, thus aiding--directly or indirectly--Islamic movements (such as the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan or the Party of Islamic Liberation) in challenging local autocratic regimes. There is particular concern regarding the security of Tajikistan and stability in the Fergana Valley, which is shared by Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. These concerns appeared justified by the advances of the Islamic movement of Uzbekistan into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in August 2000.

The clearly demonstrative effect of Taliban success for anti-governmental forces across the Central Asian CIS states cannot be dismissed. But it should be fully understood that an upsurge of activity among Islamist groups in Central Asian states is generated at least as much by internal factors as by outside influences. Radical Islam finds fertile soil in the social discontent arising out of disastrous economic conditions, impoverishment, the semi-feudal nature of local regimes and their ineffective state management, repressive policies, and lack of a social power base. Complicated ethnic relations (especially in the Fergana valley) further aggravate the situation, raising concerns that infiltration of even small armed groups across the border could topple the local regimes. By underestimating the internal causes of instability in Central Asian states, Russia risks repeating one of its most fatal mistakes in Chechnya. While Russia can more or less effectively control the Tajik-Afghan border, it cannot solve the chronic weakness and instability of Central

Asian regimes. In building its security relations in the region, Moscow cannot afford to become hostage to local regimes, nor pursue its interest in driving Central Asian states closer to Russia at any expense.

### **How Should Russia Proceed?**

Russia currently finds itself in a delicate position. On the one hand, there is no alternative to Taliban (read Pushtun) dominance in Afghanistan, which means that it is definitely the force to deal with. In this context, neither the radical Islamic character of the Taliban regime nor its drug trafficking record should be an obstacle to establishing contacts with Afghanistan's *de facto* government. Russia, after all, does not see any problem in dealing with Iran to the mutual benefit of both countries. While both the Taliban and the Northern Alliance are involved in heroin trade, the Taliban officially disapproves of drug dealing and use and is simply unable to control this most lucrative business in Afghanistan (where a trafficking route to Central Asia, Russia, and Western Europe begins). Finally, the Taliban's alleged support of Chechen rebels is more than offset by Russia's long-standing support of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan.

On the other hand, Russia cannot simply leave ethnic Tajiks and Uzbeks in Afghanistan to their miserable fate because of the potential reactions of their respective home nation-states. Although the possibility of large-scale refugee flows seems exaggerated--the assessments of the potential number of refugees range from 30,000 (sources in Russian border troops in Tajikistan) to 150,000 (Western media)--Russia should do its best to promote international relief aid to Tajikistan. Maintaining a security alert in Central Asia at a reasonable level would not harm Moscow's interests either.

Walking this tightrope is not easy, but others have managed. Both Iran and Turkmenistan--while recognizing the Northern Alliance as Afghanistan's legitimate government--have opened consulates on the territory controlled by the Taliban. Western countries have also quietly moved to establish contacts with the Taliban. In spite of the Taliban's continuing statements that Russia remains the movement's "enemy number one," there is no reason for the Taliban leaders to not be interested in normalizing relations with Moscow. Although Russia has not officially been in direct contact with the Taliban, it is better late than never: Moscow should more actively pursue contacts with the Taliban, both directly and through its "reluctant ally" Uzbekistan, which has intensified its own contacts with the Taliban government. In the near future, however, Russia's contacts with the Taliban are likely to fall short of any formal agreement, since such an agreement might require significant concessions that are unacceptable to both sides.

Even this brief overview demonstrates how far dealing with the underlying problems of maintaining stability in the Southern Tier are from just countering terrorism. While the struggle against international terrorism is certainly a convenient foreign policy concept, it dramatically oversimplifies things. The real threat to Russia's national security, posed by the recent developments in the Southern Tier, is far more critical. By downgrading this

threat, at least officially, to "terrorist activities," Russia might overlook a far more serious regional problem--that presented by the inability of most Central Asian regimes to create stable social bases for themselves, and to build even a semblance of modern statehood.

© PONARS 2000