

Toward a U.S. Policy on Chechnya

Sarah E. Mendelson and Scott Lindsay

November 2001

PONARS Policy Memo 204

Center for Strategic and International Studies

U.S. policy on Chechnya must bridge three objectives: cooperating with Russia on counterterrorism, stopping abuses in the conduct of the war in Chechnya, and finding a political solution for long-term stability in the Caucasus. Contrary to conventional wisdom, these objectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Moreover, working with Russia against terrorism presents an opportunity for the United States to formulate a proactive policy toward a political solution agreeable to both parties. In the aftermath of September 11, U.S. policymakers should take advantage of fundamental changes in the political-military dynamic of the conflict in Chechnya to aggressively pursue all three objectives.

When President George W. Bush meets President Vladimir Putin in Crawford, Texas, in November, he should make clear that fighting terrorism and working to end the war in Chechnya with a political solution should be pursued simultaneously on two separate fronts. He will need to persuade Putin that the Islamic extremist movement is the real threat to both Russian and U.S. long-term interests and that the Russian government will need to come to an agreement with the nationalists in Chechnya before it can effectively eliminate the terrorists within its borders. If Putin agrees, Russia could become an indispensable ally in the war against terrorism. If he does not, Russia's failed Chechnya strategy will continue to foster an environment that breeds terrorism.

Political-Military Dynamics Post-September 11

For two years, the Russian government and many in the West have viewed the Chechen resistance as a monolithic bloc. This perception has obscured a fundamental reality on the ground: at least two distinct movements comprise the Chechen resistance, the primary composed of traditional Chechen nationalists led by President Aslan Maskhadov, and the other, a smaller but highly significant group of radical Chechen and Arab Islamists with links to foreign terrorist groups. September 11's aftermath has both highlighted this distinction and driven a wedge between the two groups.

Prior to September 11, Maskhadov tolerated Islamist-terrorist commanders such as Shamil Basayev and Khattab as a means to resist Russian "occupation." As a result of the attacks on the United States, this extremist faction of the Chechen resistance is seen as a clear liability to the nationalist cause. Maskhadov knows that he must get to the bargaining table and distinguish himself as a moderate willing to negotiate. In the long run, of course, the extremists are a threat to both Maskhadov's and the Russians' vision of post-war Chechnya.

Perhaps all this was in Putin's mind on September 24 when he called for Chechen representatives to meet with the regional governor, Viktor Kazantsev, to discuss a cease-fire and plans for disarmament. This call was met with considerable skepticism—unsurprising given that Kazantsev himself oversaw some of the worst atrocities that the Russian federal forces committed against Chechen civilians in January 2000. Yet the exact wording from the Kremlin indicated an important shift; Putin made no preconditions for establishing this dialogue—a significant break from past policy. Additionally, he encouraged “those who call themselves political figures” to halt all ties with international terrorists, signaling that he is willing to distinguish between the two movements. Maskhadov responded positively by having his second in command, Deputy Chairman Akhmad Zakayev, speak on the phone with Kazantsev. These were only “talks about talks,” but the very fact that the Russians and the Chechen nationalists are open to establishing direct contact signifies the fundamental change in the political dynamics of the conflict.

On October 24, Kazantsev announced that Zakayev had agreed to meet with him in Moscow within 10 days. Kazantsev said, “There is a light at the end of the tunnel, indicating a possible peaceful solution to the conflict.” Undoubtedly, many factions on both sides will attempt to derail this development. However, it is the most positive step toward a political resolution that the main parties have taken since the onset of hostilities.

The Way Forward

The United States can play a significant role in this rapidly unfolding drama. The Bush administration is currently reformulating its policy on both Russia and Chechnya. A central part of the broader foreign policy of fighting terrorism must be helping to stabilize the situation in Chechnya.

Cooperation with Russia against terrorism and concern over human rights abuses in the conduct of the war in Chechnya are not mutually exclusive. The way that the Russian federal forces have conducted the current war has done more to incite extremism and terrorism than it has done to quell it. A mutually agreeable resolution of the conflict with moderate nationalists would stabilize the situation sufficiently to allow the return of refugees and relative normalcy. Moreover, a political solution would help isolate extremist-terrorist groups, who would continue aggression. This new environment would require the deployment of a small, professional antiterrorist force as opposed to the 80,000 unpaid and untrained Russian troops that currently terrorize the local population.

The U.S. government should engage both the Kremlin and the nationalist movement led by Maskhadov on constructive steps each side can take to set the stage for a settlement. The basic formula for U.S. engagement should emphasize that the Chechen nationalist movement and the Islamist-terrorist movement are distinct; the Islamist-terrorist movement represents the real threat to both Russian and U.S. long-term interests; and this terrorist movement can only be effectively pursued after a political settlement with the nationalists.

U.S. involvement in the process leading to a resolution of the war in Chechnya will be essential to modifying the Chechen nationalist position. Maskhadov and his foreign minister, Ilyas Akhmadov, have enthusiastically embraced the need for a political settlement to the conflict. Implicitly, this position recognizes their inability to militarily achieve independence, and hence, the need for a settlement short of full sovereignty. The conflict is a stalemate on both sides; the Chechens do not have the strength to dislodge Russian forces, but remain a viable fighting force. The Bush administration should engage Maskhadov and Akhmadov in substantive discussions on the formulation of a politically viable negotiating position that includes clearly severing relations with extremist and terrorist-linked factions, the need for a settlement short of independence, intelligence sharing on Islamist-terrorist activities, and significant U.S. assistance for the post-settlement reconstruction of Chechnya.

The Ingredients For A Mediated Settlement

A mediated settlement between the Kremlin and the nationalists then is central to stopping the larger war in Chechnya and moving forward in tracking the terrorists. Despite both sides' tentative interest in discussions, human rights abuses and propaganda from both sides have created a cycle of mistrust that make negotiations especially difficult. Only third-party influence and support will permit both parties to pursue a settlement with reasonable confidence. The United States can facilitate such confidence by actively engaging itself in the peace process. Specifically, the United States should encourage reasonable negotiating positions, dialogue without preconditions, and post-settlement cooperation against the Islamist-terrorist movement in Chechnya. If the Bush administration demonstrates a strong interest in the process of mediation—and not just the outcome—both sides will be more likely to stay on course.

To this end, the United States should publicly support a “big bang” approach to a settlement as opposed to the sequenced approach that Russia might favor; too many factions on each side have incentives to torpedo the process for a sequencing to work.

The key positions of the Russian government will be territorial integrity and stability in the republic. On the nationalist side, Maskhadov will need some form of political autonomy, a major (but not necessarily complete) Russian military withdrawal, and a change of tactics to specifically target terrorists rather than the population at-large. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the United States, these positions are not nearly as far apart as they once were.

A mutually agreeable political settlement should include the following:

Military

- ◆ Both nationalists and Russian forces must cease hostilities.
- ◆ Russian tactics must change from siege and occupation to specific targeting. This will entail a major Russian withdrawal and restructuring in favor of special forces that directly engage only armed, hostile, extremist forces.
- ◆ Chechen nationalists must clearly cooperate in isolating and eliminating extremists.

Political

- ◆ The Kremlin must grant Chechnya regional autonomy within the Russian Federation and largely desist from interfering in internal matters.
- ◆ Maskhadov and the Chechen government in exile must renounce their immediate independence aims and publicly recognize Chechnya's status as an autonomous republic within the Russian Federation.
- ◆ A transitional government must be formed led by the Chechen parliament with Maskhadov as interim president. Elections should be held soon after the situation has been stabilized.

International

- ◆ An OSCE and possibly UN presence in Chechnya must be significant; international monitoring of a cease-fire will be necessary. When elections occur, a large and sustained international observation group should work alongside domestic monitors.
- ◆ Substantial international assistance for the rebuilding of Chechnya, as in Afghanistan, must be forthcoming and donor states must see it as a priority, central to eradicating the environment in which terrorism develops.

Conclusion

The current war in Chechnya, like the Soviet war in Afghanistan, has radicalized elements of the population and attracted Arab Islamic mercenaries. Putin himself has speculated that the conflict may continue for another decade. If this is the case, the current state of Afghanistan could well be a window on the future of Chechnya. If the United States is serious about confronting the roots of terrorism, then the Bush administration needs to develop a policy that actively preempts the long-term consequences of the war in Chechnya with a political settlement between the parties.

The proposed dialogue between Maskhadov's representative and the Kremlin is the first real opportunity for a political settlement in two years of war. Although this opening shows promise, the road ahead is long and difficult. The United States can play a significant role in this process by providing strong incentives for both the Russian and Chechen leadership to overcome obstructionist domestic forces. Russia seeks closer cooperation with the West and enhanced stature in the war against terrorism. The nationalist Chechen leadership needs the West to monitor Russia's fair dealing in the peace process, as well as significant financial assistance following a settlement. The United States can and should provide these incentives to both, but only in exchange for honest efforts toward a political solution.