

Russian-U.S. Cooperation in Preventing Megaterrorism: Opportunities and Limits

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Vladimir A. Orlov
PIR Center
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The prevention of the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD)—is one of the few areas where U.S. and Russian vital interests coincide. Both states consider WMD proliferation as a major national security threats it faces.

The events of September 11 and the subsequent establishment of the antiterrorist coalition may create a new U. S.-Russia strategic partnership. After a short (but deplorable) delay, Russia has joined the international antiterrorist coalition. President Vladimir Putin has thus made an important choice to support U.S. efforts to destroy terrorists on the territory of Afghanistan.

The strategic rapprochement with the United States has become a critical component of Putin's foreign strategy. He strongly confirmed that position on the eve of and during his visit to Washington, D.C., and Crawford, Texas, in November 2001. Cooperation in counterproliferation and counterterrorism and particularly in such sensitive areas as WMD, their components, their technologies, and their delivery systems may become a key issue on the bilateral strategic agenda.

Russia and the WMD Terrorism Threat

Russian doctrines and major conceptual documents have treated WMD terrorism as one of the major threats to national security for some time. The issue began to be discussed among the WMD expert community in the early 1990s, when terrorist groups intensified their activities in Russia and along its borders, and in light of weakening Material Protection, Control, and Accounting (MPC&A) systems and growing problems pertaining to the transportation of nuclear munitions.

In 1992, the Russian counterintelligence service warned that the threat of nuclear blackmail with respect to nuclear power plants was real. Officers of the Russian secret service published an article informing the public about the developments of 1990 and 1992, when directors of the Kursk and the Smolensk nuclear power plants received letters that contained threats to blow up or to seize the plants. In 1993, one of the leaders of the Chechen militants—Shamil Basayev—

said that he had been offered a nuclear explosive device for \$1.5 million. In October 1994, Moscow mayor Yuri Luzhkov delivered a speech at a special session of the Moscow City government devoted to the prevention of terrorist threats at nuclear facilities in the city. He admitted that he was concerned about possible emergencies at nuclear facilities and the possibility of their seizure.

In 1995, Chechen militants deployed a container with the radioactive isotope cesium-137 in Izmailovsky Park in Moscow. The material was not extremely dangerous and was supposed to have a psychological rather than any military effect. In the same year experts close to the secret service reported that there was a dangerous link between ethnic terrorist groups and organized crime groups in Russia and international criminal communities. The channels for arms and drug trafficking connected Gorny Badakhshan (Tajikistan), Abkhazia (Georgia), and Chechnya and Ingushetia (Russia) with Colombia, Antigua, Pakistan, Yemen, Laos, and Estonia. Some presumed that these well-established channels could be used for the transfer of WMD for criminal and terrorist purposes.

In March 1996, M. Barsukov, then director of Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB), in an interview with the Moscow News argued that attempts to seize nuclear power plants (NPPs), other hazardous facilities, chemical weapons storage sites, and nuclear weapons themselves were "quite possible."

In 1997, during a trial in Tokyo, one of the leaders of Aum Shinri Kyo maintained that the sect had acquired in Russia a secret technology for sarin production in Russia with the support of Oleg Lobov, then secretary of the Russian Security Council. Indeed, photographs of Lobov with the Aum Shinri Kyo leader Asahara were a matter of public knowledge. However law enforcement agencies involved in the investigation in Moscow did not confirm the information.

In the spring of 1997, the FSB prevented an attempted diversion at a nuclear power plant. The president's office in Moscow received a phone call with a warning that a nuclear power plant would be seized. According to the FSB, the intentions of this terrorist were quite serious and the threat was very real. The caller was arrested—as its director called it, a victory for the FSB. After the second Chechen war began in September 1999, measures to protect NPPs and other strategic facilities have dramatically increased.

U.S.-Russian Cooperation in Combating Megaterrorism

Concern is increasing in Russia that national security means alone cannot prevent the threat of megaterrorism. Top Russian officials have more and more actively expressed an intention to cooperate closely and not only episodically with the United States in this field. As Putin said in November 2001, "We may fight the threat *only* if we unite our efforts..."

This cooperation, both on bilateral Russian-U.S. and on multinational levels, should provide for:

- Appropriate legal measures to prevent the preparation of WMD terrorist acts, including measures to prohibit illegal activities of individuals, groups and organizations that support, instigate, organize or participate in WMD terrorist acts.
- Exchange of information to prevent WMD terrorism. As different opportunities (including financial) for megaterrorists still emerge, counterterrorist activities involving traditional political methods become less efficient. Under these circumstances, the early exchange of intelligence data is crucial.
- Dissemination to other states concerned of reports on investigations into potential or real WMD terrorist acts and whether suspects of such terrorist activities are detained.

Limitations and Challenges

The Russian political and military leadership currently seems to follow the strict instructions of their president and have come to regard the crusade with the United States against international terrorism as a must. At the same time, such a policy has certain limitations, or conditions.

First, Russia expects to participate in the joint threat assessment with the United States.

Second, Russia would like access (at least limited) to the decisionmaking mechanisms concerning the combat against megaterrorism.

Third, in this fight against international terrorism, Russia would not prefer to focus on states (above all, Iraq), but rather on nonrecognized regimes (such as the Taliban) or on various nonstate actors (like separatist groups or extremist religious cults). Another matter of concern is to prevent the convergence of terrorist groups and international criminal communities (some U.S. NATO allies, notably the United Kingdom, also raise such concerns).

Fourth, when it comes to megaterrorism, Russia would prefer to focus on the significant threat of cyberterrorism and joint efforts to prevent this challenge, while the United States does not believe that this should be an area for close bilateral cooperation and information exchanges.

Washington may not be ready to accept such conditions from Moscow. In that case, there would still be some room for compromise and maneuvering, but the options would become narrower and joint actions would be more declarative and far less practical.

How far could Russian concessions and compromises go if the United States, with its closest NATO allies, extends the counterterrorist campaign? In principle, Russia would not rule out pinpoint military strikes (although Moscow would prefer to avoid such actions) by the United States and the international antiterrorist coalition against international terrorist bases in sensitive regions, such as North Africa (Sudan, Libya). For Russia to endorse similar actions in Southeast Asia (e.g., in the Philippines or in Indonesia) is not really a problem. However, Russia would not tolerate a U.S. operation to overthrow Iraqi president Saddam Hussein under current circumstances. Even in this area certain circumstances could enable the parties to reach a compromise, but only in the future. Saddam is not an eternal sacred cow for Russia. Putin has hinted that Russia cannot approve of Saddam's failure to let in international inspectors. The terms of Russia's reconciliation with a change of regime in Iraq could be confirmation of the development of a germ warfare program in Iraq and joint (but shadow) decisionmaking with the United States on the new regime. So far, however, these conditions cannot be fulfilled. Iraq is unlikely to have a biological weapons program nowadays, nor does Saddam show any signs of

being read to step down. In the case of increased U.S. pressure on Iraq, Russia would prefer that the pretext be concerns over “WMD nonproliferation” and, at the same time, would require that the charges are well substantiated.

Russia would be more anxious about U.S. military interference in Syria or Iran under the pretext of fighting international terrorism. Russia would not be ready for any compromises in this area. At present, Washington is not considering shifting the strikes from Afghanistan to Iran or Syria. On the contrary, the United States actively uses valuable contacts in Syria (obtained from Russia and some other coalition partners) to accomplish antiterrorist goals in the region. The handshaking of the two heads of foreign services in New York in November gives weight to the rumors (dating back to late September) about a slow U.S.-Iranian rapprochement. The Russian administration is extremely nervous and sensitive to any indication that the United States’ currently *neutral* policy toward Iran, still very fragile, will become no more than a tactical maneuver, and may be revised without any consultation with Russia. This nervousness only increased after an op-ed column in *The New York Times* on November 29 that defined the current Iranian regime as the United States’ “enemy,” accusing it of “killing Americans... in Saudi Arabia” and of trying to develop nuclear weapons, unequivocally linking “local tyranny” to “global terror” and concluding with a prediction of a “democratic revolution.” If Iran is part of the U.S. “global” antiterrorism plan, the U.S.-Russian antiterrorist alliance should be considered dead.

The two parties may well miss current opportunities to establish an effective partnership. U.S. unwillingness to regard Russia as an equal partner, share information with Moscow, and assess jointly emerging threats may presumably have caused this risk. Russia’s inability to quickly and efficiently develop joint international security mechanisms, as well as emerging *silent* opposition to Putin’s pro-U.S. stance by certain circles in Russia’s midlevel bureaucracy, notably in the General Staff and in counterintelligence may also have caused it.

However the window of opportunity is open, and still open wide. The U.S. ambassador in Moscow, Alexander Vershbow, assessed the results of the Crawford (November 2001) summit in an emotional article as “the beginning of a U.S.-Russian alliance,” one that is “based on shared interests and shared values.” In the Kremlin these days, his assessment is basically repeated, though perhaps less emotionally. Working on a set of measures to jointly prevent WMD and cyberterrorism, in the broader context of preventing proliferation and international crime would be a rare, if not unique, chance to experiment with strategic partnership and a new security framework not just in speeches, but in practice.