

Partners In Need

U.S.-Russian Cooperation on and Approaches to Anti-terrorism

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Shaken to the core by the September 11 attacks, the United States naturally took the leading role in the global fight against terrorism. By demonstrating that even unprecedented military might does not guarantee strategic invulnerability, the September 11 tragedy had far-reaching implications for serious changes in U.S. domestic and foreign policy. The U.S. national security policy has been reviewed: anti-terrorism and homeland defense have assumed primary importance on the list of U.S. national security tasks, and the nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, which had become a foreign policy priority long before September 11, began to receive even greater attention. The new focus on fighting terrorism worldwide has also further certified U.S. global domination and reinforced unilateralist trends in U.S. foreign policy, best reflected in a declaration made by U.S. secretary of defense Rumsfeld, according to whom, “the mission determines the coalition,” and not the other way round.

Not surprisingly, prospects for and problems of bilateral cooperation with the United States on anti-terrorism have received special attention in Moscow. Russia has voiced concerns about terrorism as a major new type of security threat for years, as terrorists have increasingly targeted its citizens, most recently and on unprecedented scale in Moscow on October 23, 2002, when several hundred people were taken hostage by Chechen radicals at a musical show.

U.S.-Russia Bilateral Cooperation on Anti-terrorism

After a remarkable freezing at the end of the 1990s, U.S.-Russia relations have clearly been on the rise since September 11. U.S.-Russia bilateral cooperation on combating terrorism has been particularly successful, if not unprecedented, and at certain stages of the anti-terrorist campaign, arguably became more intensive than both states’ participation in many wider multilateral anti-terrorist initiatives.

Bilateral cooperation with the United States on anti-terrorism has proved highly valuable to Russia; perhaps for the first time since the end of the Cold War, it did not come as a leftover from the past (such as, for instance, U.S.-Russia residual cooperation on strategic arms control and disarmament), but stemmed from the need to counter a common security threat of a radically new type. Russia’s active participation in the U.S.-led global anti-terrorist campaign has been fully in line with Russia’s national interests, such as radically improving relations with the West and with the United States, in particular. At the turn of the twenty-first century, this goal became all the more pressing for Russia, as it assumed an increasingly peripheral position in world politics. Given U.S. global supremacy, the weakening of the United Nations, the North Alliance

Treaty Organization's military dominance in the Euro-Atlantic region, and the European Union's primacy in European politics and economics, only the new rapprochement with the West would allow Russia to avoid international semi-isolation, which seemed almost imminent by the end of the 1990s.

By actively participating in the international anti-terrorist coalition, Russia managed to directly associate itself with the world's leading power, while surpassing cumbersome Western institutional bureaucracies, such as NATO and the EU, that seemed to find themselves almost out-of-business at the first stages of the post-September 11 anti-terrorist operation, when it appeared that most of the critical decisions were taken by national governments and leaders. As a result, Russian leaders prevented the country from sliding into political semi-isolation, to make it useful again for the international community and for the United States as its leader, and to find Russia's specific niche in world politics as that of a reliable partner of the West in the global fight against international terrorism. These goals were reflected in the Joint U.S.-Russia Statement of October 21, 2001, the Joint Statement on a New Relationship Between the United States and Russia of November 13, 2001, and other joint declarations.

The most vivid manifestation of the new favorable climate in U.S.-Russia post-September 11 relations has been Russia's cooperation with the United States during its operation in Afghanistan. This cooperation also helped demonstrate how different Russia's current conflict-management policies are from those of the past. Even prior to the September 11 terrorist attacks, Russia has declared the struggle against international terrorism as one of its top foreign policy priorities, viewing the consolidation of extremist forces along the southern flank of the former Soviet Union, particularly in Afghanistan, as the primary source of terrorism. Russia's main interest in Afghanistan has been rooting out terrorism there and preventing that country from serving as a primary source of instability in a wider region including the Central Asian states. It was these regional security concerns, coupled with the above-mentioned, more general foreign policy considerations, that pre-determined Russia's support to the U.S. military operation launched in October 2001, as well as Moscow's very restrained reaction to the growth of U.S. military presence in Central Asia.

Russia played a key role in resupplying the Northern Alliance forces at the most critical stage of the U.S. anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan. U.S.-Russia intelligence sharing on terrorist infrastructure, training bases, and locations was also exemplary and even, in the words of the U.S. ambassador to Russia Alexander Vershbow, "unprecedented." Much of the bilateral cooperation on anti-terrorism was conducted within the framework of the U.S.-Russia Working Group on Afghanistan, created in advance in 2000 to forestall the subsequent dramatic events. It is within this framework that in February 2002 the United States and Russia agreed to support the expansion of anti-terrorist cooperation within the framework of the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), NATO, and other international structures, as well as bilaterally. The Working Group on Afghanistan proved to be such a timely and suitable mechanism for bilateral cooperation on anti-terrorism that its mandate was further expanded by President Bush and President Putin at the May 2002 Moscow summit, and was renamed to the U.S.-Russia Working Group on combating terrorism. At the first meeting of the Working Group with an expanded mandate in July 2002 in Annapolis, possibilities for cooperation in combating terrorism from Chechnya to Kashmir were discussed, while disagreements on Iran and Iraq were also addressed. For the first time, consultations on the problems of combating nuclear, chemical, and biological terrorism were on the agenda.

Apart from Afghanistan, other important bilateral anti-terrorist measures included a Joint Statement on Combating Bioterrorism issued in November 2001, following an outbreak of anthrax in the United States, and the U.S.-Russia Mutual Legal Assistance Treaty, that provided a “legal basis for cooperation in identifying and seizing or freezing criminal or terrorist assets” and was brought into force on January 31, 2002.

Overall, Russia arguably turned out to be no less, if not more, important for the United States in its anti-terrorist operation in Afghanistan, particularly at its earlier stages, than many of its NATO allies. The interim results of Russia’s participation in the first stage of the international campaign to fight terrorism were summed up on April 20, 2002, at Russia’s Security Council special meeting on anti-terrorism: Russia was able to avert the threat of regional destabilization along its southern borders, posed by the situation in Afghanistan, to strengthen its relations with Central Asian states and to achieve remarkable rapprochement with the West on the basis of new common threats and shared values of the civilized world.

Russian and U.S. Approaches to Combating Terrorism: Nuanced Thinking, Similar Actions

For the first year following September 11, Russia’s approach to the fight against international terrorism (fully or partly shared by several other Commonwealth of Independent States [CIS] governments) has been characterized by certain theoretical and political nuances, as compared to the U.S. anti-terrorist policy. These nuances have been most evident at the level of official political rhetoric. For instance, Russian officials have publicly criticized an interpretation of terrorism as a super crime, impossible to counter by regular methods and acting laws. Criticism has also been voiced with regard to interpretation of terrorism as “a form of war waged by clandestine groups and individuals,” according to which the same causes lie at the root of war and terrorism, and the latter should be countered primarily by military means and by the military. It has to be noted that both interpretations have been actively used by the United States in its anti-terrorist policy and campaign.

Apart from these declaratory nuances, some real differences in U.S. and Russian interpretations of the threat posed by international terrorism could be traced. While the U.S. administration’s emphasis has been on rogue states (particularly the authoritarian regimes of Iran, Iraq, and North Korea) as primary sponsors of terrorism, Russia, as much of the rest of Europe, pays more attention to the so-called failed states, or areas that serve as major actual or potential breeding grounds for terrorism. For many in the Russian political elite, the September 11 events demonstrated that a qualitative modification of international terrorism occurred. According to Evgenii Primakov, the latter “appears as a self-sufficient organization not connected with any particular state,” and, as such, can no longer be exposed by such traditional means as convincing or pressuring one or another state to stop supporting terrorism.

Although the Bush administration resorted to “axis of evil” rhetoric, Moscow rejected this vision both verbally and by openly cooperating with all three axis members (among other things, by repeatedly hosting North Korean leaders, preparing to sign new major economic agreements with Iraq, and helping to develop a civil nuclear energy sector in Iran). In contrast to the Bush administration, Russian top officials have not publicized any black list of states supporting terrorism and have used the more flexible term, “arcs of instability.” At the same time, they expressed general concern about the growing number of states and areas where the existing

power vacuum had or could be filled in by terrorist groups and forces. As specified by Russian defense minister Sergei Ivanov, the regions of concern include “the Middle East, the Balkans, Somalia as well as a number of states in Asia and the Caucasus.”

Although skeptical about certain aspects of the Bush administration’s anti-terrorist policy and of the U.S. approach to fighting terrorism, Russian officials seemed to imply that the Russian approach was somehow different in that it interpreted terrorism as a “complex social and political phenomenon, based on a spectrum of social contradictions, embracing extremist terrorist ideology and structures to conduct terrorist activities, and as a form of political extremism.” This approach has been described by Boris Mylnikov, director of the CIS Anti-terrorist Center, as “more serious and fundamental” and “providing for comprehensive methods to fight terrorism.” In practical policy, however, it seems that, regardless of any theoretical nuances and strategic disagreements, Moscow and Washington have a lot in common in their counterterrorist tactics and methods; some of these methods can even be described as almost identical.

In a situation, when thousands of citizens of both the United States and Russia have recently been the targets of major terrorist actions, unprecedented in scale, both states unsurprisingly stress the immediate task to ‘cripple the ability of terrorists to operate’. This dictates the need to emphasize post-action retaliation and investigation over preemption and, more importantly, prevention. Both the United States and Russia, regardless of their radically different capabilities, resources and international weight, emphasize the role of military force and other conventional means in the fight against terrorism. Subject to domestic political and security pressures to respond rapidly and decisively to a terrorist threat, both states seem to have neither the time nor the will (nor resources, in the Russian case) to prioritize the need to address the social, economic and political roots of terrorism and other forms of political extremism comprehensively, rather than on an ad hoc basis, leaving this extremely difficult and not immediately rewarding enterprise to others. It is most likely that the October 24 massive hostage taking in Moscow and the potential counter-terrorist response of the Russian government will only further reinforce these and other similarities.

Neither the United States nor Russia have been alone or particularly unique in their use of the fight against terrorism in order to achieve wider strategic goals and solve a number of pressing foreign and domestic policy problems. The use of counter-terrorism as a multi-purpose political tool is almost inevitable and might even be justified, as long as it does not become counter-productive, as would likely be the case when both states run the risk of abusing their legitimate right to self-defense, guaranteed by Article 51 of the UN Charter.

Over the course of the U.S.-led anti-terrorist campaign, Russia has repeatedly stressed the primary importance of wide multilateral cooperation in addressing global security challenges and making the maximal use of the UN’s potential and other international/regional organizations for these purposes. At the same time, as demonstrated by post-September 11 experience, Russia’s practical cooperation with the United States as the leader of the anti-terrorist coalition has been most effective when exercised on a bilateral basis. This cooperation proved essential for Russia to gain new prominence in the international political arena and become an internationally recognized player in the global anti-terrorist campaign. This, in turn, helped Russia to promote its wider foreign policy interests, such as further and deeper political and economic integration into international community.