

Russia's Counterrevolutionary Offensive in Central Asia

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Counterterrorism has never been a convincing Russian strategy for Central Asia. At the start of Vladimir Putin's presidency, attempts to impress upon the leaders of the five Central Asian states that only Russia could provide security in the face of this rising threat were undermined by a clear inability to offer any assistance in repelling incursions into Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan by the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The threat to deliver air strikes against the Taliban forces in Afghanistan rang quite hollow. In autumn 2001, when Putin, rejecting the opinion of his closest aides, raised no objections against the deployment of U.S. forces in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, his readiness to join the U.S.-led anti-terrorist coalition was still in doubt. Indeed, Russia has never so much as hinted at the possibility of contributing something meaningful to the international efforts at rebuilding Afghanistan, preferring to criticize the shortcomings in North Atlantic Treaty Organization operations. In 2002-2004, attempts to counterbalance the U.S. military presence invariably fell short of the target, since the composite squadron at the new Russian air base in Kant, Kyrgyzstan was a poor match to NATO's air assets, while the large-scale military exercises in the Caspian Sea in mid-2002 have not been replayed.

Thus, the reassertion of Russian influence in Central Asia since mid-2005 has been all the more impressive. Rulers who until recently preferred to assert their independence by maneuvering between Russia, China, and

the West are now according Moscow the respect it demands and are eager to discuss with it plans for strengthening their armed forces according to old Soviet templates. The U.S. airbase at Karshi-Khanabad (K2), Uzbekistan is being withdrawn, and Russia has shown that it is perfectly capable of enforcing the closure of the larger airbase at Manas, Kyrgyzstan as well. Expanded military exercises were conducted in autumn 2005 and the first joint Russian-Chinese exercises added a new dimension to this cooperation.

It is quite easy to establish the point at which this Russian political offensive was launched: the brutal suppression by Uzbek forces of the uprising in Andijon in early May. Back in March, the sudden death of Askar Akayev's regime in Kyrgyzstan proved to other leaders-for-life that being soft on the opposition and hesitating to crush street riots was a sure way to early retirement. The West was seen as a dubious partner spreading a corrosive influence through various nongovernmental organizations, while Russia was clearly at a loss about the adequate response. Andijon altered this fluent situation into a rigid divide: the West condemned the bloodshed and demanded an independent investigation, while Russia unambiguously supported the course of action taken by President Islam Karimov. Encouraged by this backing, he demanded the closure of K2, thus provoking the introduction of sanctions by both the United States and the European Union. Moscow has remained unwavering in its support. The question now is about the near consequences and further implications of this split in the anti-terrorist coalition.

From Networking to Alliance-building

A new discourse that provides a useful instrument in justifying the anti-Western reorientation of the whole region has helped Moscow to advance its influence so quickly. Counterterrorism, which now shapes a universally acceptable political language, has not been abandoned entirely but blended into a reasoning aimed at delegitimizing color revolutions. Russian objections against Western support for popular movements against corrupt semi-authoritarian regimes, described as attempts to export democracy or to enforce models incompatible with local traditions, were never even moderately convincing. Counterterrorism certainly makes them appear more solid, but that requires establishing a clear connection between revolutionary social movements and terrorist organizations. Andijon, whatever the real content of that tragedy was, provided a unique opportunity to demonstrate such a connection, so Moscow asserted with confidence that the uprising was in fact a terrorist attack prepared in the camps of Afghanistan.

It was certainly Karimov who exploited this discourse most vehemently, but other Central Asian leaders also played their part, eagerly assuming that by joining ranks they would be able to neutralize

Western pressure for granting more political space to the opposition. Even the new leadership of Kyrgyzstan opted for subscribing to this interpretation, despite the fact that it inevitably shed a rather dubious light on their own Tulip Revolution. A new kind of unity has thus emerged in Central Asia, where mutual suspicions and sabotage of any cooperative initiatives used to be the normal pattern of relations, and Uzbekistan was suspected by all its neighbors of harboring hegemonic ambitions.

The new political language needed an appropriate forum for consolidating this emerging unity, so Russia stepped up its activity aimed at activating all sorts of previously moribund organizations. Generally, Moscow has little enthusiasm for international organizations, particularly for European fora like the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe, and is quite content with the unreformed United Nations Security Council. In Central Asia, however, Putin finds it important to formalize his personal networks with regional leaders, which he has been cultivating incessantly, into organizational frameworks. In October 2004, Russia joined the Central Asian Cooperation Organization (CACO) formed two years prior by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In October 2005, this body was merged with the Eurasian Economic Community (Eurasec), which Uzbekistan previously had not been a member of, but Belarus was.

This organizational optimization makes a certain amount of sense if perceived as an attempt to tie closer together under the Russian aegis Belarus and Uzbekistan, both on the forefront of confrontation with the color revolutionary forces. The next logical step would be to pull Uzbekistan back into the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) which it left in 1999 when the 1992 treaty was up for renewal. This would make Uzbekistan Russia's formal security ally together with Armenia, Belarus, and three Central Asian states (minus the self-isolated Turkmenistan). With all that reformatting, Moscow still considers it important to preserve the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as the widest umbrella organization of post-Soviet states. The presence of post-revolutionary Georgia and Ukraine and EU-oriented Moldova among its members makes it impossible to utilize the new counterterrorist discourse, but the fact of their participation in the low-content proceedings implicitly proves that with all their revolutionary fervor these states remain tied to Russia and dependent upon its benevolent patronage.

An organization that has experienced a particular boost of activities is the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), which unites four Central Asian states (Turkmenistan is again absent), Russia, and China. It is here that the blending of counterterrorist and counterrevolutionary rhetoric acquires a pronounced anti-imperialist twist aimed at U.S. penetration into the region. In each of these organizations, words matter little. The

SCO shows some capacity for action, however, as with joint exercises and, more importantly, a signal to the United States that its bases are overstaying their welcome, followed by the decision in Tashkent to shut down K2. There are few reasons to expect that pressure on the United States will stop here, particularly since all SCO members, as well as Turkmenistan, perceive Western experiments with democracy-building in Afghanistan as a serious challenge.

The Political Economy of Counterrevolution

All this hasty alliance-building would have remained only marginally relevant for real social and political developments in Central Asia if Russia had not been able to build an economic foundation for the new discourse. It is also possible that Russia would not have been able to mount an efficient defense against the revolutionary forces if the rise of world oil prices had not massively increased the resource base available for its foreign policy. In essence, Russia's new expansion in Central Asia is secured not by its military muscle, which remains rather feeble, but by its economic dynamism, driven by the energy sector.

Certainly, Russia's interest in Caspian hydrocarbons is not a new feature in its policy, but its ability to invest in them has significantly increased during the last couple of years. In the wake of the Yukos affair, the Kremlin has also consolidated its ability to direct these investments. The first crucial breakthrough was achieved in April 2003 when Moscow attained exclusive rights to export all natural gas produced in Turkmenistan for the next 25 years. (It was, in fact, a then-peculiar combination of antiterrorist and counterrevolutionary reasoning that persuaded the capricious President Saparmurat Niyazov to accept this deal.) In mid-2004, Russia agreed to make a large-scale investment in Tajikistan, which has no hydrocarbon reserves but plenty of hydro-energy; the deal included the construction of two large hydropower stations and an aluminum plant that would unitize this cheap energy. And in 2005, several mid-size investments in oil and gas development projects in Kazakhstan were agreed upon, and Gazprom finalized a deal on producing and transporting natural gas in and through Uzbekistan.

Even if more deals follow, these investments do not amount to total Russian economic dominance in the region. Kazakhstan, in particular, seeks to preserve the multi-vector character of its economic development and, despite persistent pressure from Moscow, leaves open the possibility of exploiting oil through the newly opened Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. The Russian offensive is also complemented by a rapid expansion of Chinese economic ties with the region. While Russia focuses mostly on large-scale government-supported undertakings, China encourages all sorts of flexible arrangements and cross-border trade that comes to dominate the consumer market. Strategically, China is extremely interested in the Caspian's hydrocarbon resources but it prefers not to

move too aggressively into that highly competitive market and builds its economic positions step by step, starting with relatively open niches. Russian and Chinese economic interests could clash even in the near term, but for the time being the countries are perfectly able to harmonize their agendas and soften competition.

These remarkable Russian and Chinese economic advances leave very little space for Western companies and reduce the relative significance of international aid and assistance, often targeted at intra-regional problems left unaddressed by the Russia-led integration. Only Kyrgyzstan and, to a lesser extent, Tajikistan still show symptoms of aid dependency, but in both these countries drug trafficking as a different kind of economy is rapidly expanding and involving wider social groups. Russia misses no occasion to put the blame on NATO for failing to check the vastly expanded opium production in Afghanistan, but it is beyond doubt that the withdrawal of Russian border troops from Tajikistan in August 2005 has left open the main gateway for heroin trade. The swift collapse of the Akayev regime has shown that narco-business could be an active revolutionary force, so Moscow, instead of suppressing it, seeks to accommodate the interests of those political clans in Tajikistan that have established control over this business. The fight against drug trafficking is becoming primarily an EU project, and the resources for achieving any measure of success are clearly lacking.

Conclusions

Russia has achieved much success in consolidating its influence across Central Asia and assumes that the revolutionary tide has been turned. Much the same way as the demonstration effect from the victories in Belgrade and Tbilisi worked to mobilize crowds in Kyiv and Bishkek, authoritarian leaders expect the decisive use of force in Andijon to provide deterrence against new attempts to test the power of Russia-friendly regimes. However, the Russian counterrevolutionary course, even if supplemented with closer economic ties and coordinated with China, fails to address Central Asia's main societal grievances. Moscow cannot do anything about the over-concentration of power in the hands of ruling families or rampant corruption, because they are the essential features of Putin's own regime. The explosion of accumulated grievances could take various forms, from a palace coup in Turkmenistan to a north-south split in Kyrgyzstan, but it is clear that stability can be only temporary.

It is also clear that the capacity of the United States (as well as the EU) to influence political developments in the region has significantly shrunk, as the October visit of U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice demonstrated. The idea of stimulating the growth of cross-border ties with Afghanistan to advance the greater Central Asia project (which does not include Russia) may appear promising, but its attractiveness for Ashgabat, or Dushanbe, or Tashkent is highly problematic. These regimes

are now less concerned about the flow of drugs from Afghanistan or even the spread of Islamic extremism, and more about Western experiments with democracy-building. If Washington would press on with opening a southern corridor from Central Asia, Moscow, which has carefully refrained from any involvement in Afghanistan, might become tempted to exploit a few easily available spoilers. The lack of usable military instruments, which is a rather untraditional limitation for Russia's foreign policy, would inevitably turn any political crisis in Central Asia into a potentially disastrous problem for Moscow, where the fear of color revolutions has only temporarily subsided.