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CHECHNYA'S WAR: A "LOGIC" OF ITS OWN

By Nabi Abdullaev

Little has changed in Chechnya since the November 18 meeting between Akhmed Zakaev, the Chechen rebels' representative, and Viktor Kazantsev, President Vladimir Putin's envoy in the Southern federal district and the Kremlin's representative for the negotiations with the rebels, at least in terms of halting the fighting in the breakaway republic. Indeed, while Zakaev publicly characterized his meeting with Kazantsev, which took place in the VIP lounge of Moscow's Sheremet'ev airport, as a breakthrough, the meeting only seemed to reinforce the Russian side's doubts about the possibilities to bringing the issues that were discussed--how to reach a ceasefire and start the process of rebuilding Chechnya's civilian life--to fruition.

There was good reason for pessimism over the meeting. First, Moscow and the separatists had different views about the terms and substance of the talks. Zakaev reportedly refused to discuss the disarmament issue that the federal government considered the top priority. However, a important reason for pessimism, Chechnya experts say, is the lack of a single center of power among the rebels, which is bound to undermine the significance of any negotiations. "Many political groups, including Russian troops, hold power in Chechnya, but no one is strong enough to give any guarantees [that agreements will be implemented]," said Timur Muzaev, an expert with the Moscow-based Panorama think-tank.

Experts agreed that while the bulk of rebels act on their own, the organized separatists could be divided into three

basic groups, each with its own leadership. Maskhadov, the Chechen president who was elected to a five-year term in February 1997, leads those rebels who see Chechnya's future as an independent state based on ethnicity rather than Islamic fundamentalism. Maskhadov's forces are strongest in southwestern Chechnya, but, according to some observers, his control over other rebel leaders is very limited. "In contemporary Chechnya, where a leader's political influence is measured by the number of guns brandished by his supporters, Maskhadov is just an ordinary warlord and not the most powerful one," said Aleksandr Iskandaryan, head of Moscow's Center of Caucasian Studies.

Although Maskhadov cannot give direct orders to other prominent rebel leaders, experts believe he can influence them to some extent, since he is the one who gives the rebels' cause an air of legitimacy. "Without Maskhadov, the other rebels would seem to many to be ordinary terrorists, and this could severely reduce political support for them outside Russia," said Muzaev.

But Iskandaryan warned that Maskhadov's significance should not be overestimated. "What will happen to the warlord Shamil Basaev if Maskhadov leaves the rebels?" he asked rhetorically. "Obviously, nothing."

Naturally, Maskhadov is unlikely to acknowledge his inability to control the entire rebel force, said Shamil Beno, a former representative of Kremlin-appointed Chechen leader Akhmad Kadyrov. "It would be unwise of him, as it would undermine his political status," he said, adding that formally Maskhadov commands the other rebels as head of their General Staff.

The second group—the largest and the most active one—is led by Basaev and his Arab lieutenant Khattab, whose stated goal is Chechen independence coupled with radical Islam. This group, which regularly challenges the Russians' formal control over southern and southeastern Chechnya with deadly booby traps and ambushes, gets financial support and fighters from radical Muslims worldwide, but has failed to win broad public support in Chechnya. "Last year, Kadyrov's Moscow office held a poll among refugees in Chechnya and Ingushetia that showed that ordinary Chechens feel most negative toward federal troops and Khattab's Wahhabis," said Beno, referring to the radical followers of the austere Saudi brand of Islam. "The people want foreign fighters out of Chechnya."

The third group, led by Ruslan Gelaev, seceded from the common cause in the summer of 2000 after Gelaev had a personal conflict with Maskhadov. This group, which settled in neighboring Georgia, includes people who cannot articulate

any ideological basis for fighting. "They took up arms simply in response to an attack by outsiders," said Beno, who also served as foreign minister under the first post-Soviet president of Chechnya, Djohar Dudaev. According to Iskandaryan, the drawn-out conflict has demoralized Gelaev's fighters.

Although the experts were pessimistic that talks would help resolve the region's political and military stalemate or improve the lives of ordinary Chechens, they said both sides could reap certain political benefits from a semblance of rapprochement.

For the Kremlin, public attempts to meet the rebels halfway would allow President Vladimir Putin to capitalize on the West's new willingness to be less critical of the war in Chechnya in light of Moscow's support for the military campaign in Afghanistan and the general mood created by the international war on terrorism. "Russia is formally demonstrating the maturity and wisdom of its political regime," said Shamil Beno. "But by presenting Maskhadov with such unacceptable preconditions as disarmament, the federal authorities have precluded any viable prospects that could come out of the talks."

Both Beno and Muzaev pointed out that Maskhadov also stands to gain from talks with Moscow, as they could reinforce his legitimacy as the popularly elected president. Beno speculated that one reason Maskhadov's envoy Akhmed Zakaev insisted on a meeting in Moscow was to create the impression of state-to-state talks, rather than negotiations between Russia and a fractious group from one of its constituent territories. "Maskhadov's rating will rise as he talks about peace," said Muzaev. "He is in a position to talk about anything now, since he will not bear responsibility if he fails to guarantee [the implementation of] any accords."

According to Muzaev, Putin's position is less enviable, since the president must bolster his reputation as a man of his word. While the dual threat of military exhaustion and antiwar sentiment necessitates the search for a political solution, Putin is as powerless as anyone else to ensure that agreements are carried out. "For him, negotiations are essential and impossible at the same time," said Muzaev.

The main problem, experts agree, lies in the fragmented nature of the Chechen resistance to Russian rule. "Unlike the first Chechen conflict, when Dudaev controlled the vertical structure of power, now the rebel resistance has formed a web-like structure, which is better for quicker, operative responses," said Iskandaryan.

But this tactical military advantage has previously proved an

obstacle to political settlement. "Russia's expectations that rebel resistance would slacken after Dudaev's death in 1996 were erroneous," said Muzaev, who was an adviser to the Chechen government in 1995-97. "On the contrary, it increased in intensity as power was dispersed among warlords striving for combat glory."

Today, experts say, the number of uncontrolled armed groups has grown dramatically and even their approximate manpower is impossible to estimate. "It can be compared to a set of concentric circles," said Iskandaryan. "There is a small number of guerrillas who fight on a regular basis; they are followed by those who come home to rest and pretend to be civilians for that period; then come those who join the rebels just for certain military operations."

Muzaev linked the ebb and tide of rebel activity to atrocities by Russian troops. "Whenever federal soldiers conduct fierce mopping-up operations among civilians, public support for the rebels rises and many locals join them for retaliatory operations," he said.

As the conflict drags on, the fighting in Chechnya becomes more chaotic and tactical solutions dominate over strategic ones. "Now that the sides have failed to come to any political settlement, the number of secret military and business accords between Russian medium-rank officers and mid-level warlords is rising," said Beno, referring to illegal arms and oil trade. Such deals, he added, only fuel the spread of violence in the region. "More Chechens are entering the fight--not because they strive for independence or anything else, but because, being immersed in violence, they cannot escape this choice," said Iskandaryan. "Thus the war gains its own logic and breaks loose from the control of those who launched it."

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GEOPOLITICAL RIVALRIES IN EURASIA

By Taras Kuzio

Uzbekistan is competing with the more Russophile Kazakhstan for dominance of Central Asia and is one of the most important newly independent states of the former Soviet Union in terms of population, geographic location and mineral wealth. The September 11 terrorist attacks in the United States created a highly advantageous situation for Uzbekistan and Washington began actively courting Tashkent from the start of the antiterrorist campaign in Afghanistan. On October 12, Uzbekistan and the United States signed a joint statement defining their partnership as a "qualitatively new

relationship." Uzbekistan's move into the pro-American camp, however, was not unexpected, given that it has been gradually moving away from Russia since 1999.(1)

Uzbekistan's security policy can be divided into three phases since the break-up of the Soviet Union. Until 1998 Uzbekistan was a central member of the Commonwealth of Independent States; indeed, the CIS Collective Security Treaty (CIS CST) was named after Uzbekistan's capitol, Tashkent, where it was created in 1993. The CIS CST proved to be, like so many other CIS organizations, a virtual body whose members placed more importance in bilateral than multilateral security relations.

The second phase began in the late 1990s and resembled similar moves away from Russia's sphere of influence taken by neighboring Turkmenistan and the Trans-Caucasian republics of Georgia and Azerbaijan. Nevertheless, Turkmenistan, unlike the other three states, sought to establish a permanent neutrality that was recognized by the United Nations in 1999. Turkmen neutrality has a pro-Western orientation: Russian Border Troops left Turkmenistan in 1999 and since then Turkmen officers have increasingly been trained in Ukrainian and Western academies. Turkmenistan also signed an Individual Partnership for Peace (PfP) program for 1999-2000, having been the first Central Asian state to join PfP in May 1994.

Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Georgia looked to Ukraine, the long-time dissident country in the CIS, which had put forward the idea of a CIS regional organization, GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) back in September 1997. GUAM became GUUAM in April 1999 with the addition of Uzbekistan.

Thus, by 1999, the CIS CST was reduced to a core group of six Russophile states. Of these, Belarus and Armenia had no interest in security problems in Central Asia or outside their immediate regions. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan looked to Russia, while Tajikistan remains a de facto Russian protectorate. Russia, unlike Armenia or Belarus, has continuously expressed an interest in security issues in Central Asia.

Uzbekistan's ruling elites deeply distrust Russia's ultimate motives, and the remaining GUAM/GUUAM members share this lack of trust. They look with suspicion on Russia's use of "peacekeepers" to freeze conflicts on the ground, rather than resolve them, which has worked to Russia's advantage in Abkhazia, South Ossetia, the Trans-Dniester and Nagorno-Karabakh.

There have also been rumours recounted to this author by high-ranking Ukrainian Foreign Ministry officials that Russian policy toward Uzbekistan was double edged. While Moscow officially opposed "Islamic fundamentalism" and

"terrorism," elements within Russia's intelligence services cultivated links with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) on the assumption that the greater the Islamic terrorist pressure put on Uzbekistan President Islam Karimov the more likely he would turn to Russia for military support. With the destruction of the IMU, this dual policy is no longer possible.

The third phase of Uzbekistan's security policy is still developing. Having greatly benefited from greater U.S. attention to the region, Tashkent has allowed itself to move more overtly into the U.S. camp. Its decision to join GUUAM was instrumental in preparing a transition away from the Russian sphere of influence. GUUAM members, for example, never hid their desire for enhanced bilateral and multilateral cooperation with NATO and Western states, particularly the United States. Indeed, Uzbekistan pointedly used the occasion of the joined GUAM in April 1999 during the 50th anniversary NATO summit in Washington DC, a move that did not go unnoticed in Moscow, which at that time was trying to rally CIS members in opposition to NATO's military actions in Kosovo and Serbia.

In a statement released on the sidelines of the NATO anniversary summit, the newly reinvigorated GUUAM expressed its desire to cooperate with NATO in PFP and through the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council. The statement called for opposing threats to the GUUAM members' territorial integrity and "aggressive separatism" (both of which can only come from one country, Russia), "ethnic intolerance" and "religious extremism" (a reference to Islamic fundamentalism), and for halting arms supplies to conflict zones (a reference to Russian supplies of arms to Armenia).

UZBEK NATION-BUILDING: RUSSIA AS THE NEGATIVE "OTHER"

Uzbekistan's movement away from Russia has also been the result of nation-building and state-building that is generating a more self-assured ruling elite. Of all the states in Central Asia, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan had the fewest Russian minorities and throughout the region Russians and Central Asians had traditionally lived separate lives. As Central Asians have increasingly come to identify with their respective new states, the loyalties of Russians remain divided between the former Soviet Union and the new state they now inhabit.

As in many other of the Newly Independent States, Russians are finding it difficult to accept status of being a "national minority" in Uzbekistan. The dominance of the titular nations is firmly established in post-Soviet constitutions and Russians are increasingly being squeezed out of government and state positions in favor of members of

the titular groups. Two-thirds of Uzbekistan's armed forces officers are now Uzbek, a factor that has assisted the U.S. military campaign in Afghanistan. Russian NGOs in Uzbekistan have been accused of fomenting separatism and closed down. A majority of the ethnic Russians returning to the Russian Federation are from Central Asia, not the three Baltic states or Ukraine. Of the newly independent states, Uzbekistan and Ukraine are among those most opposed to Russian proposals for dual citizenship for ethnic Russians.

Newly published Uzbek and Central Asian historiographies denigrate Russia's "civilizing mission" during the Tsarist and Soviet periods as "colonialist" and as having harmed local identity and culture. Of the five Central Asian states Uzbekistan is the most overtly anti-Russian. The Russian language has been removed from public view as part of a government-backed program of de-russification based on the December 1995 law "On the State Language," which put Russian in the same category as other national minority languages. Within Central Asia, Uzbekistan is unique in having no provision for the Russian language in its post-Soviet constitution. Cyrillic has been replaced by the Latin alphabet throughout Central Asia, while in Uzbekistan, Soviet and Russian signs, topographical and street names have been replaced with Uzbek historical and national ones. In contrast, Russophile Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have not downgraded the Russian language; the latter actually made it an official language in 1995.

While Russians, the Russian language and Russian/Soviet history have been downgraded, Uzbek and Central Asian languages and historiography have been upgraded. New historiographies, myths, legends and monuments tracing Uzbek and Central Asian histories to "golden eras" before the Russian conquest have the task of legitimising the new states of Central Asia. The Uzbek "golden era" is the fourteenth-century empire of Timur--known in the West as Tamerlane--the center of which was present-day Uzbekistan. The Timur museum, which was opened in Tashkent in 1996 on the 660th anniversary of Timur's birth, has the feel of a place of worship and veneration. School children and conscripts are taken there in escorted groups, and Timur will soon be more recognizable to this younger generation than Vladimir Lenin.

Traditional social, cultural and ethical values are being re-introduced as elements in a new state ideology to replace Communism. The post-1992 ideological vacuum has been filled by state nationalism, and in Uzbekistan this state nationalism barely conceals its anti-Russian orientation.

As these nation-building processes have developed a gulf that was always there has grown between indigenous groups and Russians. Uzbekistan's de-russification and historiographical

policies serve to reinforce the divide between Uzbeks and Russians. Externally, these processes have served to reinforce the movement away from the Soviet past and Russia's sphere of influence. The outside world is no longer accessed through Moscow and, as in the case of Uzbekistan post-September 11, it is now possible to become a player on the international stage independent of Moscow.

UZBEKISTAN AND THE CIS

The evolution of Uzbekistan's security policy away from Russia led it to seek regional support within the CIS from like-minded states such as Ukraine. "We have come to understand each other better and to look at many things from the same angle," then Uzbek Prime Minister Utkir Sultanov said in 1997.(2) It was only a matter of time before Uzbekistan made its first move towards the West when, in the spring of 1999 it withdrew from the CIS CST and then joined GUUAM.

President Karimov complained in 1999 that Russia, "driven by imperial ambitions and strategic interests in Asia, seeks to thwart projects" that bypassed it.(3) As Uzbekistan moved away from Russia saw its views on the CIS began to converge with those of Ukraine five areas.

First, both countries opposed recognizing the CIS as an international organization and a subject of international law. Second, they supported maintaining the CIS as a virtual organization with no supra-national structures. The September 1995 Russian presidential decree "On Affirming the Strategic Course of the Russian Federation with the Member States of the CIS" is an example of how Russian policy is seen to be geared towards reducing the sovereignty of the Newly Independent States through the re-integration of Eurasia. Third, Uzbekistan was dismayed at Russia's overt military support for Armenia in its bid to hold on to occupied Azeri territory. Fourthly, Uzbekistan was unhappy at the continued stationing of Russian troops in neighboring Tajikistan.

Finally, Uzbekistan and Ukraine both disagreed with Russia's hostility to NATO enlargement and rejected attempts by Moscow to fashion a joint CIS response that would rubber stamp the Russian view of similar international questions. Clearly, both Uzbekistan and Ukraine saw NATO—and the USA—as security allies vis-a-vis Russian pressure. Uzbekistan, like other GUUAM members, does not see NATO as an "aggressive" bloc (Georgia and Azerbaijan have openly discussed their intention of seeking future NATO membership).

UZBEKISTAN'S STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE WITHIN CENTRAL ASIA

Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have long been rivals for dominance

of Central Asia. The two countries, however, are in different geopolitical situations. Kazakhstan, which has a 4,000 kilometer-long un-delimited border with Russia and 50 percent of whose population are Russian-speakers living primarily in the north of the country, cannot escape from Russia's sphere of influence. In contrast, Uzbekistan has only a small percentage of Russians and national minorities, greater access to the outside world and no border with Russia.

Since the mid-1990s, U.S. policymakers have increasingly noted the strategic importance of Uzbekistan to the West within the CIS and Eurasia. Frederick Starr urged U.S. policymakers in 1996 that they should focus their attention on Uzbekistan.(4) Other Western experts noted Uzbekistan's pro-Western and pro-NATO orientation and its strategic importance within Central Asia and Eurasia to the West.(5)

HUMAN RIGHTS OR GEOPOLITICS?

Neither Russia nor the United States prioritizes human rights in its relationship with the Newly Independent States outside Europe, including Uzbekistan. If either country did place a priority on human rights, Uzbekistan would not find ready-made allies in either Moscow or Washington, given that the Uzbek regime has a very poor human rights record. Karimov was reelected in January 2001 for another five-year term by a vote of 91.9 percent. It was slightly less than what Soviet leaders routinely received, but not by that much. Uzbekistan sees its security alliance with external powers (Russia until 1998 and the United States and NATO since then) as more of a means to bolster its domestic security than to protect itself against foreign threats. Islamic fundamentalism in Central Asia was "largely generated and sustained from within"⁶ until Afghanistan's Taliban regime and Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida terrorist began supporting the IMU. Islam in Central Asia has traditionally been more cultural and part of national identity than religious. One of Karimov's demands in supporting the military campaign in Afghanistan was that the U.S. bombing take out the IMU leadership. On November 18 IMU leader Juma Namangani and twenty-four other top IMU officials were reportedly killed in the U.S. bombing of the northern Afghan city of Kunduz.

The new international climate since September 11 has worked to Uzbekistan's advantage but has been detrimental to other GUUAM members. As the United States and NATO, on the one hand, and Russia, on the other, have increasingly cemented an alliance in the newly formed NATO-Russian council, the opportunities for countries like Ukraine and Georgia to play on problems between Russia and the West have diminished. Ukraine was able for some time to use its geopolitical importance to ensure that the West turned a blind eye to its poor record on democratization and economic reform. That

geopolitical card evaporated after September 11, especially because the West applies different standards of human rights to countries in Europe and those outside. Thus while Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have called on the United States to not ignore human rights abuses in Uzbekistan, the fact that Uzbekistan has proved to be more strategically important than even Pakistan in helping the United States to defeat the Taliban regime means that Washington has not made the issue of human rights in Uzbekistan a priority.

The United States and Russia, notwithstanding their recent rapprochement, are still likely to be rivals in shaping the future of Afghanistan. The rapid dispatch of Russian diplomatic and humanitarian assistance to Kabul caught Washington off guard. U.S. National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice told Izvestia in mid-October that the United States would not squeeze Russia out of Central Asia. This is not likely to hold true in Uzbekistan. Just prior to the November CIS summit, the United States announced its first financial assistance package—worth US\$50 million—to the GUUAM group, which former U.S. President Bill Clinton had largely ignored.

CONCLUSION

Two years prior to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, Uzbekistan began moving into the pro-Western camp by joining the avowedly pro-Western GUAM group, making it into GUUAM. It is unlikely to have agreed to such a close relationship with the United States without a commitment from Washington that it would be for the long term.

NOTES

1 Douglas Busvine, "U.S. Pushes military cooperation with Central Asia," Reuters, 4 April 1996 and C.J. Chivers, "Long Before War, Green Berets Built Military Ties to Uzbekistan," The New York Times, 25 October 2001.

2 Interfax, 17 April 1997.

3 UNIAN, 26 April 1999.

4 S.Frederick Starr, "Making Eurasia Stable," Foreign Affairs, vol 75, no 1 (January-February 1996), pp 80-92.

5 Svante E. Cornell, "Uzbekistan: A Regional Player in Eurasian Geopolitics?," European Security, vol 9, no 2 (Summer 2000), pp 115-140.

6 Martha B. Olcott, "Islam and Fundamentalism in Independent Central Asia" in Yaacov Ro'i ed., Muslim Eurasia. Conflicting Legacies (London: Frank Cass, 1995), p 33.

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