The Caucasus powder keg: Russia threatens military interventions

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28 September 2004

The reaction of the Russian government to the Beslan hostage crisis increasingly recalls that of the American government to the attacks of September 11, 2001. The horrifying events in Beslan, which shocked and angered millions of people all over the world, are being used by the regime of President Vladimir Putin as a pretext for a domestic offensive against basic democratic rights and the implementation of a foreign policy agenda that will inevitably lead to new wars.

While the background to the events in Beslan remains obscure due to the official policy of secrecy, reinforced by Putin's rejection of an independent inquiry, the Moscow regime has already drawn far-reaching conclusions from the hostage disaster. In the future, regional governors will no longer be elected, but will instead be nominated by the president, and the election law will be changed so as to strip small opposition parties of any real chance of winning office.

Such measures will serve to further strengthen the powers of the president, which under Putin have assumed increasingly authoritarian dimensions. There is now talk of a "strong state with an iron fist," and parallels have been drawn to the Stalin era.

There barely remains any possibility for democratic control under conditions in which the media is spoon-fed by the Kremlin and the parliament is dependent on the president. All that remains for the people as a whole is to cast their vote every few years in a referendum to confirm a president whose real power base is the intelligence forces and military apparatus.

The change in foreign policy after the Beslan hostage crisis was announced by the general chief of staff of the Russian armed forces. Yuri Baluievski threatened that Russia "would undertake all measures to liquidate the terrorist bases in any part of the world."

Many commentators interpreted this comment as a translation of the Bush doctrine of "pre-emptive war" from American into Russian. Moscow assumes the right to carry out military action against other countries, bypassing international law. The states neighbouring southern Russia, which first achieved independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union, particularly regard this as a threat—especially Georgia, which has been repeatedly accused by Moscow of harbouring Chechen terrorists.

Despite the parallels between the United States and Putin's Russia, the comparison cannot be taken too far. The threat to the world arising from US aggression is incomparably greater. The United States is economically and militarily a great power and is openly striving to establish world hegemony. Russia is an economic dwarf, whose productive capacity is comparable to that of Holland. Its army is decrepit, and even if it wished to do so, it would be unable to attack distant countries, as did the US in the cases of Serbia, Afghanistan and Iraq. Russia does, however, possess an arsenal of nuclear weapons that it inherited from the Soviet era. In his recent comments, Baluievski excluded the use of such weapons—at least for the present.

Nevertheless, the threat to world peace posed by Baluievski's announcement should not be underestimated. On the one hand, he has declared that Russia is prepared to violate international laws which formerly provided at least a certain deterrent to direct military action. According to a spokesman for the Carnegie Institute in Moscow: "What the Americans have shown us now constitutes the standard for Russia. The Chinese and the Indians will also follow suit."

Even more significant is the emergence of a global development which ever more clearly points to a military confrontation between imperialist powers or power blocs, and is heading towards a Third World War. In this respect, the regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus play a role similar to that of the Balkans on the eve of the First World War. Together with the neighbouring Middle East, this region constitutes the so-called "strategic ellipse," housing the most extensive reserves of world energy resources.

The Balkans and the Caucasus

As is well known, the immediate trigger for the outbreak of the First World War was the murder in Sarajevo of the successor to the Habsburg throne, Franz Ferdinand. The causes of the war, however, lay elsewhere, and cannot be reduced merely to an event of secondary historical significance.

The roots of the war lay in the explosive contradictions between the main imperialist powers that had been building up for decades. In the final analysis, the war resulted from the fact that in the epoch of world economy, the nation state was no longer viable. In particular, the ruling elite in Germany had come to the conclusion that this contradiction could be resolved only through the violent reorganisation of Europe under its domination. It wanted the war.

It was no accident that the spark that exploded the powder keg came in the Balkans. This was the site where rival interests of the imperialist powers and power blocs directly intersected. The weakest point in the fragile international balance of forces, it was where tensions assumed a most immediate and tangible form.

The detachment of Bosnia from Austrian domination would have led to the decline of the Habsburg multinational state, strengthening the position of Serbia and its Russian protector. This, in turn, would have significantly weakened Germany in relation to its rivals England and France, which shared an alliance with Russia. That is why the deed of a Bosnian Serb nationalist could unleash a chain of events plunging Europe into a four-year bloodbath which, in turn, expanded into a world-wide conflagration.

The parallels between the Balkans at the start of the twentieth century and Central Asia today are remarkable. The Caucasus and Central Asia are not merely the focal point of the conflicting interests of Russia and the US; the future of the entire region is of fundamental significance for Europe and, in particular, Germany. The same applies to rapidly growing China and India. Also involved are Iran and Turkey, which want to be

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involved in a new edition of the "Great Game" in Central Asia. Two things are at stake in this "game"—geo-strategic power and access to oil and gas, which assume ever-increasing importance as world reserves shrink in the twenty-first century.

The situation is not yet as advanced as in 1914, at the time of the Sarajevo assassination. In contrast to then, the conflicting interests in the Caucasus are only vaguely delineated today. There is a great deal in flux. Deals and manoeuvres are still being made, and there has been no final determination of international axes and power blocs. But the general development is proceeding in a similar direction.

An indication of growing tensions is the divergent reactions by Washington and Berlin to the Beslan hostage drama and its consequences. While Washington clearly criticised the latest measures proposed by Putin, Berlin was demonstrably silent.

Bush, of all people, publicly warned Putin to respect "democratic principles" in waging the anti-terror struggle. This criticism was promptly rebuffed by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, who employed a standard formulation from the days of the cold war. The issue was a "Russian internal matter," he said, adding smugly: "We are aware that the US also took quite tough measures after September 11."

The German government expressly refused to solidarise itself with Washington's criticism. Instead, the spokesman for the German government, Béla Anda, declared that German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder was conducting a "very confidential and intensive dialogue" with Putin. Already prior to the events in Beslan, Schröder had welcomed the recent Moscow-rigged presidential elections in Chechnya. For its part, Washington had criticised the conduct of the elections.

In order to understand the conflicting interests in the Caucasus, one cannot remain at the level of diplomatic gibes. It is necessary to examine the strategies and interests of the main players in a broader historical and international framework. This article gives a brief overview.

The conflict between the US and Russia

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the US has deliberately and systematically penetrated the former territory of the Soviet Union and its sphere of influence. This was one of the principal purposes of the US-led war against Yugoslavia, as well as the eastward expansion of NATO and the occupation of Afghanistan.

The three Baltic states, which at one point belonged to the Soviet Union, are now members of NATO, together with most of the former Warsaw Treaty states. The US has also set up military bases in a number of former Soviet republics in Central Asia and supports governments that, in turn, enjoy friendly relations with Washington.

In Georgia, the US provided political and financial help to install a government that is utterly hostile to Moscow and is seeking to join NATO. Georgia is not only of great strategic importance because of its immediate proximity to the crisis-ridden Caucasus region, it also controls the passage from the Caspian Basin to the Black Sea, i.e., the most important corridor for the export of gas and oil from Central Asia to the West. In addition, the country forms a bridge between southern Russia and Asia Minor.

Until now, President Putin has refrained from public criticism of Washington and maintained a close personal and political relationship with the US president. This was partly in recognition that Moscow had little hope of success should it seek an open confrontation with Washington, but was also due to the fact that such a stance promised Moscow a free hand to deal with the separatist movements threatening the southern edge of the Russian state. Putin has continually sought to present the Chechen separatists as a component of "international terrorism" in order to wave off international criticism of the brutal activities of the Russian army in the region.

It is apparent, however, that Moscow feels increasingly under pressure from the US. In his first public television appearance following the Beslan massacre, Putin declared that he was dealing "with (the) direct intervention of international terrorism against Russia," and indicated that foreign powers were behind the terror action—without, however, naming names. He said Russia was being targeted by terrorists because "as one of the world's major nuclear powers, Russia still poses a threat to someone, and this threat must be removed."

One day later, he held an unusually long and open briefing with selected foreign journalists and Russia specialists at his country residence, Novo Ogarjevo. Here he was even clearer in his comments: "I didn't say Western countries were initiating terrorism, and I didn't say it was policy. But we've observed incidents. It's a replay of the mentality of the cold war. There are certain people who want us to be focused on internal problems and they pull strings here so that we don't raise our heads internationally."

Once again, Putin refrained from giving any names and expressly praised US President Bush, whom he described as a "reliable partner." He even indicated that he would prefer to see a victory for Bush in the November elections.

Putin went on to openly criticise the US's closest European ally, Great Britain. He attacked London for giving political asylum to Achmed Sakajev, the European representative of Chechen separatist leader Aslan Machadov. The Russian foreign ministry has officially demanded his extradition.

Putin informed his Western audience that he regretted the dissolution of the Soviet Union. He repeatedly expressed his fear that separation by Chechnya would lead to the break-up of Russia itself, and spoke in this connection of a "domino effect."

His fears are not ungrounded. A further disintegration of Russian territory to the south could very well lead to the complete collapse of the country—there are sufficient centrifugal forces at work. There would be nothing progressive arising from such a development. It would lead to a wave of expulsions, ethnic cleansing and regional conflicts. The new states that arose would be neither self-determining nor democratic. Instead, they would be dependent on the intrigues of the great powers and rival, semi-criminal cliques. The series of events that led to the devastation of Yugoslavia in the 1990s would be repeated—this time on an even larger scale.

The suspicion that Western circles would deliberately encourage such a development has not been plucked from thin air. While Washington has officially refrained from interfering in Putin's Chechen policy in order to secure Russian support for the US war in Iraq, the so-called neo-conservatives who play a leading role in US foreign policy are openly propagating the Chechen cause. The same people who played significant roles in the propaganda preparation for the Iraq war occupy prominent posts in the American Committee for Peace in Chechnya (ACPC), a pro-Chechen lobby group.

In a contribution to the British *Guardian*, John Laughland, a member of the British Helsinki Committee, gave the following names: "They include Richard Perle, the notorious Pentagon adviser; Elliott Abrams of Iran-Contra fame; Kenneth Adelman, the former US ambassador to the UN who egged on the invasion of Iraq by predicting it would be 'a cakewalk'; Midge Decter, biographer of Donald Rumsfeld and a director of the right-wing Heritage Foundation; Frank Gaffney of the militarist Centre for Security Policy; Bruce Jackson, former US military intelligence officer and one-time vice-president of Lockheed Martin, now president of the US Committee on NATO; Michael Ledeen of the American Enterprise Institute, a former admirer of Italian fascism and now a leading proponent

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of regime change in Iran; and R. James Woolsey, the former CIA director who is one of the leading cheerleaders behind George Bush's plans to re-model the Muslim world along pro-US lines." (*Guardian*, September 8, 2004)

Laughland concluded: "Coming from both political parties, the ACPC members represent the backbone of the US foreign policy establishment, and their views are indeed those of the US administration."

Putin's reaction

Putin's answer to US encirclement—the violent suppression of Chechen resistance, the strengthening of an authoritarian, centralized state, and the threat of military strikes abroad—is as reactionary as it is counter-productive. It corresponds to the interests of the social class that Putin represents—the new Russian elite, which plundered state-owned property after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and shamelessly enriched itself at the expense of the mass of the population.

Under Putin's predecessor, Boris Yeltsin, who proclaimed the end of the Soviet Union in December 1991, this plundering was chaotic and disorganised. Billions were transferred abroad, and state-owned companies, in particular the lucrative energy sector, were "denationalized" in a semi-criminal manner. Corruption and criminality flowered. The Russian state threatened to disintegrate and become a toy in the hands of the Western great powers.

With the coming to power of Putin, whom Yeltsin had personally selected as his successor and who was supported by the leading oligarchs, a limited course correction took place. The new elite realised that to secure their wealth and power, they required a strong state and the ability to play a role internationally amongst the great powers.

Putin, who could look back over a long career in the Soviet secret service, the KGB, filled key political and administrative offices with secret service veterans. The KGB, which served the Stalinist regime as a kind praetorian guard, was suited to this task because it had been imbued with Great Russian chauvinism by Stalin in the 1930s and 1940s. For the KGB, the "defence of the Soviet Union" did not mean defending the socialist achievements of the October Revolution, but the defence of the internal and external power of the state.

Putin consolidated the power of the new capitalist elite by strengthening the central state in relation to the regions, extending the police and secret service apparatus, limiting freedom of opinion and the press, and finally, this summer, abolishing the numerous, state-financed social benefits that still remained from Soviet times. Yeltsin had not dared to take such a step, because he feared an uncontrollable reaction from the general population.

With regard to foreign policy, Putin aimed to restore Russia's status as a great power. To this end, he acted with extreme brutality against separatist tendencies in the Caucasus. At the end of 1999, even prior to taking over the office of president, he unleashed the second Chechen war, which is still raging today. Chechnya was largely destroyed, as was any prospect of a peaceful solution. At the same time, the war served to stifle increasing discontent over the social crisis in Russia and justify the further strengthening of the state apparatus.

With some success, Putin was able to present the Chechen conflict as a consequence of foreign interference and appeal to nationalist sentiments in Russia. This was facilitated by the support he received from the Communist Party.

For its part, the so-called "democratic" opposition criticized the Chechen war, but endorsed the course of the "free-market" reforms, cooperated closely with Western governments, and relied financially on the oligarchs. The weakness of the Russian "democrats" can only in part be attributed to the fact that the Kremlin exercises a monopoly over the media. The real reason lies in the fact that their economic and social policies are diametrically opposed to the social interests of the population.

Putin also strove to bind the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)—the loose confederation of states that replaced the old Soviet structure—more closely to Russia, employing a mixture of economic, military and diplomatic pressure, especially in the cases of White Russia and the Ukraine.

In the Caucasus, Moscow supports Armenia against Azerbaijan, which is falling increasingly under Western influence. It maintains its own troops in the rebellious areas of Georgia. In Central Asia, Moscow aims at a strategic alliance with the two most important energy producers, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan.

The energy sector plays a key role in Putin's great power plans. It constitutes 40 percent of national tax receipts, 55 percent of export profits, and 20 percent of the Russian economy. In the Ukraine, in Georgia and in Kazakhstan, Russian firms close to the Kremlin are buying up gas and oil companies.

The conflict between the Kremlin and a section of the oligarchs is about who will exercise control over this sector. The state, according to Russia expert Alexander Rahr, will "not permit that this sector, on which Russia depends to reemerge as a great power, is controlled by the particularist interests of profit-seeking oligarchs, or that it falls under the control of foreign transnational enterprises." He says that, although Putin does not want to renationalise the oil companies that were denationalised in the 1990s, they will have "to fit in with the Kremlin's rules of play, otherwise they will share the same fate that befell 'Yukos,' which has been made an example of." (*CIS Barometer*, September 2004)

On these two key questions—control of the immense energy reserves of Russia and Central Asia, and supremacy over the states of Eastern Europe, the Caucasus and Central Asia — interests collide that cannot be reconciled peacefully in the long term. They are not only cause for constant tensions between Russia on the one hand and the US and Europe on the other; the strategic aims of America, the European powers and, in the long term, China, clash irreconcilably here as well. That makes Central Asia and the Caucasus a powder keg of future confrontations.

European interests

As in the question of the Iraq war, European foreign policy is deeply divided in its attitude to Russia. The enlargement of the European Union to the east, advanced by Germany and France for economic reasons, has turned out to be an obstacle to a common foreign policy.

Germany and France, supported by Italy, aim to establish a strategic partnership with Russia. Already on the eve of the Iraq conflict, Berlin, Paris and Moscow cooperated closely to prevent a war resolution being tabled at the UN. Since then, Putin, German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder and French President Jacques Chirac have met regularly, with the last such gathering taking place in Sochi on the Black Sea just before the Beslan hostage crisis.

The energy question is central to German interests in Russia, the main issues for Berlin being the creation of a counterweight to American hegemony and the opening up of the Russian market. Germany possesses no energy reserves apart from its own enormously expensive coal stockpiles, and consequently depends to a high degree on Russian gas and oil. This becomes all the more critical since supplies of North Sea oil, which previously covered a third of German needs, will be exhausted in the near future.

Russia is already providing 35 percent of German natural gas

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requirements. This is expected to grow to over 50 percent over the next 20 years. German energy companies, which maintain close personnel contacts with the chancellor's office, are involved in Russian enterprises with close state connections, and are investing billions in the development of the new Siberian gas fields. A new gas pipeline between Russia and Germany via the Baltic Sea is also being planned.

During the recent crisis in the Caucasus, the German government stood demonstratively behind Putin. In his September 8 budget speech, Chancellor Schröder said Germany had no interest in endangering the territorial integrity of Russia. Two days later, Putin and Schröder published a common declaration, in which they agreed to cooperate closely in the fight against terrorism. Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer also publicly denounced Chechen independence efforts. This cannot be "a solution, because it would continue the dissolution of Russia, with disastrous consequences for the whole region and for world security," he told the*Märkische Allgemeine Zeitung*.

While Germany and France endorse a partnership with Russia, the new European Union members, who until 1989 belonged to the Warsaw Pact, are seeking the containment of Russia. Close relations between Berlin and Moscow still produce nightmares in Warsaw. If there are differences of opinion between Washington and Russia, these states almost automatically side with the US.

Despite its close relations with Germany, France and Italy, Russia's relations with the EU as a whole are strained. The European Union Commission in Brussels has repeatedly criticized Russia's Chechnya policy and, following expansion to the East, displayed an unexpectedly tough attitude towards Moscow in bilateral disputes.

Brussels has imposed visas for Russian citizens in transit to Kaliningrad, which became an enclave following the Baltic States' entry into the EU, and restrictions on imported Russian goods into the former Eastern-bloc member states. Moscow is also distrustful of intensive European moves towards the Ukraine, White Russia, Moldavia and Georgia, which Russia regards as part of its sphere of influence.

Despite the interest in a strategic partnership with Moscow and access to Russian oil and gas, Berlin and Paris are not ready to subordinate themselves to Russian claims in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Alongside America, Germany has emerged as the most important trading partner with Central Asia and shares an interest with the US in establishing a transport corridor connecting Europe and Asia, running outside Russian territory via Georgia and Azerbaijan. Berlin and Paris are therefore developing their own relations with the local ruling powers in the region, even if this strains their relationship with Moscow.

Moreover, Schröder's close relations with Putin are a subject of controversy in Germany. Many veterans of German foreign policy from both the government and the conservative opposition camp have publicly backed Schröder. These include Wolfgang Schäuble (Christian Democratic Union—CDU), Karl Lamers (CDU), Egon Bahr (Social Democratic Party—SPD) and ex-foreign minister Hans Dietrich Genscher (Free Democratic Party—FPD).

However, sharp criticism has been levelled by political groupings and by the media. Schröder is accused of undermining German foreign policy in the Middle East and Africa and the common European foreign policy through his silence on human rights violations in Chechnya. Others warn that he is embracing Putin too closely, under conditions where the latter's own position is coming unstuck as a result of the unwinnable Chechen war.

Germany, France and Russia are collaborating closely in what is probably the most explosive question in the region at present—Iran's nuclear programme. Iran was a central topic at the last tri-partite summit in Sochi. Schröder, Chirac and Putin agreed to exert joint pressure on Teheran to stop the production of enriched uranium. They want to forestall any escalation of the conflict between Iran and the US.

Russia maintains good relations with Teheran and supplies Iran with nuclear technology. In contrast to the US, the EU endorses cooperation with the country's energy industry.

European observers fear that in the wake of a Bush election victory, the US will increase pressure on Iran, whose government has refused to halt production of enriched uranium. "A reelected president Bush will hardly hesitate to threaten military blows," wrote *Der Spiegel*.

A preventive strike by Israel, which bombed an Iraqi atomic reactor in 1981, is also considered possible. The US has just agreed to supply to Israel 500 so-called "bunker busters," which could be used against Iran or possibly Syria, as Israeli security experts freely admit. These precision bombs, weighing a ton, can penetrate deeply underground and pierce concrete walls up to two metres thick.

European tactical calculations could, however, go awry, as the example of Iraq has shown. The regime in Baghdad was pressed by Europe to accede to American demands for disarmament in order to forestall a war. Baghdad gave way and destroyed its weapons and rockets, but the US attacked nevertheless.

Conclusions

The danger of war, threatened by the escalation of the conflicts in the Caucasus, Central Asia and the Middle East, cannot be answered by supporting one imperialist grouping against another—the weaker against the stronger, or the "more peaceful" against the more aggressive.

There can be no doubt that American imperialism is today the most dangerous and aggressive factor in world politics. A change in the US presidency would not alter this.

However, the Iraq war has already demonstrated the complete inability of the European governments to counter this danger. Even those countries that rejected the war did so half-heartedly, and later sanctioned Iraq's occupation. They studiously avoid resting on the powerful movement against the Iraq war that developed worldwide—including in the US itself.

In the end, their "rejection" of the Iraq war was motivated by their own imperialist interests in the region. They reacted to the war by strengthening their own military apparatuses to be able to carry out international interventions, at the same time intensifying attacks on the social and democratic achievements of their own populations, so as to stake their claims in the global fight for economic and strategic power. There is an inseparable connection between growing militarism on the one hand, and the attacks on social and democratic rights on the other.

The same applies to Russia, where the working class is paying for Putin's great power pretensions with pauperization and the loss of democratic rights.

The resistance of the working class to the danger of war and the attacks being carried by their own governments all over the world must be armed with an international socialist perspective. That is the only viable basis for preventing the danger of a new world conflagration. As in 1914, the alternative today is once again: socialism or barbarism.

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