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Containing the Chechen War: A New Item for the OSCE Agenda

By Miriam Lansky

Russia has told the world that it is fighting terrorists in Chechnya. But what if Russia is pursuing broader strategic objectives to reassert complete control over the Caucasus?

Although Russia continues to dominate the region, Georgia and Azerbaijan have tried to steer an independent course. Should Georgia ever fully regain control over its own territory, Russia may have to vacate its four military bases in Georgia, including the strategic naval installations on the Black Sea coast. Russia would also like to keep Azerbaijan from building its own oil pipeline to the West and remain dependent on Russian routes instead. Total subjugation of the region would give Russia an open route to the Middle East.

Since the start of hostilities in August, Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov have repeatedly accused Azerbaijan and Georgia of allowing "terrorists" to move weapons and fighters across their territory to Chechnya. The Georgian and Azerbaijani governments steadfastly denied such claims and Russia has produced no evidence to substantiate them.

But Russia's threats have escalated dramatically in recent days, prompting some in the Russian media to conclude that an invasion may be imminent. The speciousness of the Russian case and the virulence with which it nonetheless makes it give reason to fear Moscow has another agenda, and is using its "fighting terrorism" stance as a pretext

Leave aside for the moment the fact that the Chechens do not need to import weapons that they can just as easily buy from hungry Russian soldiers. Azerbaijan has no border with Chechnya. Georgia has reinforced its 70 kilometer border with Chechnya, a snow-covered mountain range that few dare cross in any case. President Heydar Aliev of Azerbaijan and President Eduard Shevardnadze of Georgia have always maintained that the conflict in Chechnya is an internal Russian matter; they have refrained from criticizing Russia even as its troops commit atrocities.

Russia's cures for the scourge of "terrorism" in the Caucasus look suspiciously like overt control. Russia insists that Georgia allow Russian border guards back on its borders, extend the lease on its military bases for an additional 25 years and allow reinforcements, permit the use of airfields for bombing Chechnya and cede part of its quota for military personnel and weapons under the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty. (Jamestown Foundation Monitor 12 November 1999)

But Moscow is also making demands that have nothing to do with terrorism, but everything to do with Russian interests. Russia, for example, insists that Azerbaijan abandon plans to construct a long-awaited pipeline that would carry Azerbaijani oil from the Caspian Sea to the Mediterranean coast, thereby breaking Russia's monopoly on oil transit.

Russia has backed up its demands with economic and military pressure. On November 17, 3 Russian helicopters violated Georgian airspace and fired on a Georgian village, prompting the foreign ministry to make a formal protest against Russia's "act of aggression against a sovereign state". (Itar -Tass, 18 Nov 1999 via Nexis) This is not the first time. Russian planes bombed a Georgian village in August and an Azerbaijani village in October. Both times the Russian military initially denied responsibility, prompting the Moscow daily, Izvestia to run the headline "UFOs bomb Georgia." (Izvestia 27 August 1999) The bombings may

indicate gross inaccuracy and negligence on the part of the Russian military, but could have been calculated threats to test the resolve of Georgia and Azerbaijan and the West's commitment to their well-being.

To apply economic pressure to Georgia and Azerbaijan, Russia has threatened to introduce a visa regime on the borders, in contravention of existing practice. This measure would wreak havoc on the economies of states heavily dependent on trade with Russia. All the Azerbaijani and Georgian business people residing in Russia would have to return to their countries of origin to undergo cumbersome bureaucratic procedures.

Over the last few days Russian rhetoric against its southern neighbors has intensified substantially. A Defense Ministry spokesman claimed that a Chechen government in exile is being created in Georgia and Azerbaijan hosts terrorist camps on its territory. Some Russian media, including the newspaper Vremya concluded that these statements were meant to create the propaganda necessary to justify military intervention. (Vremya MN, November 11, 1999, p. 1 via Nexis)

The United States has to take these threats seriously. Hostilities involving the states of the South Caucasus and Russia would destabilize Turkey, a NATO member and key US ally, as well as other regional powers, such as Iran . This conflict would reinforce the most sinister elements of Russian society and could spell the end of democratic development throughout the region.

The White House once seemed to see the threat. In October Deputy Security of State Strobe Talbott repeatedly warned that Russia must refrain from using the war to destabilize neighboring states. In those speeches Talbott explicitly asserted the inviolability of Azerbaijan's and Georgia's independence. Just as Russian pressure on Azerbaijan and Georgia has increased in recent weeks, this message has been dropped. The Clinton administration risks appearing to have

given the Kremlin a green light for further aggressive action.

The west must use the opportunity of the OSCE summit in Istanbul this weekend not only to insist Russia sign a ceasefire and negotiate peace in Chechnya, but also to reiterate its support for the independence of Azerbaijan and Georgia. The administration must develop policies to underpin its statements on this matter. One suggestion is to utilize the Macedonian example by deploying a small observer force under OSCE auspices in Georgia in the vicinity of the border with Chechnya. Russia must be shown clearly that "fighting terrorism" is neither a reason to commit atrocities against Chechen civilians nor an excuse to bully its southern neighbors.

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