Chechnya
9/11, the Moscow Hostage Crisis, and Opportunity for Political Settlement

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Having enlisted Putin's support in the global war on terrorism, the White House has not publicly protested the continuing *zachistki* (cleansing raids) and other systematic abuses of Chechen civilians by the Russian military and police special operation forces—the frequency and intensity of which, according to the Human Rights Watch, have increased since September 11, 2001. The Bush administration has not condemned or threatened the Kremlin with sanctions for brutal and sweeping attacks on predominantly civilian targets from 1994 to the present. The administration instead shifted its focus toward the international terrorist connections of the Chechen resistance. This shift tacitly endorses the erstwhile argument of hardliners in the Russian military and national security establishment—also implicit in the parallel Putin has drawn between the September 11 attacks and the 1999 apartment bombings in Russia—that banditry and terrorism have all along been the primary cause of violent conflict in Chechnya.

Russian military conduct in Chechnya was not an obstacle to NATO's decision to integrate Russia more closely within a "19+1" or "NATO at 20" arrangement. More recently, the importance of pushing Moscow toward political resolution in Chechnya within the administration has been in reverse proportion to the importance of winning Russia's support for a U.S. military attack on Iraq. Even when Russian air strikes on sovereign Georgia killed one civilian and injured others—apparently leaving the purported terrorist targets unharmed—the White House responded with only a feeble expression of concern.

Yet, the exigencies of global war on terrorism, changes within Chechnya, and changes in perceptions of the Chechen war within Russia since September 11 have opened a window of opportunity for enforceable political settlement in this war-torn region. Such a settlement would be squarely in the national interest of both Russia and the United States. At least four conditions for negotiating a political settlement are in place.

Opportunity to Redefine the Nature of the Conflict and Security Challenges

Whatever the differences, past or present, in the perceived nature of the Chechen conflict, it is in the interests of both the United States and Russia to prevent Chechnya from serving as a breeding ground for domestic and international terrorism. Yet, Russian military presence and operations affecting civilians in Chechnya remain one of the principal drivers of social and psychological support for what Moscow and Washington define as terrorism. For a powerful

illustration of how deeply the seeds of animosity and revenge have been planted within the Chechen society as a result of Russian military operations one needs only to see the drawings of Chechen children refugees. In hundreds of paintings made available by child psychiatrist Akhmad Idrisov, who has worked with these children, boys and girls depict gruesome battle scenes featuring Russian tanks, armored personnel carriers, helicopters, planes, and air-to-surface missiles. The Chechen fighters are portrayed as lone-wolf heroes standing up proudly to Russian military power. A giant Mohammad's sword of revenge appears in several of the paintings, shaped as a traditional Chechen *kinzhal* (long dagger), shattering Russian armor. These paintings vividly confirm military analyst Pavel Felgengauer's warning at the start of the 1999 Russian invasion: with each single Chechen fighter they killed, Russian forces would create ten fighters in years to come as family sought revenge.

The Kremlin recognizes how serious the issue of social support for terrorism is to Russia's security. In *The Chechen Wheel,* a book published in Moscow in 2002 and supportive of Putin's strategies, Federal Security Service (FSB) Gen. Aleksandr Mikhailov nevertheless comments:

> We are pragmatists. We expect simple and easy solutions to the most complex problems. Watching the events in the north Caucasus, we ask ourselves and the people in power a single question: 'When is all this going to end?' I don't know. Those who are in charge of the Chechen operations don't know either. Those who are going to replace them don't know. The Chechen people don't know. Over the last decade, a whole new generation grew up whose only toys were submachine guns, bullet cartridges, and grenades. And this applies not only to Chechnya. The children, the widows, and the mothers of the army and police officers killed in action, will never forget and never forgive both the Russian government and the Chechens for the death of their loved ones.

According to Putin, Russia has won the Chechen war, otherwise known in Kremlin-speak as an anti-terrorist operation. According to press reports, success is manifest only in daylight while Chechen rebels are in charge after dark. Redefining these challenges in terms of social support for terrorism is not only consistent with Russia-U.S. joint security objectives, but also allows the Kremlin to save face and avoid politically painful interpretations of the conflict in terms of the decline of Russian state power and human rights violations.

Opportunity for Third Party Enforcement

Withdrawing military and security forces from Chechnya has long been considered out of the question for Moscow because the Kremlin-appointed Chechen government has no credible policing capability. Moreover, the Russian military has been reluctant to allow pro-Moscow Chechen leaders to develop such capability because it fears that a local Chechen police force might turn against the Russians. Even if a Chechen police force were loyal to Moscow, the withdrawal of Russian forces from the region would pit the force against seasoned armed groups committed to the war of attrition against Russian presence.

According to a report from the Chechen city of Urus-Martan by Sharon LaFraniere of *The Washington Post* (October 16, 2002), Chechnya has been trapped in a vicious circle of insecurity. On the one hand, "rebels, masked and ruthless, prowl the streets at night picking off the Chechen officials, policemen, teachers, and clerks who accept jobs from the Russian government, which offers essentially the only paid employment in the republic." Urus-Martan officials told the *Washington Post* that the rebels killed 60 local officials and civic leaders in less

than three years. On the other hand, LaFraniere reported: "For most of Chechnya's 500,000 to 700,000 residents, the threat posed by the rebels is coupled with—and surpassed by—the threat posed by the Russian troops, whose brutal and indiscriminate sweeps of Chechnya's villages have resulted in the deaths or disappearances of hundreds of civilians." While periodically conducting savage cleansing raids, the Russian military and security forces also fail to shield Chechen civilians from the rebels. As the *Post* reports, "Russian soldiers offer no protection; they are too afraid to venture out of their heavily protected bunkers at night."

This is a classic situation calling for third-party enforcement—what Barbara Walters found in her study of over 50 deadly civil wars to be the decisive factor ensuring that peaceful settlements last. Before September 11, however, Putin squarely objected to third-party enforcement. In his autobiography, *In the First Person,* Putin says: "We do not need any intermediaries…. That would be the first step toward internationalizing the conflict. First, intermediaries, then somebody else, then observers, then military observers, and then things will be out of our control…"

And yet, the establishment of a U.S.-Russian anti-terror alliance after September 11 and Putin's statements to the effect of Russia having no feasible alternative to allying geopolitically with the West, indicate that Russian opposition to third-party enforcement in Chechnya is no longer a given. In the same autobiography, for example, Putin opposed NATO's eastward enlargement, particularly to include the former Soviet republics, but in the post–September 11 context, Putin has made no big deal of NATO's prospective accession of the Baltic states. Similarly, the post–September 11 context makes it possible to define any external enforcement in Chechnya in terms of the global war on terrorism, which boosts Moscow's status in the global anti-terror coalition, rather than in terms of peacekeeping, which might imply Moscow's relegation to the position of failing state.

Opportunity to Legitimate a Moderate Chechen Leadership

Global terrorism is but a small part of violent Chechen activity. There are significant distinctions among four types of Chechens using violence against the Russians—bandits, or common criminals, fighting for small immediate gains; committed terrorists bent on using destruction to publicize their cause; revenge seekers driven by loss inflicted on their families and loved ones; and dedicated freedom fighters. As long as the Kremlin fails to draw these distinctions as a matter of official public policy, no moderate Chechen leader opposed to Russia's military rule in Chechnya has an incentive to distance himself from radicals out of fear of being targeted as a terrorist, compounded by fear of being defeated piecemeal. In recent months, for example, elected Chechen president, Aslan Maskhadov reconciled with former rival Shamil Basaev by giving the latter a symbolic position in his resistance government, according to Radio Free Europe. The militarily stronger side must make the first move if this knot of mistrust is to be loosened—unless Moscow's preference is to fight the war to the last Chechen.

The post–September 11 environment gives the Kremlin a window of opportunity to redefine the nature of Chechen resistance and to separate these different groups. Although Russian operations have been indiscriminately brutal to Chechen civilians, they did remove the most radical and committed leaders of Chechnya's opposition associated with terrorism and banditry. Notably, Amir Khattab, Arbi and Movsar Baraev, and Hunkar-Pasha Israpilov were killed, and Salman Raduev was taken prisoner. Shamil Basaev was severely wounded crossing a minefield

and is unlikely to be capable of physically leading daring field operations. Prior to the Soviet collapse, most of these radical leaders had rather mundane occupations (e.g., a city Komsomol secretary, a traffic cop, etc.). Before a new wave of radical, violent leaders crystallizes under continued Russian military presence—and a brutal hostage-taking in Moscow by Chechen guerrillas in late October 2002 showed how palpable this threat is—Moscow has a window of opportunity to strike a political deal with the moderates. Russian politicians of such caliber as Grigorii Yavlinski and Ivan Rybkin distinctly recognized this opportunity in their recent calls on Putin to intensify dialogue with Maskhadov's representatives. The horrific hostage crisis in Moscow in late October 2002 offered a missed opportunity to drive a wedge between the separatists and the terrorists—considering Maskhadov's denouncement of hostage-takers. Instead of taking this visionary path, the Putin administration used the hostage crisis to reiterate its erstwhile claim that Maskhadov was a terrorist.

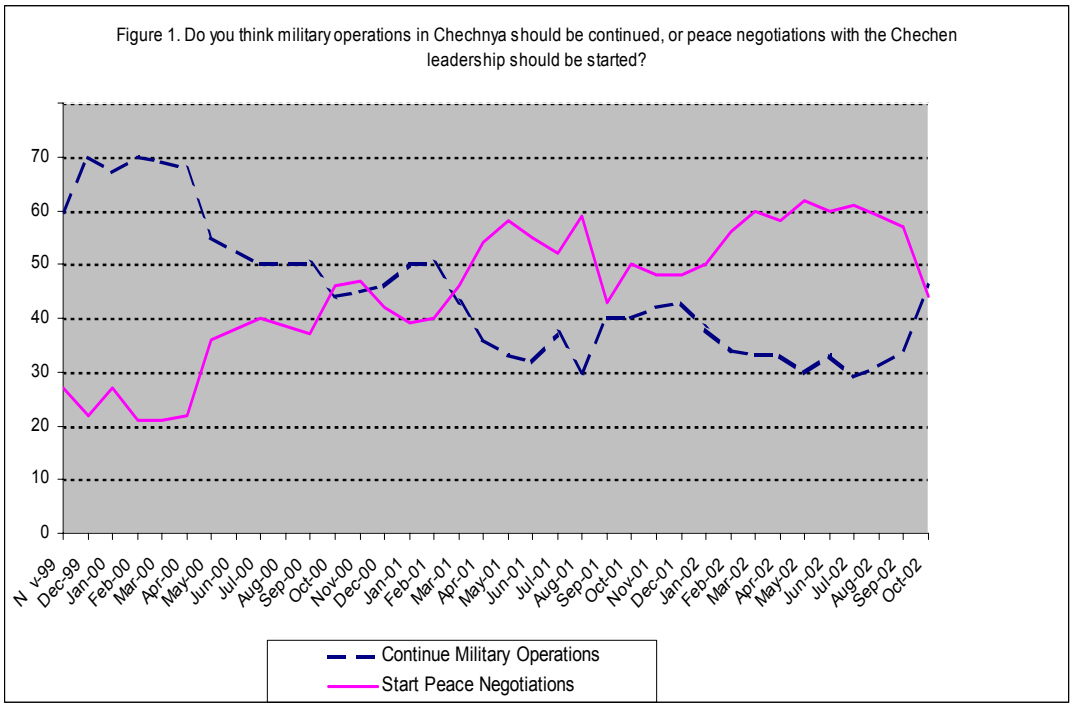
None of this implies that a deal with Maskhadov, or with any other leader of the Chechen resistance, is a necessary condition for settlement. And yet, the United States and the Kremlin are much more likely to help settle the conflict if they join forces to work out a face-saving formula for those Chechens who genuinely feel they need to employ arms to protect the security and safety of their families and their people against a massive military invasion.

Post–September 11 Shifts in Russian Public Opinion and the Moscow Hostage Crisis

Since November 1999, the All-Russian Center for Public Opinion Research (VTsIOM) has included questions on Chechnya in its monthly opinion surveys with representative samples of the Russian population ranging from about 2,100 to 2,400 respondents. As shown in Figure 1, January 2001 marks a turning point in Russian public opinion trends (see Figure 1 below).

Before January 2001 the majority of respondents favored "continuing military operations." After January 2001, the majority of respondents favored "starting peace negotiations." These trends almost reversed again after August 2001, but following September 2001, the peace option again gained momentum. After January 2002, the prevalence of supporters of peace negotiations (political settlement) over supporters of military operations has increased inexorably. Moreover, of those who believed that military operations should continue, only about 65 percent said they would still support such operations if Russian troops sustained considerable losses. And because the Russian military continues to sustain casualties, it is most likely that no more than 20 percent of all respondents are committed supporters of military presence.

FIGURE 1



Sources: The Russian Center for Public Opinion Research (VCIOM), *The Russian Public Opinion Monitor,* no. 4 (July-August 2002), p. 6; and www.wciom.ru/vciom/new/press/021020_terror.htm.

Even after a group of ethnic Chechen terrorists took more than 750 hostages in Moscow, about three miles from the Kremlin, the Russian public expressed only limited support for massive military retaliation in Chechnya. In a survey of 500 Muscovites on October 24, 2002, by the ROMIR polling agency, only 10.9 percent of respondents favored employing "tougher policy in Chechnya." Instead, respondents wanted to increase security in Moscow and other Russian cities (31.5 percent), deport from Moscow all members of ethnic groups of the Caucasus (24.8 percent), or withdraw troops and recognize Chechnya's independence (14.5 percent).

Sentiments hardened in a Russia-wide VTsIOM poll conducted from October 25 to 28, 2002, where 46 percent of respondents supported military operations in Chechnya while 44 percent still preferred peace negotiations. Even in the midst of a horrific and dramatic crisis in Moscow, support for military action in Chechnya was way below the 70 percent mark of February 2002. The Russian public strongly supported forceful retaliation specifically against Chechen terrorist military bases (54 percent). Yet, with respect to the resolution of the Chechen conflict in general, most respondents (33 percent) favored combining the use of force with peace negotiations. It is important to note, along with international humanitarian organizations and the U.S. and European governments, 70–80 percent of respondents positively evaluated President Putin's actions in response to the crisis. Today, Russians would not necessarily reject the long-feared internationalization of efforts to resolve the conflict in Chechnya.

Meanwhile, Putin's special representative on human rights in Chechnya, Abdul-Khakim Sultygov, told *Nezavisimaia Gazeta* that, despite the hostage crisis, efforts to bring about a political settlement in Chechnya by means of a constitutional referendum remained in force.

Citing statements by President Putin and other officials, Sultygov stated that, "the course for political settlement has been set and it is irreversible."

Conclusion

Although it is important to identify these opportunities, it is also important to recognize that decisionmakers in both Washington and Moscow have powerful incentives not to pursue them. In the short run, Moscow may decide to continue to enjoy Washington's acceptance of its military operations in Chechnya, however indiscriminate it might be toward the local civilian population. Washington may well remain preoccupied by other priorities such as military action against Iraq and decide that taking on any major initiatives with regard to Chechnya would divert too much time and resources away from its principal goals. In the long run, however, visionary leaders on both sides would do well to recognize opportunities for reducing social support for terrorism in one of the world's most violent areas. Far more than Europe was after World War II, in the words of Winston Churchill, Chechnya today is "a rubble heap, a charnel house, a breeding ground of pestilence and hate." It is not in the national interests of either Washington or Moscow to keep witnessing accounts of Russian military brutality in Chechnya, disseminated by Islamic preachers and the media, energizing the likes of Osama bin Laden and Mohammed Atta around the world.