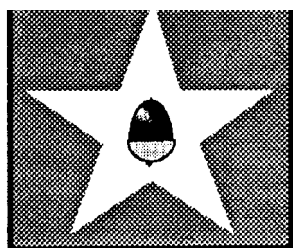


**Conflict Studies Research Centre**

**The Pattern of  
Russian Policy in  
The Caucasus &  
Central Asia**

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## **The Pattern of Russian Policy in The Caucasus & Central Asia**

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There is a widespread tendency to view Russia as the 'variable' where developments in the Caucasus and Central Asia are concerned. But unless the variable is approached as a subject in its own right, these developments are likely to surprise us. Russian policy in these regions reflects a broader pattern, the product of four elements:

- **The persistent equation in the Russian mind between security and 'spheres of influence'.** Even during the 'multi-voicedness' of the Yeltsin era, recognition of the CIS as Russia's 'rightful' sphere of interest was a major policy objective. Under Putin, Russians are not only 'saying this loudly', but acting in a more focused and methodical way. To a considerable degree, these methods still remain 'zero sum': strengthening influence by means of exploiting the real (and often self-induced) vulnerabilities of others. Russia recognises the formal independence of these countries, but has shown no interest in their 'ability to stand', and has sometimes undermined it, at the expense of its continuing desire for stability on its borders.
- **The distinctive currency of Russian influence.** The West still perceives Russia's relationship with newly independent states through a traditional state-to-state prism. In some respects, eg the deployment of Russian armed forces abroad, this prism remains relevant. But many of Russia's more effective levers of influence are *trans-national*: a shared business culture, a common political culture with 'parties of power' at local and national level, a common working culture across much of the security sector and pervasive economic interdependence. These connections make Russian interests structurally part of *internal* arrangements in these countries. If the latter cannot escape from the political, business and administrative cultures of the former USSR, they will not become proper participants in the global economy, and their independence will lack substance. But the route to such emancipation – the creation of effective, transparent and accountable institutions – threatens the power of those who currently have it.

In the Caucasus and elsewhere, the nexus between local clans, security services and organised crime is reinforced by Russian interests and methods of 'business'. Stanislav Levchenko's maxim – 'look for your vulnerabilities, and there you will find the KGB' – is pertinent. It will therefore remain difficult for outsiders (and many insiders) to see where local vulnerabilities end and Russian influence begins.

- **Confidence.** Russia's new confidence under Putin is largely the result of its new found economic strength. But it is reinforced by the events of 9/11, which for Russia represented: (a) a strategic diversion of the West, shifting the latter's focus from the former USSR; (b) an opportunity to increase pressure on neighbours (and its own Muslim areas: Tatarstan, Chechnya and Ingushetia) under the flag of fighting the 'war on terror'; (c) greater scope to use energy transit networks (and energy partnership with the West) as a means of securing geopolitical gain in the former USSR. Kremlin advisers claim to have detected 'signals' from the West that it will not obstruct this policy. Within recent months, these real or imagined signals have emboldened Russia to speak more forcefully ('liberal empire') and act more overtly and decisively in Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia. Hence:

- **Confusion,** when we (eg the US in Georgia) demonstrate that no such signals were intended.

**Therefore:**

- Russia continues to take us by surprise because we underestimate the distinctiveness of its thinking and methodology. Russians *are* methodical, but also uncertain about where the limits lie;
- We continue to confuse Russians because of our failure to communicate our own interests clearly, simply and consistently – and *before* problems mature into crises.

**The War On Terrorism (WOT)**

**Situation Pre September 2001** Russia maintains the view that the CIS is its rightful and natural sphere of influence. As far as Moscow is concerned, the fight against international (ie Islamic) terrorism began in the autumn of 1999, when the second Chechen war commenced. It has since become a leitmotif of Russian foreign policy towards the CIS as a whole.

In 2000, the first year of Putin's presidency, Russia did an effective job in lining up Central Asia and, to a more qualified degree, the rest of the CIS around combating international terrorism. This theme has served as a useful means of enhancing Russian influence, particularly in Central Asia, as these states were especially concerned about the threat posed by Islamic terrorism, and saw Russia as a key partner. Georgia and Azerbaijan were more problematic. These two states see NATO and the USA as their primary security partners. Moscow's relationship with Georgia became increasingly strained from late 1999 onwards as Russia accused Georgia of providing a refuge for Chechen separatists.

**September 2001 And Its Aftermath** presents Moscow with both advantages and challenges.

Advantage: Russia is seen by the West, particularly the USA and UK, as an important partner in the WOT and is increasingly recognised as an energy superpower. This is a dramatic reversal of the marginalisation and occasional humiliation it believes it has suffered since the end of the Cold War, which was most emphatically demonstrated by the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999.

Challenge: Moscow has to accept a greater US presence in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. This is a cause of concern in the Russian security establishment, which fears these regions becoming a sphere of US influence. The ministry of defence insists that it expects the US presence in Central Asia to be temporary and limited in scale. Iran shares Russia's misgivings. Concern is likely to have been enhanced by the recent leadership changes in Georgia and Azerbaijan. The Russian Ambassador in Azerbaijan has reacted strongly to unconfirmed rumours of future US bases there. Russians also suspect US involvement in the removal of Eduard Shevardnadze, and tensions are unlikely to diminish under his replacement.

Challenge: The WOT is a double edged sword for Moscow. It promotes the long-standing agenda of emerging as 'leader of stability and security' in the former USSR. It also secures US assistance in combating Islamic terrorist organisations that Russia is unable to combat on its own. However, Moscow also acutely perceives that the WOT promotes the Bush administration's agenda of remodelling the international system and securing a dominant position within it. In some respects Russia's position on the WOT is closer to France's and Germany's than to the USA's. Therefore, partnership with France and Germany is, for Moscow, an essential counterbalance to its new, wary and decidedly limited partnership with the United States.

Challenge: Russia remains frustrated over issues such as the World Trade Organisation, trade links with US, and EU widening. Therefore the WOT does not end Russia's basic foreign policy frustrations, ie its resentment of the USA's dominant role. Putin is making a virtue of necessity, as there is little point in opposing the US juggernaut. In the long term, however, Russia probably looks more to the EU as its basic partner than the USA.

## **Outlook & Policy Options**

- Russia is defining its interests with conviction and asserting them with increasing toughness. The 11 October 2003 document 'Actual Tasks Concerning the Development of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation' moves beyond 'pre-emption' to an assertion of Russia's right to take preventive military action. This is not surprising. Russia is not good at being 'small' and has never been reconciled to being treated as anything less than a great power. Today's assertiveness is a compound of anxiety and confidence. Today, economic (and particularly energy) resources are being

used ever more blatantly for geopolitical gain. Russia has used its energy relationship and debt for equity deals in a very unsubtle way, on occasion, in dealings with several of its neighbours. Arms sales are another useful lever.

- Russia's role in the region will also be influenced by its relationship with China. Despite mutual anxieties about Islamic extremism, separatism and instability in Central Asia – not to say China's appetite for Russian arms and its growing dependency on Russian energy – China refuses to be drawn into Russian schemes of 'strategic partnership' and in the Russian Far East is behaving with increasing boldness.

In the Caucasus and Central Asia, the UK will need to confront three issues:

**1. *The role of regional security organisations in the FSU:*** The Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) has defied every prediction of its demise. It is unlikely to be disinvented soon. For this reason alone, it must be recognised *de facto*. Where its activities promote our interests and values, we should be open to cooperation. But caution should be exercised about recognising *de jure* an organisation which even some of its members view as an instrument of Russian rather than collective interests. Moreover, Western recognition would undermine the large number of CIS states who have remained outside the CSTO despite Russian pressure (which would surely increase). Western recognition would be seen as endorsement of regimes that have defined 'terrorism' and 'extremism' in disturbingly permissive terms and lack legitimacy in the eyes of many of their own people.

**2. *The independence of Russia's neighbours:*** Russia is likely to remain the dominant force in this area unless the West demonstrates that its assistance works. Failing this, Russia will promote 'firm good neighbourliness' and may on occasion provide 'brotherly support' for the 'negative phenomena' that weaken the ability of local states to pursue an independent course. Whilst we might not approve of such behaviour, we might not always have a compelling interest in opposing it, or the means to do so successfully. In order to strengthen security in the region, it is not enough to strengthen international mechanisms, we need to diminish the dysfunctional institutions inside states that prevent them from becoming going concerns. This is a tall order. Where we cannot provide such assistance, we should tailor our expectations accordingly. Where it makes sense to provide it (eg Georgia), interests must be declared openly, and efforts must be integrated and sustained.

**3. *The future of Russia:*** UK policy cannot be founded on the hope that a more prosperous Russia will be a more 'liberal' Russia. The State Duma elections of 7 December 2003 point to the opposite conclusion: that Russians equate prosperity with stability, stability with order and order with a strong and respected state. President Putin's spokesmen now claim that 'the political transition period in Russia has ended'. Russia's political stability is closely related to the 'vertical of power' that Putin is still constructing, and to continuing economic growth. Its heavily unbalanced

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economy is dominated by energy interests and hostage to changes in energy prices. Russia still vests too much power - and faith - in the office of president. It would be prudent for the UK to give active consideration to potential developments in Russia after Putin's departure - timely or untimely.

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