

RUSSIA'S CONTRIBUTION AS A PARTNER IN THE WAR ON TERRORISM

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This monograph examines terrorism and counterterrorism from the Russian perspective, in order to assess prospects for cooperation with Russia in fighting terror. It concludes that, regardless of the state of political relations between Russia and the United States at any given time, longer-term systemic and conceptual obstacles to meaningful cooperation may well prevent any significant Russian contribution to U.S. counterterrorism efforts.

This monograph explores these questions. First, it lays out detailed Russian definitions of terrorism, illustrating the important point that Russian understanding of terror and how to counter it draws on a fundamentally different history from western definitions. It then turns to look at the Russian security “pyramid,” which sets out the relevant authority structure. The monograph examines the roles of coordinating bodies such as the Security Council and the National Anti-Terrorist Committee, before looking in more depth at the individual organs involved in counterterrorism operations, particularly the Federal Security Service and Ministry of the Interior. The monograph then explores the most important question for Russia in terms of terrorism: the North Caucasus, illustrating the extent of the problem, before sketching out the security situation regarding the Winter Olympic Games in Sochi in early-2014. The monograph finally looks at the wider context of the relationship between Russia and the West, particularly the United States, and looks at the lengthy list of tensions which affected the relationship even before Russia’s seizure of Crimea, which took place after the monograph was completed.

It is essential to understand the very different meaning ascribed to the word “terrorism” in Russia from how that term is understood in the United

States. Not only is this a highly politically charged term, but it also has much broader application than in Western usage. For instance, the armed conflict in Chechnya, including during phases which in some aspects resembled high-intensity warfare, was referred to by Russia as a “counterterrorist operation.”

The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was largely terrorism free, in part because of the oppressive, but largely effective, security system. But Russia began to face a significant terrorist threat almost immediately after the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Since the early-1990s, the North Caucasus has been ravaged by attacks ranging in scale from pinpoint assassinations and kidnappings, to major attacks on communities – most vividly illustrated by the attack on Beslan in 2004, which killed hundreds, the majority of whom were children.

Although they are not the only source of terrorist activity in Russia, radical Islamic cells based in the Caucasus are seen by the Russian authorities to be its main driver. It would appear, therefore, that the United States and its allies have a common cause with Russia in fighting “international terrorism.” Some senior Western officials have advanced the idea of developing practical cooperation in the fight against international terrorists. This is a feature, for instance, of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO)-Russia agenda. Yet, while interests appear to coincide and offer a potential platform for developing a more practically cooperative relationship, there are, in fact, significant obstacles to this cooperation.

The lessons from the U.S. counterinsurgency experience can only be applied to Russian circumstances with caution. There is no room for compromise in the North Caucasus conflict. The Russian Empire, and

later the USSR, subjugated the region with extreme brutality, and the local populace resisted with the same ferocity. The historical resonance of this experience provides an additional dimension which was lacking from operations in, for example, Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. At the same time, aspects of the Russian approach to counterterrorism operations would be entirely unacceptable if implemented by U.S. security forces.

Nevertheless, scope for productive cooperation against terror threats does exist. Identifying opportunities for this cooperation requires a detailed understanding of the Russian view of these threats, and especially of which Russian agencies and authorities are relevant to any such cooperation and which are not. This monograph aims to provide an introduction to that understanding.

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