

Escalation of the Tajikistan Conflict

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Introduction

After proclaiming for months that the Tajik-Afghan border should be treated as Russia's own, the convictions of Russia's political and military leaders were finally put to the test. On 13 July, Russian Border Troop Post No 12 in Tajikistan's Kulyab region was virtually overrun when 200 Afghan mojahedin, armed with mortars, rocket launchers and recoilless cannons, launched a frontal assault from across the river Pyanj. Simultaneously, a second group of Tajik "militants" fell upon the post's 47 defenders from behind. By the time reinforcements from the Russian Army's 201st Motor Rifle Division and troops from the Tajik National Security Committee had repulsed the attackers, 24 of the post's complement had been killed and 18 wounded.¹

In one fell swoop, the attack internationalized a civil conflict in Tajikistan which, since April 1992, has claimed over 100,000 lives.² Already, it is having three other effects. First, the escalation of the conflict is exerting a decided, and possibly decisive, influence in Russia's inconclusive efforts to define its geopolitical priorities. By the same token, it has given the protagonists of integration in both Russia and Central Asia a renewed determination to transform the CIS into a reconstituted USSR. Finally, it is raising trenchant questions about Russia's ability to match means to ends and is forcing Russian policy makers to consider just what the Russian Federation can and cannot accomplish on its own. If long debated questions are at last being answered, there is little indication as yet that the answers will suit Russia's neighbours, let alone benefit Russia itself.

The Cycle of Conflict

By no means is this attack "*the most ruthless yet*" according to the Commander of Russian Border Troops in Tajikistan, being treated as the mere sequel to earlier raids which had already transformed the 1,200 km Tajik-Afghan border into a zone of turbulence. Such raids have become

routine since December 1992 when the present Tajik government, dominated by Kulyabis and old-guard communists, ousted opposition forces from Dushanbe. However, the government failed, like its Soviet predecessor, to establish control over the country as a whole. The forces are divided by untidy permutations of clan, region and ideology. Although rigidly branded as "*Islamist*", "*fundamentalist*" and "*terrorist*" by the Tajik authorities, they span a broad spectrum. They include Pamiri separatists (who may have no political complexion whatsoever), the secular Democratic Party, and an assortment of "*Islamic*" groups, many of whom are only notionally committed to the religious labels they sport. For all this diversity, most opposition groups have found it feasible, as well as necessary, to make use of Afghan arms, connections and territory in their struggle against the central authorities.

Because the border plays such an important role in this struggle, the border's guards are party to the conflict by their very presence. By placing former Soviet KGB Border Troops in Tajikistan under Russian jurisdiction in August 1992 (rather than withdrawing them), Russia took a fateful step, condemned by the Tajik opposition at the time. By concluding a bilateral Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with the government of President Imamali Rahmonov on 25 May 1993, Russia took an even more fateful step. It threw to the winds the last vestiges of the neutrality which it preserved for a time when a similar spectrum of forces tried to oust Rahmonov's Soviet predecessor, Rakhmon Nabyev, in 1992.

Thus, the attack on Border Post No 12 and several incursions which reportedly followed comes at a time when Russia is visibly committed to Tajikistan's territorial integrity and political order. It follows months of statements from Foreign Ministry liberals as well as blatant chauvinists, that Russia has a "*special responsibility*" to "*stop all conflicts on the territory of the former USSR*", that the Russian Armed Forces have a "*special mission*" to protect the Russians in former Soviet republics and that the Russian Army is the "*guarantor of stability*" in Russia and elsewhere. As recently as 9 June, President Yeltsin rhetorically asked a closed session

of the Russian military leadership what it would mean to withdraw from Tajikistan. *"It means that they will hack each other to bits. There will be neither a republic nor a nation. As a great power, Russia cannot permit a whole nation to perish."*³ Since 13 July, action has been largely in accord with this sentiment.

Reaction and Response

The most striking feature of the attack then was not its provenance or even its ferocity, but the large-scale and overt participation of *"Afghan servicemen"*. It has been asserted by not only Russian military headquarters but also the Tajik Foreign Minister, who within hours of the assault boasted of having *"solid proof"*, that the attack had been commanded by senior officers of Afghanistan's 55th Infantry Division. The core assertion (i.e. Afghan involvement) aroused the suspicions of many who were prepared to accept it. Citing previous clashes which Russian authorities chose to hush up, the leaders of several prominent Russian and Tajik political parties called a press conference on 21 July to warn that the furore over Border Post No 12 has been engineered by Russian generals and their allies seeking an excuse for greater involvement.⁴ Two days earlier, Gavril Popov, chairman of the Movement for Democratic Reforms and a campaigner for the withdrawal of Russian troops from all former Soviet republics, spoke of *"horrible misinformation"* about the Tajik border and warned that Yeltsin himself was *"poorly informed"*.

Publicly at least, Russian officialdom has maintained a united front, characterising the episode as a *"brutal provocation"* and a *"threat to the national security of the Russian Federation"* which would be *"decisively repulsed"* and *"neutralised"*. That facade, however, sheds no light on the vexing question of whether Russia's Ministries of Defence and Security have been operating as a law unto themselves on the border, either before 13 July or since. An otherwise robust statement from Yeltsin's press office on 15 July was notably clumsy on this point. Nor was the issue clarified by Yeltsin's decree on 28 July giving the Minister of Defence *"general operational leadership for the interaction of all forces and means enlisted for the defence of the Tajik-Afghan border and the stabilisation of the situation"*.

What is clear, despite these uncertainties, is that events in Tajikistan furnished new political weapons to those embroiled in Russia's power struggle (*ante*

the October rebellion). On 27 July, the Minister of Security, Viktor Barannikov, was dismissed. This was a move timed to coincide with setbacks in Tajikistan but more likely motivated by the Ministry's investigations of corruption in Yeltsin's entourage. That suspicion is only strengthened by the sacking, one day earlier, of the first deputy minister of Internal Affairs - a key Barannikov ally, whose Ministry has no role to play in Tajikistan. Not surprisingly, a third casualty, the commander of Russian Federation Border Troops, Colonel General Vladimir Shlyakhtin, was a Barannikov subordinate. In marked contrast, the Ministry of Defence which has bent over backwards to avoid *"partisanship"* has suffered no adverse consequences.

Although the Tajik events may have benefited the *"democrats"* in terms of Moscow politics, they have unmistakably strengthened the proponents of a more militarized and less Western orientated policy in terms of national security. In turn, they are bound to strengthen the Russocentric tendency in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, whose tougher positions on the former Soviet *"near abroad"* have aroused favourable parliamentary comment in recent months.⁵

On 15 July, the Minister of Security declared that the Border Troops would *"use all available forces and combat resources, without exception, not only to halt but also to prevent acts of aggression from territory adjacent to the borders of Tajikistan and the CIS"*. With only minor variation, this formula which reflects the offensive spirit of Russia's draft military doctrine has been repeated by the Foreign Ministry, not to speak of the President, the government and the Ministry of Defence.

Soon it became known that words had been translated into actions. On 17 July, the Afghan Foreign Ministry claimed that Russia had launched a massive aerial and artillery bombardment on northern Afghanistan, leaving 300 casualties in its wake. For three days, Russian and Tajik authorities fended off the claim with Aesopian language. On 20 July, they changed tack. The Ministry of Security's press office announced that Russia had a *"moral right"* to invade Afghanistan and admitted that strikes across the border had indeed taken place. After further denials that inhabited locations had been struck, the Russian government then announced that civilians and *"extremists"* were intermingled *"as a rule"* and that Russia, for its part, had duly warned Afghanistan to evacuate civilians from border areas. Any hope that retaliation would be a one-off event was firmly dispelled by 31 July, when *Izvestiya* published an eyewitness account of

cross-border strikes by combat helicopters from the 201st Division:

*"This 'task' has been methodically carried out in recent days in accordance with the measures adopted by Minister Pavel Grachev. It has become an important element of the day-to-day functions of the Russian Army in Tajikistan ... From (official) information, it is hard to clarify where these strikes are being directed and against whom ... We have no way of knowing how 'surgical' these strikes are. In terms of accuracy, I believe, it is unlikely that they compare even with the US bombardments of Baghdad in which innocent civilians were killed."*⁶

Means and Ends

Yet to punish is not enough. What is the aim and how is it to be achieved? Boris Yeltsin's dictum *"the Tajik-Afghan border is practically Russia's border"* has aroused no official dissent. It was not *"military hardliners"* but the Ministry of Foreign Affairs which outlined these *"most important foreign policy tasks"* for the Russian Federation in November 1992:

"the cessation and regulation of armed conflicts around Russia, the inadmissibility of their spreading onto our territory and the provision of strict observation in the 'near abroad' of human and minority rights, particularly of Russians and the Russian speaking population".⁷

Only those who are far out of kilter with official policy openly question Barannikov's axiom that, by defending this border, *"we defend the strategic approaches to the backbone of Russia"*. If the circle of dissenters is small, it is because in Russia the imperial perspective is often strategically compelling. If Tajikistan were *"sacrificed to the Islamists"* asked the Parliamentary Foreign Affairs chairman, Ambartsumov, *"How far would we need to retreat? To north Kazakhstan probably"*. By Marshal Shaposhnikov's estimate, the cost of *"moving the line"* would be thousands of billions of roubles.

Yet Shaposhnikov (who resigned on 10 August as secretary of the Security Council) has been adamant that there could be no chance of *"ceasing and regulating"* conflict without a comprehensive approach. He has been equally emphatic that, whilst *"it is essential to close the Tajik-Afghan border ... Russia alone is unable to do so"*. For a time at least, it seemed that all of these warnings might be

heeded. Yeltsin's decree of 28 July outlined three complementary measures.

First, *"decisive steps"* would be taken to neutralize threats to the border and reinforce the Russian military presence. On 26 July, according to ITAR-TASS, Foreign Minister Kozyrev stated that *"only a strong rebuff based on force, including bomb attacks on bases of armed formations, could stabilise the situation"*. To this end, the Supreme Soviet has been asked to repeal the December 1992 law banning the deployment of Russian conscripts outside the Russian Federation without their consent.

Second, Russia would have to promote negotiations and compromise between all concerned. According to his special envoy, First Deputy Foreign Minister Anatoliy Adamishin has said:

"this entails, most of all, that the (Tajikistan) government should find a way of establishing a dialogue, democratising the country and, it has to be said ... Russia is exerting pressure towards this end."

Finally, Russia would need to seek partners in both the *"near and far abroad"*. Russian peacemaking activities must be allowed to operate under the UN flag, efforts to defend *"this CSCE border"* must secure EC and NATO support, and the *"civilized world"* must be persuaded that *"a stable Central Asia"* is not only Russia's buffer against an *"Islamist"* south but also its own. Moreover, as Yeltsin bluntly informed participants at the summit of Central Asian states on 6-7 August, *"Russia expects more support"* from its CIS and Collective Security Treaty partners. *"It is vitally important for all our states to neutralize the growing threat to security ... The Tajik-Afghan border is ... a matter of our common concern. We have got the Minsk agreements of 22 January (1993), as well as the ... collective security treaty of 15 May 1992. Russia counts on them being met in full"*.

Back to the USSR?

By throwing down the gauntlet of *"collective security"* to his Central Asian neighbours, Yeltsin handed them a gift rather than a burden. It is no secret that the five Central Asian governments felt betrayed by the Soviet Union's breakup - and it is no surprise that, with the exception of neutrally minded Turkestan, they have sought to add Soviet flesh and bone to the CIS shell. Since 13 July, the region's senior figure, Kazakhstan's President Nazarbayev,

has taken every opportunity to say, "I told you so". Already, he has forced Yeltsin to convene an Economic Union summit in Moscow on 7 September, and he has made no secret of his wish to go further: "Without uniting, without a normal economic union and without joint defence, and - I am not afraid of the word - without once again starting to strengthen friendship between the peoples who used to be called Soviet peoples, then there will be no progress".

Such "progress" is grist to the mill of those who advocate a more Asiatic and southerly direction for Russian policy. "What is effectively at issue" states *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* "is the creation of a new geopolitical union this time without the European republics of the former USSR ... It is Kazakhstan, with its half-Kazakh half non-Kazakh population, that makes it possible for Moscow to feel itself to be part of Europe, by giving it a bridge into Asia".

Is Kazakhstan, therefore, a prize to be "held onto with both hands", or will engagement in Central Asia ruin what chances Russia still has of becoming a normal European country? Those who think like Gavril Popov are fearful that "collective security" is merely a device which allows deficient regimes to off-load military costs onto Russia, whilst at the same time using Russian forces to crush their internal opponents.

Thus far, each of these fears has been substantiated. Although Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan each promised one battalion to reinforce the Tajik-Afghan border, Kazakhstan's Border Troops are 75 per cent Russian; Uzbekistan refuses to confirm whether its contingent has been dispatched, and Kyrgyzstan's battalion (originally designated a "special purpose brigade") arrived at half its promised strength of 500, without weapons, or bullet-proof vests. What is more, Russian Border Troops - 50 per cent under-strength themselves - are now plugging holes in the Kyrgyz border post of Sary-Tash in order to compensate for Kyrgyzstan's "contribution".

True to Popov's second warning, the Tajik authorities promptly used the furore over Border Post No 12 in the west to launch an offensive by army, Interior Ministry and National Security forces against Pamiri separatists and local "Self-Defence Forces" in the autonomous region of Gornyy Badakhshan, several hundred kilometres to the east. Russia's refusal to back the venture may be laudatory, but the opposition has every reason to think this beside the point so long as Russia continues to back the government. The fact remains

that, by launching its offensive, the client has further destabilized the border which the patron is obliged to protect. Are such protectors the fire brigade or the fire?

Containment or Expansion?

Three weeks after "Afghan servicemen" openly intervened in Tajikistan, Russia's chief negotiator for the crisis, Anatoliy Adamishin, reminded a Russian newspaper that the conflict was "more Tajik-Tajik in nature". Astutely, and perhaps unwittingly, he went to the core of the problem. Like many "nation-states" designed from above, Tajikistan is both divisible and expandable. It contains minority peoples determined to resist the intrusions of any central authority indeed desperate to do so after three generations of Soviet misrule. It contains others, like the Kulyabis, "for whom war means life and power". By the same token, it adjoins two countries, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan, with large Tajik populations whose loyalties bear no relationship to borders. "If the hard line opposition comes to power in Dushanbe, the spectre of recarving the map to change the borders the Bolsheviks drew up will become a reality." So warns a "senior anonymous diplomat". We should not be astounded if Russia's conduct speeds the opposition's hardening, even if it prolongs its path of power. Moreover, we should not forget that the Central Asian map includes not only Afghanistan and the CIS states, but Iran, Pakistan and China as well.

Notes

- 1 ITAR-TASS citing the Russian Border Troops' press office. Further details from Mayak Radio and Ostankino 1. TV "special correspondent" Alishar Khodzhayev, citing "verified information", puts the total number of attackers at 400. BBC *Summary of World Broadcasts*, (hereafter SWB), SU/1741 A1/1, 15/07/93 and SU/1742 A1/1, 16/07/93.
- 2 See Jane's Intelligence Review, Vol. 5, No. 4, pp 181-184.
- 3 INTERFAX, 10/06/93.
- 4 The press conference was convened by the leaders of the Economic Freedom Party, the (Russian) Social Democratic Party and the Democratic Party of Tajikistan, SWB, 24/07/93.
- 5 See Lough J B K, "Defining Russia's Role in the 'Near Abroad' ", Conflict Studies Research Centre, RMA Sandhurst, April 1993.
- 6 Report from Boris Vinogradov, *Izvestiya*, 31/07/93.

7 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, adopted by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 27/11/92.

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