Threat of Terrorism in Central Asia

Following the speech of Russian President, Vladimir Putin, which he delivered before the General UN Assembly on September 28, 2015, and the latest developments in Syria it evoked, global mass media engaged in a heated debate over the topic of international terrorism, which is associated these days with the activities of militants of the Islamic State (ISIS). It should be noted that Russia has a well-grounded reason to have concerns over this issue, as it directly involves the integrity of Russia’s eastern border it shares with the post-Soviet states of Central Asia.

Central Asia is a vast region, which includes Afghanistan, Mongolia, the northern regions of Iran, India and Pakistan, the western outreaches of China as well as part of the southern outskirts of Russia and five former Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. Since any upheaval in the post-Soviet region of Central Asia would inevitably affect Russia, it is no surprise that this sub-region is regarded as vital as far as Russian strategic interests are concerned. This is why Russia’s geopolitical rivals (the US and the member countries of NATO, which often benefit from destabilization of the situation in the post-Soviet Central Asia) strive to spread their influence to that region.

According to experts, radical movements in the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia are apparently being funded and managed by some international powers. For example, since the beginning of the 21st century, the authorities of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan had to deal with the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan. Today this terrorist group, considered to be one of the most notorious, is seen as a threat to all countries of the Central Asia region. Originally, its objective was to achieve the separation of the Fergana valley from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan and to form an independent Islamic state in its territory. The Fergana valley is a densely populated district with a high unemployment rate, which makes it a perfect “breeding ground” for all sorts of radical organizations and the recruitment of new supporters. If the initial militants’ agenda involved just the establishment of an independent state in the Fergana valley, today they harbor an even more ambitious plan: they want it to become a part of the Islamic Caliphate, which is supposed to include the entire territory of the Middle East and the Caucasus.

In August 2015, the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan integrated into ISIS. This organization is proving to be more and more influential in the region and it is continually expanding, taking other smaller militant groups originating from the countries of Central Asia under its wing.

The threat it poses is so intense that on October 1, 2015 Tajikistan’s border patrol guarding the border with Afghanistan was put on full combat alert after Taliban militants, who are members of these terrorist organizations, stormed and seized the city of Kunduz.

In recent years, there was a noticeable upsurge in the activities of the agents of international terrorist organizations in Kazakhstan. They recruit and train militants. There are militant bases in the territory of the country, where they plot acts of sabotage against neighboring states. Citizens of Kazakhstan participated in the acts of terrorism in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan.

To add insult to injury, those who come from the former Soviet republics of Central Asia fight in Syria and Iraq in the ranks of ISIS. Outlook for the future is rather grim since the worst consequence of this situation for the countries of Central Asia is that sooner or later militants will return to their home countries, and the chances are high that
having gained experience in war, they would engage in terrorist activities at home.

The threat of terrorism in the post-Soviet republics of Central Asia is exacerbated due to the wide support the radical Islamic movements receive from the local population, who are being "brainwashed" through the massive extremist propaganda. In Russia, this situation is perceived as potentially dangerous because propaganda campaigns are also being conducted among the Muslims residing in the Russian territory. According to some sources, a substantial number of militants originating from Central Asia and currently fighting in the ranks of terrorists in the Middle East were recruited in the Russian Federation, while temporary living in its territory as migrant workers. Adverse living conditions, low wages and discontent with the government in their home countries contribute to the recruiters' success.

Therefore, the worst-case scenario for Russia (in the context of activities of terrorist organizations) would be the flaring up of armed conflicts, which, causing a stream of refugees to cross Russian borders, would put the country's stability at risk and disrupt the established trade and political relations with its eastern neighbors.

Should that happen, all those, who fear a "strong Russia," including the US, would be reaping the fruits. Some facts (and there are plenty) suggest that the US and NATO intelligence agencies were involved in the establishment of some of the most aggressive terrorist organizations. Evidently, there are occasions when geopolitical interests of the US require for "the dirty work" to be done by somebody else, and Islamic terrorists are perfect candidates for this role. It happened more than once that the US, striving to spread its influence to some region, would extend its support to the local extremist and terrorist organizations to overthrow the disfavored regime with their hands.

There are grounds to believe that the West is worried about the growing affinity between Russia and China and could potentially use tension in Central Asia to undermine the positions of the two countries and increase own influence in the region. As it has already been mentioned, Russia would be greatly troubled should a military conflict be sparked in the region. It would also hit China, especially, if the Uighur separatists from the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China (more than 15 million people live there, out of which 60% are of Turkic origin and practice Islam) would become active. The US and its NATO allies can (should the circumstances be suitable) promote extremism in the region to reinforce their influence and exert pressure on Russia and China.

What differentiates the contemporary approach of the US intelligence services in their dealing with terrorist groups from the methodology they used to apply in the past is that today terrorists are supposed to be liquidated after they complete their task. But the confidence of western intelligence services in that they can keep terrorists under control is profoundly erroneous. As the Russian President pointed out in his speech at the General UN Assembly, "...those, who flirt with terrorists, deal with cruel but not stupid people who also have their own ambitions and know how to implement them. The Islamic State did not come out of a clear blue sky: it was initially nurtured as an instrument against disfavored secular regimes."

The threat to the global security is also heightened by the fact that even when NATO and the US publicly declare an uncompromising war on terrorism, they still continue pursuing their own geopolitical interests, and this notion was demonstrated in Iraq and Afghanistan.

By now, ISIS has developed into such a powerful force that it would take joint efforts of all countries to counter it.

Speaking before the General Assembly of UN, Vladimir Putin once again appealed to all countries (and, first of all, the countries of the western hemisphere) to put their ambitions aside and join Russia and its partners in their struggle against the common threat. Will the West accept this invitation or not? It is obvious that if the US and the countries of NATO do not reconsider their positions, terrorism will not be eradicated any time soon.

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