

**Land for Peace – A Policy Option for Chechnya?
On the Realities of War and the Prospects for Peace**

By Dr. Dmitri Trenin

I. Introduction

In January and February of 2000, the war in Chechnya entered a new phase. From a military perspective, this phase is marked by the Russian federal forces taking Grozny as well as by guerilla war tactics that the Chechen rebels have begun to use. From a political perspective, it is characterized by the transfer of power in the Kremlin and the beginning of a presidential election campaign in Russia. During this phase, the public's mood is marked by growing fatigue from the war, although the government still continues to enjoy mass public support on this issue. These changes require that Russian political authorities as well as top military leaders define their goals and strategy in this campaign more clearly.

This policy note argues that:

- Russia's military successes, albeit bought at a high price, will not lead to a solution of the Chechnya problem unless followed up with a dedicated and sustained political effort, something which is missing now;
- Helping the Chechens to self-organize for peaceful reconstruction of their republic is the key to any genuine political

solution. This is clearly in Russia's enlightened self-interest;

- Based on a successful transformation of the conflict between the Russian Federation and Chechnya into one that can be managed by political means, it might be in Russia's well understood self-interest to consider a longer-term solution, based on the principle ideas of the Near East "Land for Peace" concept;
- The West, above all the European Union, must go beyond criticizing Moscow for the conduct of the war in Chechnya and engage Russia in constructive dialogue about ways of post-conflict rehabilitation of the region, including the creation of economic incentives for a lasting peace.

II. Results of the Military Campaign

1. Assessing the Present Situation

As federal troops entered the territory of the Chechen Republic in September of 1999, they achieved quick and remarkable results. The threat of wider destabilization in the North Caucasus was eradicated. A considerable number of Chechen separatist military formations were wiped out. The lowlands of

Chechnya were brought under Russian control.

Commanders of the Combined Federal Forces took into consideration many mistakes from the first Chechen War of 1994-1996, and to some extent they also drew from the NATO experience in the Balkans in 1999. From the very outset of the war, attacks have been massive and targeted. Federal forces quickly reached 100,000 people. This equals the level of Soviet troops in Afghanistan in the 1980s and exceeds by two to three times the average level of federal forces used in the first war in Chechnya. Russian troops currently employ many more aircraft, helicopters, tanks, and artillery than during the previous conflict.

Thus, federal troops strove to maximize their military and technical advantages by attacking the enemy from distance, striking from the air and using artillery. They surrounded and blocked residential areas giving the local population a choice: They were either to oust the rebels themselves or run the risk of being attacked by federal troops together with the rebel forces. In December 1999, this tactic drove away separatist factions from all major towns and settlements in the lowlands of Chechnya, with the important exception of Grozny. Federal troops were also active in the highlands in the south and southeast regions of the republic. In February 2000, Grozny was in Russian hands.

Commanders of the federal troops demonstrated a unity of will and a determination to achieve their goal at any cost, as well as an ability to coordinate successfully the efforts of various forces, including those of the Defense Ministry and the Ministry of Internal Affairs. They kept emphasizing that their first priority was to minimize casualties.

From the outset of the operation, the country's political authorities virtually allowed the Russian military command to conduct the warfare *carte blanche*. In fact, the military received a guarantee that the former tactics of frequent moratoriums and cease-fires that led to irritation and suspicions of "treason" among the troops in the previous Chechen

War would not be repeated this time. Top political management also allowed the federal military command to make independent decisions concerning the momentum of the offensive and the deadlines of specific missions, e.g., occupation of residential areas, etc. Upon taking control of a residential area, federal troops immediately set up command outposts that became the main governing bodies. Migration on the administrative borders of Chechnya is also controlled by the military.

One very important factor was the decision of the Russian authorities to limit the distribution of information about the progress of the war and the willingness of major TV channels to consent to this decision. As a result, the majority of available information about the 1999-2000 military campaign has been authorized or directly released by the Russian military command.

All of the above factors contributed to the military success of federal troops in Chechnya by early winter. At the same time, as the setbacks of December and January demonstrated, these achievements are not irreversible.

Despite the casualties suffered and the lack of a centralized command, the militant separatists do pose a serious threat. There are at least 8,000 and maybe as many as 15,000 of them, with many field commanders still surviving. The staunch defense of Grozny and the bold attacks in the zone controlled by federal forces demonstrate that the morale of the rebels is quite high. Street battles in Grozny as well as military activities in the mountains reduced the advantages of Russian troops and created more favorable conditions for their opponents. Finally, Russia has failed to physically isolate Chechnya in order to prevent the rebels from receiving military assistance from the outside.

2. Assessing Possible Future Developments in the Military Situation

Under these circumstances, the war might well last longer than the two or three

months predicted by the Russian military command. Moreover, with the beginning of spring the rebels will become more active, able to enjoy the natural protection of the forests. Even after the official announcement of victory (the minimum conditions being, after the seizure of Grozny, termination - at least temporarily - of the organized resistance of the rebels, maintenance of nominal control over the Chechen lowlands and capture of at least some of the key positions in the highlands) the conflict in Chechnya will most likely continue and turn into a prolonged guerilla war. Federal troops will strive to liquidate rebel strongholds in the mountains while the rebels will sabotage Russian troops and important targets in the lowlands. Russian troops will be able to control the major residential areas and the main roads in the lowlands of Chechnya (during the daytime), but they will be constantly in danger of barrages, sabotage, and acts of terrorism. The price of military occupation for Russia, the Chechens' longing for revenge, the Chechens' proclivity towards violence, and, of course, the Chechens' desire to rid themselves of the strict control of the Russian state will encourage the rebels to recruit new fighters. Such a situation bears less of a resemblance to the struggle against the "forest brothers" in Lithuania or Bandera fighters in western Ukraine than to the situation in Kurdistan in the 1970s-1980s. In the long run, federal troops will increasingly feel besieged while their opponents will again unfold the banner of national liberation.

A chronic guerilla war is more than likely to occur, and to hope for a Russian victory is to entertain illusions. Russia has the opportunity to utilize its military success to seek a political solution from an advantageous position, but this opportunity is fleeting. It is better to start a dialogue when besieging one's opponent than when defending one's own garrison.

3. The Wider Political Context

The Russian campaign against Chechnya started out as a continuation of the Dages-

tan campaign. Never before did the power of Russia in the Northern Caucasus look as feeble and tenuous as it did in August of 1999 during the offensive of the "Wahhabists." Having coped with the situation in Dagestan, the Russian authorities faced the following dilemma: What should be done with Chechnya, the main source of instability in the region? The motives of the Kremlin, the government, the military, and the national security and law enforcement agencies for resolute action were quite obvious: It was an opportunity to revive state power; to demonstrate their ability to handle difficult tasks, and thus to increase the chances of the current party of power to win the parliamentary and presidential elections; to avenge the defeat of the 1994-96 war; and to raise the prestige of the army, national security, and law enforcement agencies.

At first, afraid of a repetition of the 1994-96 catastrophe, Russian authorities proceeded cautiously, but soon they advanced decisively. The conditions were such that the authorities' goals had not been formed beforehand and the development of an exit strategy was considered a prematurely "defeatist" attitude. Consequently, the stakes grew as successes mounted - from establishing the sanitary cordon around Chechnya, to creating a security zone inside the republic, to the actual division of Chechnya along the Terek river, and, finally, to the complete extermination of the rebels and seizure of the entire territory of Chechnya. The fact that such a momentous task was plotted in such a bold manner apparently indicates that the military command overestimated its strength and underestimated that of the enemy.

However, the military's, and consequently the authorities', response to the threat in the Northern Caucasus was a remarkable success. This was not so much due to the war itself as to an opportunity to demonstrate qualities of effective leadership under conditions of virtual paralysis of state power. In only a few months, a previously little known government bureaucrat, Vladimir Putin, became a figure of presidential stature in the eyes of the electorate. His popularity, won

mainly through his apt handling of the war in the Caucasus, allowed a large group of deputies, most of whom were formerly unknown at the national political level but who are loyal to the authorities, to win seats in the State Duma. During the Duma elections the alternative party of power that was about to move into the Kremlin suffered a painful and unexpected defeat. As a result, Yeltsin's early resignation and the highly probable election of Putin to the presidential post – maybe even in the first round of elections – became possible.

It is apparent, nevertheless, that the Chechen War, which facilitated the solution to political problems that previously had seemed impossible to solve, may lead to extremely negative consequences for those in power should it continue. Of course, setbacks in Chechnya that might occur in the next few weeks can make Putin more vulnerable, but most likely they will not prevent his election. It is something else that matters. If elected, Putin's presidency itself does run the risk of falling hostage to an endless war in the Caucasus. The revolution of hopes that led to Putin's rise can turn into a widespread disappointment that will not guarantee the future master of the Kremlin much more than isolation. On the other hand, an attempt to reanimate authoritarianism in the country by relying on the war will most likely fail. An unpopular war will sooner become the gravedigger rather than the backbone of the regime.

5. Public Moods

The invasion of Dagestan was fought off largely thanks to the Dagestani people themselves. The transfer of the operation to Chechen territory became possible due to the acute indignation among Russians caused by the explosions in Moscow, Volgograd, and Buinaksk. Compared to the first Chechen war, the second war started out not as a battle for territorial integrity and constitutional order, but for the security of society. Lawlessness in Chechnya and the free ride that Chechen gunmen were getting in the neighboring areas of Ingushetia and

Dagestan stood for the impotence of the Russian state. Having suffered too much in the past from an over-powerful and repressive state, the Russians discovered that there was now too little state to even protect them from crime and armed violence. Moral support offered to the military by the overwhelming majority of the population, political leaders, including many liberals, and the mass media undoubtedly contributed to its confidence and facilitated the success of the military operation. Initially, the low level of casualties among the Russian troops in Chechnya made the general public feel more supportive of the military efforts. Even later, when after the street fights in Grozny the official Russian military casualty figures mounted to a total of 1,500 dead and 4,500 wounded, these losses still remained tolerable - for the war was considered by the public to be "just".

In early 2000, the situation in this respect changed as well. The shock caused by the explosion of apartment buildings in Russian cities was largely gone. The anger towards the terrorists was neutralized by the pride Russians felt for the successes of their weapons and, therefore, did not transform into mass chauvinism and hatred towards the Chechens. Once federal troops approached Grozny and the mountains it became clear that a war with little blood was no longer possible. The inevitable growth of casualties among Russian troops cannot help but affect the society's attitude towards the war in general. The Russian society is tiring of the war and, while this fatigue is still only latent, it is steadily becoming more inclined to solving the issue peacefully.

5. The Foreign Policy Factor

During the first months of the war, Russian authorities were defiantly unresponsive to external pressure. Undoubtedly, this was due to the pre-election strategy designed specifically to exploit the sense of national humiliation as well as the desire to rid Russian diplomacy of excessive dependence on the West. However, this is not an exhaustive explanation. After the air war against Yugo-

slavia, the West has lost moral superiority in the eyes of most Russians. Against the background of the “collateral damage” in the Balkans, protests against human rights abuse in Chechnya lack credibility. This was an act of psychological liberation from “Western tutelage”. Even the liberals joined in, criticizing Western criticism of Russian actions.

The West was also giving Moscow very impractical advice. Opening talks with Maskhadov was widely considered useless, for, not being really in control of Chechnya even in peacetime, he would not be able to deliver his part of any agreement. Negotiations with Basayev and other avowed terrorists were deemed impossible and pointless. Since the West was not more imaginative, its advice was de-facto dismissed as lacking seriousness and driven largely by domestic political motives. The Russian government began to assess foreign countries’ attitudes to Russia on the basis on their stance on Chechnya.

At the same time, Moscow is quite aware that the war in Chechnya costs the federal budget 100 million rubles a day, seriously complicating the financial situation of the country and its relationships with international financial institutions. The discontinued IMF funds and the pause in negotiations with the Paris and London Clubs could inflict notable material losses – budget sequestration, rapid inflation, and a further postponement of the beginning of economic growth. The Kremlin gave a huge sigh of relief in mid-February when it managed to agree on the partial write-off and restructuring of the Soviet debt to the London club.

Although regional separatism and Islamic militancy are not generally supported by the governments of the Moslem countries, the horrendous “collateral damage” in death and destruction resulting from the war is not endearing Russia in the eyes of its southern neighbors. The sad truth for Russia lies in the fact that for the past 20 years its only real enemies on the battlefield were invariably Moslem fighters - the Afghan mojaheddin, the Tajik opposition, and the Chechens.

This carries with it an even more serious danger, in view of a fairly high share (12%) of Moslems in Russia’s own population, and the existence of Moslem enclaves well inside the Federation (Tatarstan and Bashkortostan).

Even though not directly related, but even more important in the long run, is the deepening isolation of Russia in the international arena, especially in the West and in the Muslim South. Ironically, the OSCE, Moscow’s long-term favorite, has turned itself into a consistent critic. Under these conditions, the strengthening of the partnership with China does not contribute to Moscow’s greater freedom but rather ties its hands to Beijing.

The bottom line is that the government can no longer ignore the fact that an essential change has occurred in the situation in Chechnya. It has gained a lot by assuming a tough position in the fall and maintaining it through winter. Further adherence of the government to its line of "complete victory" is not only likely to lower the dividends, but it also is very risky. "Tough Putin," in order to maintain momentum, should now demonstrate an ability to solve problems using not only weapons but also political means – just like he once did in Karachayevo-Cherkessiya. In the interest of the establishment – as well as in the interest of the country – he should end the war by initiating a political process in Chechnya no later than early spring.

II. Looking Out for a Political Solution

This can be done either by *pacifying* Chechnya under Russian control or by opening political negotiations. Judging by the actions of the Russian authorities, they prefer the former at the moment.

1. Outlook for Pacification

Peace based on power can be only achieved under the premise that the Chechen militants are defeated, their organized resistance terminated, and their leaders banished to the mountains or even outside Russia. “Peace-

ful” Chechnya – the lowlands of the republic in other words – will be controlled by the Russian military administration, whereas the rebellious highlands will face continuous and powerful pressure. Elections in Chechnya will be conducted under the control of the military – just like the summer 1996 parliamentary elections. In fact, Russia might have to establish a puppet governor in Chechnya.

This scenario provides not as much for the re-integration of Chechnya into the Russian Federation as it does for preservation of its undefined status. Federal power in the republic will remain shaky and *external* for Chechnya. The Chechen leaders will strive to handle their problems while avoiding interference from the outside, but their permanent competition with each other will provoke Moscow to do exactly what Chechens want to avoid. It will be difficult for Russia to play the role of an arbiter: For a very long time the attitude of Chechens towards Russian power and the Russian army will remain distrustful and – after the two bloody wars – hostile.

An alternative course to take would be that of a full-scale political settlement. Its essence would be to rebuild Chechnya and establish independent and responsible authorities in it. The tragedy of not only Chechnya but of Russia as well is that Chechen leaders failed to create a foundation of national statehood as was done in Abkhazia and Karabakh. The Chechens turned out to be better rebels and fighters than statesmen. It is in the interest of Russia not to exploit their internal disagreements but rather to help them organize themselves politically. The *Congress of the People of Chechnya* that unites representatives of the local population and the Diaspora, the Muslim clergy, and ethnic minorities could become an authoritative assembly. It would be independent from Moscow and capable of preparing and conducting free elections to a new legislative body that in turn would develop a constitution of the republic and at the same time conduct negotiations with Moscow on the status of Chechnya and its future relationships with the Russian Federation.

After two wars, it must be clearly understood that the problem is not in the status of Chechnya but rather in the nature of its relationship with Moscow. Full integration of the Republic of Chechnya into the Russian Federation is impossible – it is hindered by historical memory, experience of the past decade’s two wars, peculiarities of the Chechen mentality, customs, etc. However, it is also impossible to envision its complete independence from Russia, considering the numerous Diaspora, enormous economic dependence, geographical position, the “Vainakh” factor (i.e., close bonds between the Chechens and the Ingushets, the presence of a sizeable Chechen minority, the Akkins, in Dagestan), etc. It is interesting to note that virtually all Chechens speak good and often unaccented Russian, which the rebel government also used for all its documents. When the Chechens had to flee from their land during the war, virtually all of them went to other parts of Russia, and Moscow was the destination of the most ambitious among them.

A practical political solution has to start by combining the vital interest of Russia – security – with the vital interests of Chechnya – opportunity for independent development, postwar restoration, and the need of its citizens to earn a living freely and legally.

The ways to solve the Chechen problem range from an agreement of association between Chechnya and the Russian Federation to formal independence. Both variants call for a number of conditions and mutual obligations. From the Russian viewpoint the advantages of the association variant are obvious: preservation of territorial integrity and confirmation of the inviolability of its frontiers. The disadvantages, however, are just as clear: the interim position of Chechnya would hardly contribute to stability within the Russian Federation, provoking other subjects to put forward new demands on the center. In addition, the Chechens would most likely try to maximize the benefits yielded by their simultaneous nominal membership in the Russian Federation and virtual semi-independent status. This con-

tradition would become a source of permanent tension.

Perhaps, at some point it will be decided in Russia that instead of a *semi-independent subject* it would be more beneficial to have a *semi-dependent neighbor*. Again, the disadvantages of such a decision are clear; they relate to the difficulties that might be inflicted by the separation of Chechnya (i.e., constitutional, Diaspora-associated) as well as to potential repercussions of Chechen independence for Dagestan, Ingushetia, and states in the Southern Caucasus. The threat of recurring terrorism and aggression is also real. It is difficult to avoid answering a direct question: What did the Russian soldiers die for in the two wars over Chechnya? Still, the possibility of an independent Chechnya should not be brushed aside, for it may be vital to forming a long term settlement, even if it is not pertinent to initial negotiations.

The advantages of separate existence can reveal themselves *only* under a stable, predictable, and responsible regime in Chechnya. Just like Israel finally agreed with the principle of an independent Arabic state in Palestine – provided that the PLO authorities refuse to practice terrorism and offer real guarantees of security to Israel – Russia might well want to exchange a piece of its territory for real guarantees (some of them can be mostly material by nature) of its security. At some point, and certainly at Moscow's invitation, observation of the implementation of commitments assumed by both parties could be maintained by international organizations, such as the OSCE. Of course, making all of this possible will require an evolution of thinking among elites on both sides, especially among the Chechens.

The road to consensus among Chechens and later on to an agreement between Russians and Chechens is long and arduous. At the same time, the cost of not having a political decision is clear: There will be a third Chechen War. It may start soon after the official announcement of a victorious completion of the anti-terrorist operation. But then again, we know that it has taken Israel and

the Arabs four wars and fifty years just to take the first step down that road. And, alas, some of the peacemakers did not survive the hate of their own people.

For the West, the main issues at stake relate to Russia, not Chechnya. They include first of all the impact of the war on the process of democratization of the Russian polity. The war in the Caucasus did not cancel the elections in Russia, but it is important that it does not lead to the establishment of a police state under a new regime. This is not very likely, but vigilance is in order. Another problem highlighted by the war is civil-military relations. These have deteriorated, and need close attention. Thirdly, there is a possibility, however remote, that the fighting in Chechnya could spill over across the border, and draw Georgia into the conflict, which will arouse the international community and compel Western governments to act, potentially setting themselves on a collision course with Russia.

The Russians would do well by dropping their insistence that discussions over Chechnya should not be “internationalized”, and instead draw the West into serious joint thinking of the entire approach to the Caucasus, including Chechnya. The West should be advised to respond to the invitation and get constructively engaged. Like the Balkans, the Caucasus can not be easily dismissed and forgotten by either side. If untreated, its problems will reach out well beyond the immediate neighborhood, and not only to the North. The stress should be on facilitating internal Chechen accommodation and supporting the enlightened moderate forces, whose representatives are mostly to be found among the diaspora, and many in Moscow. Clearly, nothing will be improved without the creation of economic opportunities for the local population. Russia's own resources will not suffice. The West will need to step in, having in mind its experience in the Balkans.

The Americans must realize that the harshness of Russia's actions in Chechnya has much to do with the general assessment in Moscow's politico-military circles of

Washington's immediate and long-term objectives in Europe and Eurasia. NATO enlargement, the air war against Yugoslavia and the perceived attempts to ease Russia out of the oil-rich Caspian region have contributed to a very pessimistic view in Russia regarding the chances of cooperation with the United States on key regional stability issues. Pretty sweeping pronouncements by some highly visible politico-academic figures, aimed against "Russian imperialism", give rise to dark suspicions that the ultimate goal is not even independence of Chechnya and Russia's forced withdrawal from the whole of the North Caucasus, but disintegration of Russia itself. It is easy indeed to interpret symbolic meetings with Chechen emissaries as signs of support for their cause - moral support in public, and material support in private.

Europe's problem is how to harmonize its moral indignation and its long-term interests. Russia at present may be neither a threat (already) nor an opportunity (yet) for the countries of the European Union, but it is certainly not a country which can be safely ignored. At some point, when the European Union is confident enough about its Common Foreign and Security Policy, a Caucasus stability pact will need to be implemented - in close cooperation with the countries of the region and obviously with Russia. Together with the Balkans, the Caucasus is a challenge to Europe's international identity. The way it deals with it will define its future role and heavily impact on its relations with Russia.

This Policy Note was written by Dr Dmitri Trenin. He is Deputy Director of the Carnegie Moscow Center and chair of the "Foreign and Security Policy" program.

BITS acknowledges the generous support received from the Ford Foundation for its work on NATO-Russia relations.