

**THE US-RUSSIAN STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP: PERMANENT
FIXTURE OR TEMPORARY MARRIAGE OF CONVENIENCE?
A EurasiaNet commentary by Taras Kuzio: 12 November 2001**

The recent success of Northern Alliance military operations in northern Afghanistan will test the strength of the developing US-Russian strategic alliance. The US-Russian partnership came together essentially as a marriage of convenience, in which both countries shared a common enemy - the Taliban in Afghanistan. While both the United States and Russia have backed the Northern Alliance, tactical differences are apparent over the utilization of the anti-Taliban force in the anti-terrorism campaign. Now, Washington and Moscow will be challenged to harmonize their differences and to build a durable partnership.

The length of the anti-terrorist campaign in Afghanistan, and possibly elsewhere, will greatly influence the future US-Russian relationship. US officials have stressed that success should be measured over the medium - not short - term. Accordingly, the United States has geared cooperation with Russia with an eye to the long term. At the same time, President Vladimir Putin is hoping that Moscow's cooperation on the anti-terrorism front, along with Russian potential concessions on NATO enlargement and missile defense, will prompt the United States to treat Russia as an equal 'great power' in international affairs.

Thus far, there has been more diplomatic talk than concrete cooperation. Russia has closed down military bases in Vietnam and Cuba, steps Moscow claims it had already decided to undertake prior to the September 11 terrorist attacks. It is unclear how useful Russia's offer to share intelligence with US officials actually is. Some experts question the quality of Russian data, suggesting it might not be balanced or incisive. Russia's influence in Central Asia is also less than many outside observers believe, particularly in Uzbekistan, whose leaders are distrustful of Russia's strategic motives in the region.

The challenges to US-Russian cooperation extend far beyond Afghanistan and Central Asia. To be successful, both countries will have to bridge deep philosophical divides.

In Russia, an alliance with an old adversary is still viewed with suspicion by many within the foreign and defense establishment. Russia did not make a complete break from the Soviet Union. Russia is the successor state to the Soviet Union in terms of institutions,

personnel and outlook. Moscow also inherited the Soviet seat in the UN Security Council.

Putin's new alliance with the United States is opposed by a powerful Eurasianist intellectual and security policy establishment that has gained considerable ground in recent years. Eurasianism, developed by Russian émigrés in the inter-war years, is based on the idea that Russia is a separate and self-contained civilization that cannot be understood in Western terms (i.e. Russian cannot become a Western-style nation state). Eurasianists adamantly believe that Eurasia is irreconcilably hostile to the Atlanticist world. Although US National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice went out of her way to tell Russians in an [October 15 interview](#) in Izvestia that the United States was not aiming to push Russia out of Central Asia, this fear is still influential among Russian elites. [[For background information see the Eurasia Insight archive](#)].

Ultimately, Eurasianism exaggerated Russia's sphere of influence in Central Asia even before the September 11 terrorist attacks. Russian influence in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan has long been low. Uzbekistan withdrew from the CIS Collective Security Treaty in early 1999 and joined the pro-Western [GUUAM](#) regional group at NATO's fiftieth anniversary summit in Washington DC. [[For additional information see the Eurasia Insight archives](#)]. Over the last two years, Uzbekistan has taken part in NATO [Partnership for Peace](#) exercises and a bilateral US-Uzbek military relationship is developing.

The US-Russian partnership has benefited from Russia's changing attitude towards NATO as an institution, and its softening stance on the alliance's possible enlargement. But it is not clear whether Putin has already accepted enlargement as a *fait accompli*, to be ratified at the November 2002 Prague summit. The subject of NATO membership for the three Baltic states - Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - is especially sensitive in Moscow's view.

As in many post-Soviet states, elite and public opinion diverge over issues such as NATO and relations with the outside world. In a nationwide survey conducted by the Russian Public Opinion Fund in early October, the proportion of Russians who see NATO as 'presenting a threat to Russia' increased to 57 percent from 47 percent in February 1997. Nonetheless, 58 percent still believed that Russia 'should strengthen its cooperation with NATO,' up from 45 percent in a July 1999 survey.

The view of NATO as an aggressive alliance increased from 38 to 50 percent between February 1997 and September 2001. Yet, of those who defined NATO as an 'aggressive' bloc, 59 percent still favoured strengthening cooperation with it. On the question of Russia's future membership in NATO, 34 percent were in favor and 39 percent against.

Suspicion about the partnership is also evident in the United States. Prior to September 11, the Republican political establishment was less inclined to accommodate Russian sensitivities than the previous Democratic administration, underscored by the Bush administration's tough stance on a national missile defense system. Since September 11, however, Washington has been more willing to take Russian considerations into account on a variety of global issues. The Bush administration had additionally staked out a tougher stance on Russian economic reforms. Under the new geopolitical circumstances, Washington may accept that economic reform in Russia would be coupled with political authoritarianism. Yet it remains unclear whether this evolution in attitude is permanent.

Even if bilateral philosophical differences ease, the US-Russian partnership could be endangered by a variety of geopolitical factors. The most problematical area for US-Russian relations is the Middle East. The US and Russia fundamentally differ in their approaches, with the US oriented towards Israel, and Russia towards the Palestinians.

A decision to expand the anti-terrorism campaign would also introduce tension into the US-Russian relationship. The United States and Russia share a desire to oust the Taliban from power in Afghanistan. But their respective attitudes differ on other governments accused of aiding and abetting terrorists, such as Iran, Iraq and Syria. Russia's decision-making elites, particularly in the foreign policy and defense establishments, have close links dating from the Soviet era with the Iraqi and Syrian leaders. At this stage, a possible US attack on Iraq - which many in the United States are now clamouring for because of alleged Iraqi ties to Osama bin Laden, and a suspected link between Baghdad and the anthrax attacks - could bring about the end the US-Russian partnership.

Arms purchases by all three countries generate revenues for Russia's cash-strapped military-industrial complex. The United States has long viewed such defense cooperation with suspicion. Washington is

especially concerned by Russian assistance in building a nuclear power station in Iran. These concerns could grow now that the United States is worried about terrorist mastermind Osama bin Laden's attempts to acquire nuclear weapons.

In addition, the United States could fall out with Russia over Moscow's policy in Chechnya. A major concession that Moscow received in exchange for its support for the anti-terrorist campaign was the softening of US criticism of Russian conduct in Chechnya. Before September 11, Russia had faced severe criticism for a litany of human rights abuses connected with its campaign against Chechen separatists. In being seen to tacitly back Russia's actions in Chechnya, the United States is undermining its support in the Middle East, including in Saudi Arabia, where there is a lot of sympathy - and funds raised - for the Chechens.

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