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Nikolay P. MEDVEDEV,

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Doctor of Political Sciences, Professor of Faculty of Humanities
and Social Sciences, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
(RUDN University) (Russia, Moscow)

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www.voprospolitolog.ru,
www.souzpolitolog.ru
E-mail: voprospolitolog@yandex.ru,
souzpolitolog@yandex.ru

Executive Secretary
Shkurina S.S.

Computer-aided makeup by
Antsiferova A.S.

Translated by
Chernyshova E.V.

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THE ROLE OF RUSSIAN FEDERATION IN THE PREVENTING OF INTER-TAJIK CONFLICT

Russian peace-keeping activity was one element in a range of contradictory and often dangerous policies and activities in armed conflicts on Russia's borders in the post-Soviet period. Russia, from the beginning, was deeply involved in all these conflicts both in a political sense, because of the desire of autonomous regions or Russian minorities within other post-Soviet republics to join the Russian Federation, and in a material sense, because of the supply of Russian arms and mercenaries and even the involvement of regular Russian units in these conflicts following the collapse of the Soviet military machine. Moreover, the conflicts threatened Russia's own security.

Key words: *collapse, Russian peace-keeping activity, dangerous policies, own security.*

When the Russian Federation declared itself the heir of the former USSR, none of its leaders comprehended the level of responsibility Russia was assuming for events taking place outside its territory. The arsenals of Soviet arms in the former Union states were rapidly being seized by unknown people. While the governments of the new independent republics did not acknowledge any connection with these seizures, they also failed to conduct any serious investigation into them (3).

In one fell swoop, the attack internationalized a civil conflict in Tajikistan which, since April 1992, has claimed over 100,000 lives. 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 neighbors, let alone benefit Russia itself.

The third operation which is considered as peace-keeping by the Russian leadership was conducted by Russian forces in Tajikistan within a joint peace-keeping force under the leadership of the CIS (4).

The collective peace-keeping forces in this mountainous Central Asian republic were formed in November 1993, at a joint meeting of the Heads of States of the CIS. The experience of the peace-keeping forces in Transdnestr and Southern Ossetia was taken into consideration in the formulation of their tasks. At that point, the first steps towards analyzing the actions of the Russian forces during military conflicts in the territory of the former Soviet Union were undertaken. However, the proportionate and successful use of force for the maintenance of peace in the conflict zones gave rise to exaggerated expectations about the possibilities of using peace-keeping forces [1]. The operation in Tajikistan became an illustration of the erroneous nature of this approach. It was envisaged that the collective peace-keeping forces would include Russian forces previously based in Tajikistan as well as units from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. By that time, the Russian and Uzbekistani military were already deeply involved in the conflict in Tajikistan.

The units of the 201st Division were the source of arms for both the warring sides. During the extraordinarily violent war in the summer and autumn of 1992, the Russian Ministry of Interior repeatedly appealed to the warring sides to start negotiations. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrei Kozyrev, made a similar appeal during a special visit in October. Nonetheless, the units of the 201st Division, based in different parts of the republic, were in a difficult situation. Both the groups supporting the Islamic-democratic authorities in Dushanbe and the pro-Communist formations of the National Front tried to entice the Russian military on to their side or to take away their weapons and equipment by every possible means (5).

Some units of the 201st Division were de facto encircled and were forced to assume a circular defense within the borders of their military bases. These bases also became a sanctuary for refugees. In the autumn of 1992, a decision was made to replenish the 201st Division with the addition of specially trained units. The Division, which had suffered from a shortage in manpower, was able to restore its combat readiness. In accordance with an agreement with the authorities, military hardware was positioned on the roads around the capital. The aim of this measure was to prevent the infiltration of small gangs of thieves notorious for their handiwork in the capital city. After the defeat of the Islamic-democratic coalition and the change in power in Dushanbe, the Russian authorities openly supported the new government and agreed, for the sake of maintaining stability, to turn a blind eye to the Communist slogans and the mass violations of human rights through which the National Front came to power. Support was also ex-

pressed for the significant economic assistance supplied by Russia to the new government and for active military co-operation (2).

President Boris Yeltsin and the Minister of Defense Pavel Grachev, as well as the Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Kozyrev, on a number of occasions declared Tajikistan as a zone of special interest to the Russian Federation. Russia signed a special treaty with the new government on 'Co-operation in Military Issues'. Actual co-operation went much further than was envisaged in the treaty. Cases were registered when the Russian military ensured the security of the Tajiki forces in disarmament operations [2].

The Russian forces had the task of preventing a renewed explosion of the conflict, which threatened to spill over into Central Asia. According to the Russian military, Russia still did not have the economic resources adequately to protect its southern borders. The civil war in Central Asia would have exposed the southern borders of Russia to weapons and drug trafficking from Afghanistan and the Pamirs, where the remaining units of the Islamic opposition took refuge. They therefore prepared new units to return home to Tajikistan.

In conjunction with the Tajik government, Russia initially sent airborne commando units and, later, border guards to the borders between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. On the night of 31 July 1993, one of the Russian border posts was almost completely destroyed by Afghani units of the Islamic opposition. This tragedy elicited a strong response in Russia and illuminated one of the most important issues of this war – the lack of a serious legal basis for the actions of the Russian forces in the CIS countries.

The liberal intellectuals rightly accused the government of attempting to take control over Tajikistan and in essence repeat the failed experience of the Soviet assistance to Afghanistan. At that point, the government promoted the idea of creating a coalition of forces from the CIS to secure stability in the region.

In November 1993, at a meeting of the heads of states of the CIS, an agreement was made to create the Collective Peace-keeping Forces (CPF). In addition to Russia, three countries committed themselves to send one battalion each to participate in the peace-keeping forces. Uzbekistan did not participate in the formation of the CPF, and its forces were virtually autonomous. The participation of the Kyrgyz unit was often called into question. Only Kazakhstan completely met its commitment. The evidence, however, seems to show that the Kazakh battalion based in the mountainous region of Badakhshan, which is partly controlled by opposition forces, is not capable of changing the situation in its area of responsibility [3].

In general, the actions of the CPF bore little resemblance to the actions of peace-keeping forces. Their military power supported the current regime and allowed it to remain passive during negotiations with the representatives of the armed opposition. Moreover, the Council of Defense Ministers of the CIS stressed to the commander of the CPF, Lieutenant General Valeri Patrikeev, on 19 April 1995, during the deterioration of the situation in Tajikistan, the necessi-

ty to provide ‘assistance to the Tajikistan with forces and equipment in order to bring the size of the Tajiki army to 16 thousand’. This, according to the general, would have allowed the Tajiki forces to secure defense of the main borders. This plan was not adopted, however, and the Russian government continues to push the Tajik government to seek a compromise with the opposition. Stability in the region, moreover, has not increased (1).

NOTES:

(1) From an interview conducted by the author in Moscow in the spring of 1994 with a former fighter of one of these units who escaped from a training camp in Afghanistan.

(2) On 24 October 1994, the Security Council of Southern Ossetia was formed. This was done on the orders of the head of the Southern Ossetian Supreme Soviet, Ludvig Chebirov. The Security Council included the Security Service, the Ministry of Defence and the Department of Internal Affairs. The chief of the Security Council, Vladik Bagaev, the Chief of the Internal Affairs Department, Ruslan Khubulov, and the head of the Security Service, Leonid Kharebov, were removed. It should be noted, however, that by the summer of 1995, the author noticed a checkpoint of the Russian peace-keeping forces at the entrance of the Southern Ossetian Supreme Soviet which had not been there previously.

(3) Small Gali is the provisional name of half of the Gali region closer to the Georgian border and separated from the rest of Abkhazia by a water channel.

(4) This assumption is based on a debate with Russian officers of the collective peace-making forces in Tajikistan in May 1994.

(5) Uzbekistan provided assistance in the formation of the pro-Communist National Front (in Tajikistan), and helped overthrow the coalition of the Islamic-democratic government by supplying military hardware and crews to arm it. Uzbek aircraft bombarded the positions of the retreating forces of the coalition. After the occupation of Dushanbe by the forces of the National Front and the formation of the new government, the author spoke to soldiers from Uzbekistan who were guarding the building of the Ministry of Interior. The Interior Minister Yakub Salima was escorted by two bodyguards dressed in the uniform of Russian airborne forces. The union between Russia and Tajikistan prompted Uzbekistan to change course.

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