

Understanding the Structural Dynamics of the Russo-Chechen Conflict: A (Hi) Story of an Intractable Conflict and the prospects for Political Settlement

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Abstract

This article examines the undercurrent historical causes of the conflict between Russia and Chechnya, and the contemporary developments that have deepened this fractured relationship and put the conflicting parties far apart from dialogue and amicable political settlement. The article analyzes the economic and geo-strategic factors that arguably make Chechnya attractive for Russia, and for which the latter is bent on sacrificing everything including blood and resources to maintain the Chechnya republic in the metropolitan state, the Russian Federation. The article also assesses the tactics and modus operandi of the Chechen rebel movements that has culminated in their being characterized by Russia as lawless, barbaric and terrorists, as well as the overall impact of the Global war on Terror (GWOT) on the nationalist independence movement. Finally, the article explores political solutions and outlines recommendations for addressing the Russo-Chechen conflict to achieve a durable resolution that is acceptable to both parties.

Keywords: Russian-Chechen Conflict; Sovereignty; Terrorism; Chechen Independence; Chechen Republic of Inchkeria; Self-determination; International Relations; Caucasus relations; Islamic extremism; Statehood; and Global war on terror (GWT)

Introduction

For decades and, in fact centuries, Chechens have endeavored to break off the shackles of Soviet domination and the yoke of Russian political control with little or incremental success.

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Chechen secessionist efforts have largely been foiled by Russia through vitriolic attacks and tactics until November 1991 when General Dzhokhar Dudayev, a Chechen and former Soviet army General, declared the Chechen republic of Ichkeria independent much to the chagrin of the highest echelons of the Russian government. What began purely as a Chechen self-determination movement and nationalist struggle for independence in 1991, regrettably, metastasized into a radicalized Islamic fundamentalist movement particularly during the second Russo-Chechen war, and virtually changing the core character of the initial struggle for Chechen statehood. Such transformation has partly rendered the conflict difficult to resolve, as well as eclipsed Russian war crimes, crimes against humanity and human rights violations against the Chechen population.

The militancy, radicalization, extremism and terrorism that mark and define the Chechen struggle today crystallized with the influx of volunteer foreign jihadists, with deep pocket links to the Middle East (Saudi Arabia in particular), into Chechnya in the mid 1990s. With such an “unholy” alliance between militant foreign fighters and radicalized Chechens the secessionist conflict reoriented toward terrorism. Vidino (2006) wrote, “Today the character, actors, tactics, and very nature of the ongoing second Chechen war have all been profoundly influenced by the activities of the foreign *mujahideen* who have successfully “sacralized” a separatist conflict into a militant Islamist uprising.”¹

The Origin and Context of the Chechen-Russian Conflict

Soviet imperial incursions into Chechnya began in 1567 when the empire erected its first fortress in Chechnya and in the process, ushered in a wave of wars that lasted until 1859, albeit military campaigns continued in parts of Chechnya until 1864². Officially, the origin of the centuries-old Chechen-Russian conflict could be traced back to 1785 when Catherine the Great, the ruler of the Russian Empire deployed Russian forces to capture Chechen leader, Sheikh Mansur who had led an uprising or rebellion of the mountaineers of the northern Caucasus against Russian colonial expansion into Chechnya³. In the 1780s Sheikh Mansur spearheaded a movement of the Vaynakhs (Chechen and Ingush peoples) that resisted Russian domination and the movement which originated in Chechnya gradually but steadily spread to include virtually all the Northern Caucasus region⁴. Sheikh Mansur, however, died in exile in 1794 three years after he was captured by Russian troops in 1791⁵.

Russian forces under the command of General Aleksey Petrovich Yermolov began to conquer and annex territories in the Caucasus region in order to secure the region, among other things, against the scheming Ottoman Empire. General Yermolov employed a tactic of deep incursions into Chechnya and the Mountainous region of Dagestan by surrounding the mountain rayons (districts) by a tight circle of fortifications, clearing lines through impenetrable woods, laying roads, and destroying villages which resisted Russian domination⁶. However, the war of freedom and liberation by the Chechens and the Ingush people against their avowed foe, the Russian empire never halted, and the "Chechens kept rising up [against the Russian army] each time they saw the slightest possibility for freedom and independence"⁷. An important watershed came when a Chechen leader, Imam Shamil united the northern Caucasian nations under Islam and commanded an uprising that resisted Soviet conquest and forced the Soviet troops to retreat after several battlefield encounters⁸. Imam Shamil was a national hero who headed an Imamate, a sovereign Islamic state comprising Chechnya and Dagestan and could boast of its own legislative body, arm forces, civil administration and a taxation system⁹. The Vaynakhs harmoniously observed both the rules of the Sharia (Islamic religious laws) and the Adat (indigenous traditional civil law) side by side in a seamless relationship.

During the Crimean War (1853-1856), the Chechens sided with the Ottoman Empire and fought against the Soviet forces¹⁰. However, in 1859 Chechnya was ultimately subdued by Russia with the capture of Imam Shamil¹¹, and "it took a Russian expeditionary force of 200,000 men to end this revolt in 1859"¹². Notwithstanding Shamil's capture, Chechen uprisings continued and these were oppressively repressed by mass executions and deportations to Siberia¹³. Again, in 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union, and Joseph Stalin's government accused the Chechen and Ingush peoples of treason for collaborating with the Nazis. In February 1944, under the command of Lavrentiy Beria, all ethnic Chechens and Ingush were expelled from their homes and deported to Siberia, and Central Asia where they were put in forced labor camps in Kazakhstan and Kirgizia¹⁴. After Stalin's death in 1953, Nikita Khrushchev ascended to power in Russia, and in 1957 he permitted Chechen people to return home, after 13 years in exile¹⁵. Stalin's forced deportation of Chechens to Kazakhstan as a retribution for their disloyalty and betrayal culminated directly and indirectly in the killing of a quarter of the population¹⁶, and this has led to a major fracture in Russian-Chechen relations. Khalilov (2003: 410-411) wrote:

People in remote mountain villages were in some cases buried alive, in other cases drowned. The weak, the ill and the disabled were simply shot. The rest were loaded into cattle wagons and deported to Kazakhstan and other regions of Central Asia. Everything was left behind. In a matter of hours, the entire Chechen people were deprived of their homeland, name, history, and everything they owned. The majority of those who perished died from cold, hunger and disease during the transportation. Most of them were children, women and elderly.

Chechen Statehood: Reality or Mirage?

In 1991 after the demise of the Soviet Union, Chechnya as well as the three Baltic republics west of the Russian Federation declared independence. Chechnya conducted Presidential and Parliamentary elections and elected its first President, Dzhokhar Dudayev and adopted a constitution and parliament for the republic¹⁷. Apparently, this genuine attempt at creating institutions of rule of law and democratic governance was considered to seal Chechen independence and to secure its sovereignty. It is interesting to note that the Russian Federation granted statehood to the Baltic republics while Chechnya was refused statehood. In December 1994, Russian forces in largely a lopsided military campaign invaded Chechnya in a bid to crash and oust the All-National Congress, the independence movement in Chechnya¹⁸. After almost two years of aerial bombardments and fierce infantry or ground fighting marked by severe hemorrhage and/or casualties on both sides, a cease-fire was negotiated and the Khasavyurt Accords was signed. This agreement was negotiated by Aslan Maskhadov, then rebel Chief of Staff, and Russian General Alexander Lebed. Per the accord, Russian forces withdrew from Chechnya and the republic maintained its de facto autonomy¹⁹.

In 2000, following series of bombings in Russia of which Moscow accused Chechen militants of being responsible, President Putin arbitrarily declared that Chechnya would be governed directly from Moscow. Moscow established a puppet Chechen government in Grozny, with a mufti Akhmad Kadyrov as President and Stanislav Ilyasov as Prime Minister²⁰. Hitherto, Aslan Maskhadov had been elected President of Chechnya in 1997 in an election monitored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Despite Moscow's imposition of Kadyrov, Maskhadov remains the national leader of the underground Chechen government and enjoys enormous loyalty among a vast majority of Chechen citizens.

Furthermore, in the first Russian-Chechen War (1994-1996), Grozny was virtually reduced to rubble, and though in recent years Russia has committed significant budgetary allocations towards the reconstruction of the capital, the economic situation in the republic particularly the unemployment rate in Chechnya leaves much to be desired. The total number of deaths in the two Chechen wars (1994-1996 and 1999 to the present) has been estimated at between 180,000 and a quarter of a million²¹. Thousands of Chechens have been displaced, and thousands more people live in refugee camps in neighboring republics and across Europe. Air, financial and economic blockades and sanctions imposed by Russia have wrought devastating economic and socio-political repercussions on Chechnya posing monumental challenges to President Maskhadov's government. In effect, the blockades rendered the Maskhadov-led government and administration inefficacious and unable to stamp its authority and control over issues in the republic especially issues pertaining to security in Grozny and other parts of Chechnya. With limited and diminishing economic opportunities, criminal activities such as kidnapping, robbery, attacks on businesses, petty crime and banditry among others skyrocketed aided by the vacuum of a strong central government to enforce the rule of law, as well as President Maskhadov's inability to exert full authority over all of Chechnya. The aforementioned issues, as well as a host of others, remain the major sources of discontent for the Chechen population.

Economic and Geostrategic appeal of Chechnya Republic

The Chechen Republic of Ichkeria is relatively a small republic within the Russian Federation. It is approximately 19.3 thousand square kilometers and its southern border is located deep in the Caucasus Mountain range along the northern border of Georgia, and the republic's 1.3 million population is approximately 95.3 percent Chechen, an ethnic minority that originates from the northern Caucasus region and practice mostly Sunni Islam²².

It is not uncommon to presume that Chechen self-determination and independence movement has been largely hampered and impeded by the fact that Russia is a federation made up of roughly 21 republics with different degrees of autonomy, and that it would be tantamount to a political suicide for Russia to let such small republic as Chechnya to secede from the federation.

Draganova (2011) noted that under Article 66, part 5 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation, the status of a subject of the Federation may only be changed by mutual agreement between the Russian Federation and the subject of the federation, but there are no established constitutional provisions about the mechanisms and procedures for changing the status of a subject of the Russian Federation²³. In fact, such development of ceding to Chechen independence by Russia is widely feared may trigger a fragmentation where the other semi-autonomous self-governing regions with ethnic, cultural and linguistic homogeneity within the federation may want to join the band wagon or follow suit and reclaim their independence. However, apart from this political narrative, there is also, arguably, an economic imperative for Russia, an underpinning to the Russo-Chechen conflict. It is not far-fetched that Russia maintains a very significant interest in Chechnya and generally in the Caucasus on account of the region's abundant oil, gas and other natural resource deposits, or so I will argue.

The country (Russia) earns significant foreign exchange from the export of oil, natural gas and petroleum products to Europe and other parts of the world, and the country's economy is hugely dependent on these export earnings. For example, Russia supplies a huge chunk of Europe's natural gas needs and Turkey, for example, is a significant beneficiary or importer of Russia's natural gas. Therefore, Chechnya and the Caucasus's abundance in oil, natural gas and other natural resources continue to make the region vitally important to the Russian Federation. It is also important to point out that oil and natural gas pipelines that connect Russia with Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan all snake and pass through Chechnya. Further, access routes from Russia to the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea directly pass through Chechnya. There are also a number of petro-chemical industries and oil refineries that are located to the north of Grozny, the Chechen capital on the Sunzha River. With oil resources increasingly becoming scarce, and all the major and leading global economic powerhouses such as the United States and China, and in fact, the world at large, scrambling for new oil reserves and alternatives to fossil fuel, it makes economic sense that Russia would strengthen its grips on Chechnya in order to be secured about its own hydrocarbon energy requirements in the foreseeable future. Control over abundant hydrocarbon resources and export routes would not only augment Russia's economic importance and dominance in Central Asia, but also increase its political and diplomatic bargaining voice in the region, and also in Europe. Hence, keeping Chechnya in the federation becomes an absolute necessity and paramount to Russia's economic interests.

Thus, it is no surprise that the Kremlin would employ every tactics and means available including licentious military campaigns or operations to thwart Chechen secessionist movements.

It has been argued (Cohen and Hamilton, 2011) that in the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, Moscow also had an economic objective for invading Georgia besides strategic and geopolitical goals. Cohen and Hamilton noted that besides its motive to terminate Georgian sovereignty and authority in South Ossetia and Abkhazia which are pro-Moscow separatist regions of Georgia, it was also Russia's goal to exercise control over the South Caucasus energy corridor (East-West corridor)²⁴. The authors argued that among the calculus of Russia was that if a pro-Moscow government is installed in Georgia, it would help to solidify Russia's control over the economically strategic Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Erzurum (Turkey) gas pipeline²⁵. It is therefore apparent that natural resources, particularly energy resources occupy a high place in Moscow's strategic calculations in the Caucasus region.

Russia's annexation of the Crimea, a Ukrainian region against international outcry and condemnation is also indicative of the insecurity that Russia feels about the West's inroads into its backyard. Threatened by Ukraine's intentions of joining NATO and not wanting the alliance to have a footprint in a geo-strategically critical part in the region, coupled with the fall of a pro-Moscow government in Kiev, Russia annexed Crimea in contravention of international law. Russia's interest in Eurasia as well as in Chechnya should therefore be seen and analyzed along this continuum.

Rise of Terrorism and Implications for Independence

The weakening of the institutions of the Soviet Union set in motion a chain of conflicts in the Caucasus region²⁶, and the eventual disintegration of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in 1991 spawned a number of severe secessionist crises²⁷, as well as political and territorial upheavals and major transformations in the region. The Union splintered into about fifteen (15) autonomous states or republics, and precariously subjecting Russia's territorial sovereignty to enormous strain, and thereby compelling President Boris Yeltsin to grant sweeping autonomy to a number of the regional governments in return for political support and acceptance of Russia's federal authority over the republics²⁸.

However In 1991, three months before the collapse of the Soviet Union, Chechnya unilaterally declared its independence²⁹ and elected a President, Dzhokhar Dudayev. The All Chechen National Congress, which acted as the highest Chechen national forum or authority and represented all the major political and social forces in Chechnya, issued the first declaration of Chechen sovereignty on 25 November 1990³⁰. In the following year, a constitution was adopted and Dudayev declared Chechnya to be independent and secular, and would be governed by a President and Parliament. In 1994, after several bouts of negotiations with the Chechen leadership could not propitiate the Chechen side or had failed to produce an acceptable outcome to both parties, the Russian army invaded Chechnya³¹ in a bid to quash the Chechen independence movement sparking a new chain of wars in what is regarded as occasioning the First Chechen War.

From 1995, what began as a nationalist independence movement gradually started to drift towards Islamic fundamentalism and radicalism that in turn birthed extremist ideas, methods, and jihadist radical approaches particularly as foreign fighters from the Middle East and North Africa, began to get involved in the Russo-Chechen conflict³². The independence movement also began to fracture with internal wrangling for power among various warlords and militias occasioning the splintering away of some rival rebel leaders.³³

Moore and Tumelty (2008) argued the experience of the Mujahedeen in Afghanistan in the 1980s provided a great sense of identification and motivation for groups of foreign fighters to become involved in the Russo-Chechen wars, and Afghanistan thus became a major recruitment center and source of non-domestic fighters in Chechnya. Moore and Tumelty pointed out Shaykh Fathi, for example, who fought the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s moved to Chechnya in 1993 and became the most influential figure in establishing the foreign fighters' presence in the North Caucasus following the onset of the Russo-Chechen war in December 1994³⁴. Sheik Fathi, a Jordanian of Chechen descent, invited Emir Khattab, a Saudi-Afghan Arab mujahidin to Chechnya to, among other things, help set up a military structure for the foreign fighters in Chechnya. Murphy (2004) pointed out the Chechen government officially recruited Khattab to establish the Chechen Armed Forces Training Center in a former Soviet facility near village of Serzhen-Yurt.³⁵ Khattab and Shamil Basayev became close allies and believed that the media is as important to the Chechen's cause as rifles and guns and thus began to wage jihad through the media³⁶.

Moore and Tumelty (2008, p.425) wrote "During the second [Chechen] war the resistance has adopted more extreme methods, namely suicide attacks and mass hostage-taking."

In June of 1995, Chechen combatants led by Shamil Basayev seized a hospital in Budennovsk city in Southern Russia and took about 1,500 Russian civilians, mostly patients and hospital staff, hostage³⁷. Russian forces intervened and by the end of the crisis, about one hundred hostages were killed. Abductions of journalists and foreign aid workers, as well as robberies, extortions and criminal activities ascended in the following years. For instance, the abduction of some United Nations workers in 2002 led to a halt in the UN humanitarian efforts in Chechnya³⁸. Again in August 1999, Shamil Basayev commanding a brigade of approximately 2,000 militants invaded a neighboring republic of Dagestan in an attempt to create an Islamic state.³⁹ In the same year, series of apartment bombings in Moscow and other cities in Russia occurred⁴⁰. Estimated 220 people perished in the first two bombings and another 80 in the second round of attacks a few days later. In 2010, Chechen militants carried out Moscow Metro bombings⁴¹, and in 2011, the separatist rebels also conducted bombings in the Domodedovo International Airport⁴². Russia has accused radical Islamists from Chechnya as well as other republics in the northern Caucasus region as being the brain behind, and responsible for the terrorist atrocities in Russia⁴³. It has been argued however, that in the 1999 apartment bombings in Russia and developments in Daghestan, circumstantial evidence suggests Russia's complicity and shows that the Kremlin played a criminal role in these events for electoral purposes, and in an attempt to make Chechnya a scapegoat in order to divert Russian public opinion⁴⁴.

Again, in 2002 Chechen rebels stormed a Moscow theater and took hundreds of people hostage. The rebel forces demanded full independence for Chechnya republic in return for the hostages held in the theater building. In a bid to rescue the hostages, Russian commando forces released a sleeping chemical agent, fentanyl gas, into the air dust system. In the end, Chechen militants killed about 129 hostages in the Moscow theater siege⁴⁵. The Beslan tragedy in 2004 had the imprints of Chechen terrorist attacks. Shamil Basayev commanded a group of heavily armed terrorists that stormed a school in the town of Beslan in North Ossetia. The separatist rebels seized innocent pupils and parents, as well as unsuspecting teachers and kept the hostages in the school's gymnasium.

The militant then wired the school complex with lethal explosives and precluded their captives from accessing vital resources such as food and water. On the third day as negotiations proved futile, an explosive detonated, followed by pandemonium and terror as the captives scrambled to escape and Russian forces entering the building. An estimated 350 hostages died at the end of the commotion⁴⁶.

In their examination of the rationale underpinning terrorist target choice by Chechen rebels from 1997-2003, McCartan et al (2008) noted that terrorists are not wild-eyed fanatics who choose their targets by random⁴⁷. Instead, the Chechen militants choose their target choice logically in order to achieve optimum impact and to instill maximum fear in the general public or population, and civilian targets were more likely to be targeted in Russia than in Chechnya⁴⁸. The fire and brimstone approach by the Chechen militants arguably is not savvy but counter-intuitive and myopic, to say the least. Such spectacular attacks and mayhems with their concomitant brutalities have not compelled Russia to capitulate to Chechen ultimate demand for independence for the republic nor helped the Chechen's cause in the court of international opinion. Instead, the incidents of terrorism have increased Moscow's resolve and rhetoric against independence for Chechnya and only encouraged President Vladimir Putin to tie, or attempt to link, rebels in Chechnya to the global wave of terrorism, and to Osama Bin Laden⁴⁹, and to expand Russia's military and counter-insurgency operations in the Chechen republic.

Further, in the wake of these cycles of bombings, terrorist attacks, jihadism and "Wahhabism" or extremism, international support for the Chechen nationalist movement waned. President Putin thus succeeded in framing the conflict narrative along the lines of terrorism and the global war on terror (GWT) and posits that the conflict between Russia and Chechnya is an internal or domestic issue, a struggle for Russia to overcome. Today, Russian forces and Chechen guerrilla fighters are engaged in an intractable and violent conflict that has exacted heavy death tolls on both protagonists making the prospects for a peaceful resolution of the conflict remote⁵⁰, difficult and elusive. However, despite the fact that the conflict is largely and primarily an asymmetrical warfare, the Chechen militants with their guerilla tactics, have proven to be a real nemesis for the conventional and more advanced Russian military with all its might, personnel, capabilities and resources at its disposal.

Souleimanov and Ditych (2008: 1) writing on the international characterization of the Chechen-Russian conflict, refute the depiction or portrayal of the political motives behind the conflict in Chechnya as a battlefield of the global jihad, and argued that it is critically important to distinguish between radicalization of the Chechen resistance and the strengthening of the ideology of jihad. They wrote "...the [Chechen] resistance currently assumes a supranational character, yet one which is delimited regionally rather than globally"⁵¹.

Resolving the Russo-Chechen Conflict: Prospects for Political Settlement

An important first litmus test necessary for both antagonistic conflict parties to cross the Rubicon is for Russia and Chechnya to dispense away with their hard-lined entrenched positions, as important as they may be, and embrace political dialogue that has the potential to result in the materialization of their aspirations. The centuries long Chechen wars with Russia interspersed with short-lived cease-fires particularly in the First and Second Chechen Wars (1994-1996, 1999) have not furthered the Chechen's independence cause or achieved the political "nirvana" that generations of Chechens have long sought.

Neither have the vitriolic bombardments and attacks enabled Russia to achieve its objectives of militarily compelling Chechnya to kowtow and accept Russia's hegemony over the republic, nor eradicated armed guerilla resistance in Chechnya although Russian forces outnumbered guerilla fighters by more than 50 to 1⁵². In the ensuing hostilities, death (on both sides), misery, displacement (internal and external) of Chechen citizens and destruction of property are the only victors, and there is no light at the end of the tunnel, or so it appears, at least in the short term. The wars, for example, have culminated in the loss of about 20 percent of the pre-1994 Chechen population⁵³. This statistics translates to roughly 200,000 Chechen losses in less than a decade⁵⁴. Like the Oslo Accords, the Khasavyurt Accords brokered between President Yeltsin and President Zemlikhan Yanderbiyev in 1996 failed to produce a comprehensive settlement to the crisis and deferred contentious issues to the future.

It is against this backdrop that I posit a political solution to the Russo-Chechen conflict as the most viable alternative, certainly the most promising and result-oriented alternative to the current belligerent approach by both conflict parties.

The following recommendations offer a different paradigmatic approach to resolving the crisis.

First, the United Nations, the United States and the European Union (EU) should leverage their economic, diplomatic and political influences and prevail upon Moscow to recognize the Chechen underground government of President Aslan Maskhadov who was legitimately elected in a 1997 elections monitored by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and recognized by both Russia and OSCE "as having been in line with international democratic standards."⁵⁵ This, however, should be done with full considerations to Russian security concerns. This could be a positive step toward opening channels for brainstorming a political settlement or outcome to the conflict. Recognition of the Maskhadov's government is critically important on two fronts: first because Maskhadov's government commands popular grassroots support in Chechnya relative to the Kremlin's installed administration of Akhmad Kadyrov; second because the gesture would boost trust and confidence in the political process and establish Russia as a committed partner to peace. In diplomacy, parties with diametrically opposing views negotiate to reach a compromise or find a middle ground. A party does not negotiate with itself, and the Kremlin ought to recognize that it needs to engage the legitimate leadership or representatives of the Chechen republic of Inchkeria in constructive dialogue and healthy negotiations in the interest of durable peace.

Also, there ought to be a demilitarization of the conflict through cease-fire agreements. The United Nations, United States and the European Union can assist tremendously in this regard by assisting in brokering such a ceasefire agreement. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the United Nations, as well as other stakeholders in the peace industry should be permitted by both sides to observe and monitor cease-fire agreements and hold parties accountable to their commitments. By such interventions, as well as the involvement of other third party actors the interactions between the conflicting parties are profoundly changed and the "destructive path of the escalating conflict is diverted, at least momentarily, because the third party is there"⁵⁶ to monitor and report ceasefire infractions, aggressions and provocative actions that may trigger escalation or full scale conflict.

Additionally, a final status agreement on Chechnya Republic that leads ultimately to a referendum ought to be worked out in a framework by both Russia and Chechnya aided by a third party that is neutral. A third party negotiator or mediator that both conflict parties can trust, for example, Norway or Sweden, must be involved in the negotiation of the final status of Chechnya republic that takes into account or consideration the concerns, interests and aspirations of the warring factions. This may either be an internal arbiter mundi or negotiator in the region, or as suggested earlier, an external mediator that can facilitate negotiations through effective communication based on mutual trust, respect, honesty and cultural understanding. These attributes constitute important bedrock for solving many conflicts in the international system. Najafbagy (2008: 1) wrote, "...the institution of realistic, proper and effective communication, based on mutual cultural understanding and on goodwill, would help solve many national and international disputes, and contribute positively to the solution of political, economic and social problems among nations"⁵⁷.

Norway or Sweden could be a great catalyst for peace as each has an excellent history and track record of participating in brokering peace agreements between conflict parties across the globe. The Oslo Accords of 1991 that ushered in a new relationship between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) is a case study of the long history of commitment of Norway to conflict resolution in the international system. Third parties are essential because they contribute to issue transformations. They enable "the conflicting parties by putting them in contact with one another, gaining their trust and confidence, setting agendas, clarifying issues and formulating agreements."⁵⁸

Again, an amnesty policy or national pardon to former rebels and Islamic fundamentalists that guarantees that they would no longer be on Moscow's terrorists target if they disarm, halt all forms of guerrilla attacks and hostilities against Russia interests and demobilize would potentially de-escalate the conflict and turn the tide of terrorism in the Caucasus region. In the overall grand bargain, there must be an agreement that the United States would assist Russia to flash out recalcitrant and hard-lined militants. This clause would encourage Russia to accept to give amnesty to former rebels.

Besides, Russia should aid in the reconstruction of Grozny which had been greatly devastated after the two wars, and also assist with humanitarian assistance as thousands of Chechens have been displaced by the incessant hostilities and the two wars. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees could play instrumental role in the repatriation of Chechen refugees from Europe and the Caucasus region. Establishing credible human rights practices by Russia not only in Chechnya, but in the Caucasus region generally would be promising for lasting peace.

Further, Maskhadov led-Chechen government must maintain effective control over its territory. It must endeavor to unite all the break-away rebel factions so as to have a coherent and unified voice in negotiations. Chechen insurgents should halt the indiscriminate terrorist attacks against Russian interests and adopt negotiations or political means as a strategy in resolving their grievances instead of violence and mayhem, because that approach although it may afford them international media attention or coverage in the short-term, it only weakens their cause in the long-term, and turns the support of the international community in Russia's corner and thus augmenting the case of Putin against Chechnya.

Lastly, albeit the referendum of 2003 offered broad political rights and freedoms to Chechnya, the outcome was largely considered to be rigged by the Kremlin. In fact, it was reported that "The referendum was meant as an exercise not in democracy but in [Russia's] political control."⁵⁹ The *Economist* (March 27, 2003) succinctly summed up the whole referendum vote this way:

"PERHAPS it was the ghosts who voted – flowing up the steps, floating through the windows, squeezing through the bullet holes and broken walls to exercise their franchise.

The authorities declared that 477,000 people turned out for Chechnya's referendum on March 23rd. That would have been 88% of registered voters. People were supposedly "standing in line at some polling stations for ten or 15 minutes." But even on a tightly-controlled government tour of selected polling stations in and near Grozny, the bombed-out capital, there were only handfuls of people in the dusty streets – let alone voting. To anyone who has seen the activity in any country when just half the electorate takes part, in Chechnya it seemed that it was not the living souls who made up the numbers but the dead ones."⁶⁰

Besides, Maskhadov's government condemned the referendum and called upon Chechens to boycott the vote on the account of, among other things, Russian security intimidation and the impossibility of holding a free and fair election given the presence of over 80,000 Russian forces in the region⁶¹. A concerning issue about the referendum dealt with the fact that about 30,000 Russian troops permanently stationed in Chechnya were deemed eligible to vote. In this scheme of things, it would be appropriate for a new free, fair and transparent and democratic referendum to be held in an atmosphere devoid of Russian security intimidation and coercion. The OSCE, United Nations and the European Union (EU) should assist in the organization and monitoring of a new referendum. This way, Chechens would determine the status of the republic, whether the republic still remains part of the Russian Federation or otherwise. Khalilov (2003) posited "...peace is likely to come only with a comprehensive political solution that settles the question of Chechnya's status."⁶² It is important to stress that a political settlement to the Chechen-Russian conflict can be achieved by offering the Chechen citizens a conceivable prospects of a de jure recognized independent state with full rights and responsibilities, and this must be done in cognizance with, and alongside full security guaranties that are acceptable to the Russian federation.

Conclusion

It is not far-fetched that after decades of the use of force on the part of Russia, and the use of violence and terror on the part of Chechen militants, peaceful resolution to the Chechen-Russian conflict still remains elusive. The bellicosity on both sides has produced nothing constructive to be proud of or optimistic about, but death, mayhem, destruction and misery. What began purely as a self-determination quest and genuinely as a nationalist independence movement particularly in 1991, metastasized into a radicalized Islamic fundamentalism or insurgency and largely turning the tide of international support for the Chechen' cause against the republic. The international community, the United Nations, the European Union and the United States in particular should champion the course of peace between Russia and Chechnya not only to bring a political settlement to the centuries-old intractable conflict, but also to avert the risk of Chechnya, perhaps, snowballing into the next frontline for the war on terrorism (WOT).

In the contemporary world, intra-state insecurity and disorder in one corner of the world or within a state could spill over and metamorphose into regional conflagration and security breakdown, thereby posing wide-scale significant threat to global security and peace. The aforementioned recommendations albeit not meant to be the panacea to the centuries old conflict or projected as the silver bullet that holds the key to the Russo-Chechen political and territorial quagmire, they offer a different paradigmatic perspective and a practical approach to resolving the Chechen-Russian conflict.

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