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## CHECHNYA AND US HYPOCRISY

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### Note No. 52

To understand the present developments in Chechnya, one has to go back to the Afghan war of the 1980s.

Many analysts, including this writer, often tend to use loosely the expressions "proxy war" and "covert war". Both are low-intensity conflicts, but with a difference.

A proxy war is an open, but undeclared war fought by a nation against an adversary by using others as surrogates, in order to reduce or eliminate casualties of its own nationals.

On the other hand, a covert war is conducted by a nation in such a manner as to maintain the deniability of its own involvement, by using either its own nationals or foreign surrogates. The desire to avoid casualties of its own nationals is not an important motive. Pakistan is waging a covert war against India in Kashmir, though we call it a proxy war.

The Afghan war was the last major, genuine proxy war of the present millennium. In the initial stages, it was the US, which used Afghans, Pakistanis and Muslims from other countries for making the Soviet army bleed without losing American lives.

As the casualties amongst the non-Muslim Slav soldiers steadily mounted causing misgivings about the wisdom of the war in the Russian region of the USSR, Moscow increasingly started replacing the Slav soldiers with Muslims sent from the Central Asian Republics and the Caucasian region.

Thus, in the closing years of the war, the US and the USSR tried to undermine each other and promote their national interests and strategic objectives by making the Muslims the cannon-fodder.

The Muslims, who fought on behalf of the US, came to the battlefield because of their religious conviction. The US and the Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) of Pakistan recruited self-motivated volunteers from radicalised Islamic parties and trained them in modern forms of guerilla warfare, thereby contributing to the militarisation of these parties, which has been an important cause of the destabilisation in many parts of the world today, including in India and Pakistan itself.

The Muslims, who fought on behalf of the USSR, entered the battlefield not because of religious conviction, but because they had to, as soldiers of the communist army. They lacked the self-motivation of the Muslims who fought for the US.

In this battle, the self-motivated and religiously-influenced Muslims, who fought for the US, prevailed over the disinterested and largely non-practising Muslims of the Soviet and Afghan armies, leading to the withdrawal of the Soviet troops and the subsequent collapse of the Afghan Government headed by President Najibullah.

The end of the war saw the Muslims, who fought on the two sides, beginning to nurse anger and resentment against their former mentors, each for their own reason. The Muslims, who fought for the US, felt let down by what they perceived as the sudden loss of US interest in them, after having used them to achieve its objectives against the USSR. It is this resentment, which should explain their drift into movements directed against the US and Islamic States allied with the US.

For the Muslim soldiers of the Soviet army, Afghanistan was a totally new experience. The USSR had kept Islam suppressed, disallowing mosques, banning public prayers and not allowing pilgrimages to the Islamic holy places in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere. This suppression of the external manifestations of Islam could not wipe out their internal faith in their religion.

Their service in Afghanistan, for the first time, exposed many of them to the Muslims of the non-Communist world, whose religious conviction had an infectious effect on them. Moreover, even many Slavs, who had grown up in an irreligious atmosphere, were attracted by Islam and embraced it. Sheikh Al-Hadji Al Aspheron, the second most important Mulla of Kazakhstan today, is a Slav from Ukraine who embraced Islam after fighting in Afghanistan. He is, however, a strong critic of Islamic extremism imported from Pakistan.

Thus, the Muslims, who fought for the US, went to the battlefield with religious conviction and came back with their conviction further strengthened. On the other hand, those, who fought for the USSR, went to battle as disciplined, submissive soldiers of the communist army, but returned home after the war as pious, self-assertive Muslims.

It is the failure of the security agencies and the political leadership of the post-1991 Russian Federation to comprehend and come to terms with this transformation, which is responsible for the difficulties faced by them in Chechnya and Dagestan. Their problems have been compounded by the fact that the trained Muslims, who fought on rival sides during the Afghan war, have now joined hands in fighting against what they regard as their former manipulators, who manipulated them for their own purposes, unrelated to the interests of Islam.

The result: The continuing threats to US nationals and interests in different parts of the world from angry Muslims of Afghan war vintage and to the unity and territorial integrity of the Russian Federation from the ex-Muslim soldiers of the Soviet army and their supporters from the ranks of those, who fought against them in Afghanistan, but who have now become their fellow-jihadists.

An exclusively military approach to the threats without removing the causes of the anger and resentment can control the external manifestations of the anger for a while, but will not restore stability, peace and harmony.

By adopting such an approach, Russia has brought upon itself a fight with no finish. It may capture Grozny, the capital, at tremendous human cost, but that is unlikely to be the end of its troubles.

In dealing with violence caused by religious and ethnic emotions and anger, even the most powerful gun has its limitations and may ultimately prove hazardous to the user himself, unless effective counter-terrorism is blended with a sympathetic and sophisticated political approach.

In the past, any counter-terrorism or counter-insurgency method could pass muster with the outside world having little idea of the harshness of it, but today, with the whole world in the drawing-room of everyone having access to TV, the methods are subject to instant scrutiny and judgement. Moscow cannot use against the Chechens and Dagestanis the same harshness that Stalin used against them and the Tartars and expect to get away with it.

Russia has thus far failed to separate the external (support from Pakistani organisations and the Taliban) from the internal aspects and to deal firmly with the external, but with greater sensitivity and sophistication with the internal.

While the unduly harsh methods used by Russia are thus unwise and could prove counter-productive, there is nothing but sheer hypocrisy in the condemnation of the Russian methods by the US and other NATO powers.

The US bombed Libya because a couple of Americans were killed in an explosion in a West Berlin discotheque; attacked Iraq because of an alleged plot by the Iraqi intelligence to kill the former US President, Mr. George Bush, during a visit to Kuwait after laying down office in 1993; bombed alleged terrorist training camps in Afghan territory after the explosions outside the US Embassies in Kenya and Tanzania without any regard to civilian lives; tested new weapons such as uranium-tipped bullets and disrupted power and water supply to the civilian population of Yugoslavia through the use of graphite bombs in order to break their morale and preserve the credibility of the NATO as an interventionist force; declared the Harkat-ul-Mujahideen of Pakistan as an international terrorist organisation only after it had kidnapped an American tourist in Kashmir in 1995 and even today has refrained from similarly declaring the Lashkar-e-Toiba because it has not attacked American lives and property.

Through such actions, the US has repeatedly shown that the lives of its own nationals are more precious to it than those of other nationals and that any means are good means for protecting its citizens from terrorist violence without regard to human rights. But, where only the lives of other nationals are involved, Washington suddenly remembers human rights and international humanitarian laws and self-righteously sermonises to them on their human rights obligations.

And, now, it has been trying to do business as usual with the military regime in Pakistan despite the role of the Pakistani military and intelligence establishment in encouraging the Pakistan-based terrorist organisations to go to the assistance of the extremist groups in Chechnya and Dagestan.

What moral authority the US has to condemn Russia for what it is doing in a part of its own territory to protect its territorial integrity and the lives of its innocent citizens from the depredations of the terrorists?

The Russian experience has an important lesson for India. Despite the Russian President, Mr. Yeltsin's fulminations and nuclear-rattling against the US, it is doubtful for how long Russia can resist the US pressure because of its pathetic dependence on the US-controlled IMF for keeping its economy going.

India has thus far been able to take an independent line despite US pressure on issues of concern to us such as nuclear weaponisation, Kashmir etc because of our freeing ourselves from dependence on the IMF through good economic management. If we mess up the economy and thereby become dependent on the IMF again, we will lose whatever independence in decision-making that we have built up for ourselves and will be powerless to resist similar US interventions in our internal affairs. The economic deterrence is more important than the nuclear deterrence.

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(11-12-99)

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