



## **Geopolitical and Strategic Implications to Russia's Security**

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The bombings on 29th and 30th December, 2013 at Volgograd, the fifth largest industrial city of Russia, have revealed a perilous situation for Russia. The attacks have projected the power of the militants from Caucasus to strike Russian mainland through the newly-recruited ethnic Russian converted Muslims. It also highlighted the dynamics of rivalry in international relations, especially the changing geopolitics in West Asia.

The combination of these factors poses a new threat to Russia's security and has been brewing for quite some time. Since the time of Soviet Union, Russia has faced threat from North Caucasus especially Chechnya and Dagestan. The accumulation of decades-long grievances of this region after the end of the Cold War has culminated into secessionist demands led by Doku Umarov, self-proclaimed 'Emir' of the Islamist extremist group 'Caucasus Emirate', which has connections with Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. This group seeks independence for Chechnya and Dagestan from Russia's sphere of influence to build a Muslim republic in North Caucasus.

The unfolding dynamics in West Asia has aided the Caucasus Emirates (Russian Salafists) aim of weakening Russia. During a meeting in July 2013 between President Putin and Saudi Arabia's intelligence chief Prince Bandar bin Sultan, a suggestion was made by the latter asking Russia to withdraw support to the Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad. In return, he offered Moscow to restrain Saudi Arabia's Chechen terrorist clients to stop attacks on the forthcoming

Sochi Olympic Games in February 2014 which Putin refused. The refusal has seen intensification of attacks by the Caucasus Emirates such as the one in Volgograd, which is 400 miles away from Sochi. The gravity of the threat to Russia is also related to the return of the Russian nationals who are fighting in Syria alongside the Syrian rebels. It is feared that on their return from Syria, these terrorists will be well-equipped with weapons, experience and finance to fight against the Russian government.

Russia is making efforts to regain its 'great power' status and North Caucasus is an important region because it is a rich reservoir of oil and natural resources. In this context, Chechnya and Dagestan are major hubs of good quality oil and natural gas and also are geo-strategically located. Russian economy is heavily dependent on this region; for example the Makhachkala sea port is the only Russian ice-free port on the Caspian Sea that helps Moscow to maintain trade links with Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan etc. Russia has tried to keep Chechnya and Dagestan under its jurisdiction which are economically poor, under developed, have weak governance and violation of human rights have been taking place in the name of religion and ethnicity. Moscow through harsh measures has tried to suppress Islamic extremists who are fighting for independence. The suppression of these militants has aggravated the tension with Russia.

Russia is trying hard to stop Chechnya and Dagestan to breakaway of as it will weaken its economy and reduce influence in the region. The strategy used by the Caucasus Emirate to challenge Moscow is through the newly-recruited ethnic Russian converted Muslims. The repercussion of this is perilous as radical ideas such as Islamic extremism and liberation have penetrated deep into the Russian ethnic society. The Caucasus Emirate has been successful in carrying out terror activities by converting the Christian Slavic Russians to radical Muslims who are unhappy and frustrated with the corrupt and autocratic Kremlin government. The appearance of these Slavic terrorists helps them in evading the security agents within Russian cities.

The combination of Caucasus Emirates' extremist activities through ethnic Russians and the rivalry between Russia and Saudi Arabia poses a serious threat to Kremlin government. On

December 31, 2013 in his New Year's address to the nation, President Putin vowed to achieve "total destruction" of terrorists, but how far he will be successful is a matter of conjecture.

Security has been stepped up in Russia, especially in Volgograd and Sochi where the February 2014 Olympic Games will take place. The return of the Russian nationals from Syria increases the probability of more attacks in Russia. It may be mentioned that Russian security services are ill-prepared to deal with small-unit operations such as suicide bombing attacks due to lack of training.

With these factors and the anti-terrorism law signed on 2 November, 2013 by President Putin have aggravated the hostility among the militants. The new law apart from the introduction of heavy prison terms and payment of fine, also lays down the rule of payment by the relatives for any damage caused by militants fighting a separatist campaign in southern Russia. Hence, the implications of this anger will be heavy on Russia.

Russia needs to initiate steps such as addressing the grievances of its citizens and neighbours. It needs to respect the people of the mainland and North Caucasus, and use more of 'soft power' to protect its own security and economy.

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