
CRISIS IN CHECHNYA: IMPLICATIONS FOR RUSSIA

Prerana Bhaduli

Assistant Professor,

Department of Political Science, Mahatma Gandhi Central University, Bihar

Abstract:

The Chechen crisis is the most noteworthy event to have taken place in the history of contemporary Russia. The Kremlin consistently stated that it employed military force for several reasons: to dismantle the unauthorized and non-democratic government established by Chechen leader General Dzhokhar Dudayev, to prevent Chechnya from breaking away from Russia, to restore law and order and eradicate criminal activities within the region, to safeguard human rights, especially those of the Russian-speaking population in Chechnya, and to thwart the emergence of a significant hub for Islamic fundamentalism in the North Caucasus. The Russian military intervention in Chechnya has led to widespread condemn nation throughout the world. It has severely damaged Russia's relations with the Muslim world which increasingly perceives Moscow as 'anti-Islam'. It has also damaged relations with the West which fears that President Boris Yeltsin's military adventure has both damaged his personal standing as well as irreparably harmed Russia's transition to democracy and a market economy. Russia's primary foreign policy objective, aimed at reuniting former Soviet states under Russian influence in terms of economics, politics, and strategy, was undermined and compromised by the Chechen separatist movement. This movement suggested the potential disintegration of the Russian Federation itself, which contradicted Russia's overarching goal. Though President Vladimir Putin has been successful in crushing the crisis, still the problem persists which is a grave security threat to Russia's territorial integrity. This paper aims to examine these crises in the context of major geopolitical shifts that occurred following the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Keywords: Crisis, Caucasus, Russia, Chechnya, implications.

The Caucasus region continues to be recognized as one of the most volatile and unstable areas globally. Numerous experts argue that the final two decades of the 20th century witnessed substantial geopolitical transformations that resulted in numerous crises. These changes were unquestionably a direct outcome of the Soviet Union's dissolution and the conclusion of the Cold War. Interestingly, the aftermath of the Soviet breakup has taken on greater significance than the collapse itself. One of the numerous outcomes of the Soviet Union's disintegration was the emergence of multiple crises in various parts of the world. This development carried significant weight due to the toll on human lives and the substantial regional and global repercussions these crises generated.

In the field of international relations literature, a “crisis” is described as a situation where the established balance of a system undergoes substantial changes due to the introduction of new factors. These new elements increasingly challenge the foundations of the existing system, making the crisis more severe. According to this definition, the system comprises a hierarchy of smaller subsystems. Therefore, a crisis within a government system can have a cascading effect, leading to a crisis in regional and even international systems. In this regard, if the crisis has an impact on regional and international systems, it is closely connected to its geopolitical context. Geopolitics is both influenced by the crisis and plays a role in determining the severity of the crisis. In regions that lack geopolitical significance, crises rarely escalate to affect regional or international levels, while even minor crises in geo-strategic regions can quickly escalate (Mahmood, 2007: 28).

A preliminary examination of the nature of different crises suggests that adopting a geopolitical perspective can enhance our comprehension of their causes and origins, ultimately facilitating crisis management and resolution. Geopolitical considerations in crises can take various forms depending on the circumstances and severity of the crisis. Crises and geopolitical shifts are closely interconnected and influence each other in a reciprocal manner. A crisis can instigate geopolitical changes, and conversely, alterations in geopolitics can give rise to new crises. Using this framework, the disintegration of the Soviet Union, which stands as one of the most significant geopolitical events of the 20th century, had diverse impacts on various regions. In certain regions, like the Baltics and, to a certain degree, Eastern Europe and Central Asia, the geopolitical transformations resulting from the collapse of the Soviet Union were managed relatively smoothly. However, in the Balkans and the Caucasus, these changes continue to give rise to fresh crises. Broadly speaking, the dissolution of the Soviet Union played a pivotal role in the emergence of new crises, primarily through its influence on three key areas: the reawakening of national identities, alterations in the geopolitical power dynamics, and shifts in the economic significance and character of various geopolitical regions within the former Soviet Union (Vaezi, 2008: 58).

During the Cold War era, the prevailing ideology and the intense rivalry between the two superpowers suppressed many identity and ethnic aspirations. However, with the conclusion of the Cold War and the removal of this ideological umbrella, issues that were previously of lesser importance suddenly surfaced, causing significant tensions. Consequently, historical claims, historical rights, and ethnic distinctions have become major factors in fuelling numerous recent crises. This phenomenon has persisted long after the Cold War, particularly in Eurasia, notably in the Balkans, the Caucasus, and Central Asia. A majority of the tensions in these regions have their roots in ethnic differences, as various ethnic communities have sought control over their ancestral lands, often divided by artificial borders. An analysis of post-Cold War events reveals that nationalist motivations and the pursuit of statehood have been the primary drivers of most of these tensions. (Szayna et al., 2003: 145-147)

A political resolution was required for the situation in Chechnya, given that military efforts spanning the past nine years have proven ineffective. These military actions have had the unintended consequence of radicalizing the Chechen population and facilitating the spread of Islamic fundamentalism in the Caucasus region. What once was a movement advocating for secularism and democratic independence may now be evolving, with an increasing number of desperate people turning to radical Islam and terrorism. This shift poses not only a threat to Russia but also carries potential risks for Europe and the United States (Brownfeld, 2003: 137).

History of the Chechen Conflict:

Russia's relationship with Chechnya has a long history of conflict. Chechens and other North Caucasus peoples vigorously resisted Russian conquest during the 19th century and were among the first to assert their independence when the Russian empire disintegrated during World War I. They periodically engaged in guerrilla actions against Soviet authority into the 1930s, including opposition to collectivization. During World War II, Stalin accused the Chechens of collaborating with the Nazis, dissolved their enclave, and forcibly relocated nearly all of them to Kazakhstan and Siberia, resulting in a significant loss of life. In 1957, under Khrushchev, they were "rehabilitated" and allowed to return, although their previous properties were not automatically restored (Conquest, 1970).

Throughout history, Chechnya has experienced recurrent conflicts with Russia spanning centuries. During the 18th century, as the Russian empire expanded, Chechens put up resistance for a considerable period before eventually becoming part of Russia. In the 1830s, they once again sought independence, a struggle that persisted until 1859 and continued intermittently thereafter. Life did not improve for the Chechens under communist rule, and in 1944, Joseph Stalin forcibly relocated approximately half a million Chechens to Central Asia, resulting in thousands of deaths due to resistance or the arduous journey. It wasn't until 1957, during Nikita Khrushchev's rule, that they were allowed to return to their homeland (Dunlop, 1998).

As the Soviet Union was collapsing in 1991, Chechnya, like other Soviet republics, asserted its independence. However, Russia refused to acknowledge this secession. In October 1991, Dzhokar Dudayev, a former Soviet air force general and leader of the separatist movement, assumed the presidency of Chechnya through elections that Russia did not recognize. Meanwhile, pro-Russian factions within Chechnya opposed Dudayev's leadership, leading to internal conflicts.

Dudayev's legitimacy was far from unquestionable. He used force to dissolve the initial Supreme Soviet of the Checheno-Ingush Republic in 1991 and subsequently disbanded the Chechen parliament in early 1993. In 1994, President Boris Yeltsin ordered Russian troops to enter Chechnya. After Dudayev was killed in a rocket attack in April 1996, growing pressure from both Russian and international public opinion prompted Moscow to engage in peace negotiations. These negotiations culminated in the Khasavyurt ceasefire agreement in

August 1996. This agreement outlined the withdrawal of Russian forces, plans for a referendum on independence in December 2001, and presidential elections.

Scheduled elections were set to take place in Chechnya in 1995. However, by that time, Dudayev's popularity within the republic had significantly declined. Several factors came together to greatly diminish his political prospects, including economic challenges that he struggled to address, internal conflicts among the ruling class, discontent among various Chechen clans regarding his appointments to his team, and the long-standing Chechen scepticism towards any form of "state" authority, especially if it was located nearby in Grozny. The sole factor that could have stopped his removal is precisely what occurred: Russia's direct intervention. Dudayev swiftly transformed into an emblem of national defiance, and following his demise, he gained widespread recognition as a revered hero (Kovalev, 1997).

As the parliamentary elections neared in the autumn of 1995 and presidential elections were scheduled for June 1996, Yeltsin and his advisors grew increasingly confident in asserting that the primary accomplishment during Yeltsin's leadership was the consolidation of Russia's territorial integrity. However, Moscow still grappled with significant challenges in its dealings with local governments and the task of preventing ethnic tensions from escalating into further conflicts within Russia. The most pressing issue was the volatile situation in the North Caucasus, where, among various other issues, the breakaway republic of Chechnya persisted in refusing to acknowledge itself as a part of the Russian Federation (Walker, 1995: 1).

Until the summer of 1994, Moscow had taken a notably patient approach to the challenge posed by Chechnya. After their initial attempt to impose martial law following Chechnya's declaration of independence had failed in late 1991, Moscow essentially adopted a policy of non-interference toward Chechnya and its President, Dzhokhar Dudayev. While Moscow did not officially acknowledge Chechnya's independence, it allowed the republic to follow its own path and even periodically engaged in negotiations with Dudayev. Additionally, Yeltsin, his advisors, and government members consistently emphasized that they would not resort to force to settle their differences with Chechnya. Following the signing of treaties with Tatarstan, Kabardino-Balkaria, and Bashkortostan, they also hoped that these agreements could serve as a blueprint for a peaceful resolution with Chechnya. Yeltsin articulated this stance in an early August speech the previous year, stating, "Forcible intervention in Chechnya is impermissible.... we in Russia have succeeded in avoiding interethnic clashes only because we have refrained from forcible pressure. If we violate this principle with regard to Chechnya, the Caucasus will rise up. There will be so much turmoil and blood that afterwards no one will forgive us." While these statements were being made, Moscow quietly increased its financial and military backing for opposition groups within Chechnya. Conflict in the region escalated during the summer, culminating in a significant offensive on Grozny in November. This attack was carried out by a coalition of Chechen opposition forces

with the aim of ousting Dudayev from power. Instead of achieving a swift and relatively low-casualty triumph, the Russian military ended up subjecting Grozny to heavy artillery bombardment, indiscriminate aerial bombing, and engaging in street-by-street combat to advance into the city's core (Walker, 1995: 1).

In the presidential elections held in January 1997, the moderate Aslan Maskhadov was elected as the President of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria. In May 1997, he signed a peace treaty with Russia, granting Chechnya de facto independence but postponing the resolution of its status issue until the December 2001 referendum.

In Moscow, in May of that year, Boris Yeltsin and Aslan Maskhadov, who had recently been elected as the President of Chechnya, came together to sign an agreement known as the "On Peace and the Principles of Relations between the Russian Federation and the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria." Both sides, referred to as the "High Contracting Parties," expressed their intention to put an end to centuries of conflict and to establish a relationship based on equality, grounded in internationally accepted principles and norms of international law.

The language used in the agreement is clear and leaves no room for interpretation. It signifies that Russia has acknowledged the following points:

1. Chechnya was never integrated into Russia willingly.
2. The Chechen people have consistently opposed Russian control.
3. Presently, Moscow officially regards Ichkeria as an independent nation.

The term "independence" is notably absent from the agreement, which seems intentional. This omission is likely deliberate because in the previous year, in the town of Khasavyurt in Dagestan, Alexander Lebed and Maskhadov signed a document that brought an end to the conflict but deferred a definitive resolution on Chechnya's status until the year 2001.

The most crucial aspect, without a doubt, is that the initial article of the agreement explicitly rejects the utilization of force or any form of threat involving force to settle disputes (Kovalev, 1997: 27).

Between 1996 and 1999, the situation in Chechnya worsened significantly. The region had suffered severe damage during the war, its economy was in ruins, and there was insufficient aid to support reconstruction efforts. Concurrently, the elected government struggled to assert control over various radical Islamist, terrorist, and other groups that had gained influence during the conflict. According to both Russian and Chechen sources, around 157 armed groups were operating independently, outside the control of the Chechen government at that time (Brownfeld, 2003).

The Chechen invasion has had profound political repercussions in Moscow. Almost all democrats in Moscow vehemently criticized the decision to invade, and many have declared their withdrawal of support for Yeltsin. From an economic perspective, the invasion poses a risk of pushing Russia's budget to the brink, potentially fuelling inflation and undermining hopes for additional financial assistance from the IMF and aid from Western nations. Furthermore, Russia now seems to be an even more uncertain and daunting environment for foreign investors compared to before. In terms of foreign policy, the invasion has strained the already deteriorating diplomatic relations between Moscow and the United States. However, perhaps the most distressing outcome of the invasion is that it occurred just as the first signs of political and economic stabilization were starting to emerge in Russia (Walker, 1995: 2).

Reasons behind invasion of Chechnya under Boris Yeltsin Regime:

Initially, attempts to engage in negotiations with Dudayev had hit an impasse by the early summer of 1994. Starting in January 1994, Moscow actively worked towards finding a middle ground. Moscow signalled its willingness to acknowledge Dudayev as the rightful leader of Chechnya, even though his “election” in November 1991 was viewed as questionable. Moscow also abandoned its insistence on a new Chechen constitution and fresh elections, and it extended an invitation for a meeting between Yeltsin and Dudayev.

As expected, discussions about a potential meeting between Yeltsin and Dudayev, along with the prospect of a negotiated resolution, came to a standstill after the failed assassination attempt on Dudayev as declared by Chechen government. Dudayev reverted to his previous stance that Moscow must formally acknowledge Chechnya’s independence before any negotiations could commence. It was at this juncture, in late July, that Moscow escalated its efforts to exert pressure on Dudayev by backing the opposition.

Secondly, the decision to abandon Moscow’s previous policy of benign neglect around July likely stemmed from a growing perception that Chechnya posed a genuine and increasing security threat to Russia. This threat encompassed several aspects: a continuous influx of arms and narcotics from the republic, frequent incidents of hijacking and robbery, particularly concerning the train route passing through Grozny, which served as Moscow’s primary transportation link to Azerbaijan; the widespread arming of the Chechen populace; ongoing internal factional and clan conflicts within the republic; a substantial exodus of Russian residents; the activities of the “Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus,” headquartered in Chechnya, which posed a risk of uniting Muslim communities in the North Caucasus against Russia; Dudaev’s actions complicating Moscow’s efforts to ease ethnic tensions in other parts of the North Caucasus, such as between the Ingush and Ossetians or between Chechens and local Cossacks; and the concern that Chechen obstinacy might project Moscow as weak, potentially encouraging other republics and regions to challenge Moscow’s authority by, among other things, refusing to fulfil their financial obligations to the central government.

Thirdly, a critical factor was the matter of oil. Chechnya's own oil production was relatively small and had been decreasing for several years, even before the era of perestroika. By 1994, it constituted only about 0.5 percent of Russia's total oil production. The primary concern didn't revolve around oil within Chechnya itself but rather the oil (and natural gas) that transited through the republic. Unluckily for Moscow, a major pipeline network ran directly through Grozny. These pipelines, actually consisting of three separate lines, had experienced occasional acts of sabotage and frequent shutdowns due to the turmoil in Chechnya, though it's worth noting that all three were not simultaneously out of service. Additionally, the Chechens had reportedly become skilled at siphoning off oil and gas from these pipelines, resulting in substantial revenue losses for Moscow.

However, the most critical aspect related to oil was likely the fact that Moscow was in the midst of negotiating two highly profitable pipeline agreements. Both of these deals involved the transportation of oil and gas through Grozny to reach the Black Sea ports of Novorossiisk (in Russia) and Tuapse (in Georgia). The first agreement was with the "Caspian Consortium," which had plans to develop extensive oil and gas reserves in the Caspian Sea off Azerbaijan. The second deal was with another consortium responsible for the substantial Tenghiz oil field in Kazakhstan. In both cases, constructing an alternative pipeline that bypassed Chechnya would be extremely costly and would make it considerably more challenging to convince producers to utilize the Russian route. Likewise, a determination that Russia could not ensure the security of its existing pipelines would also present significant obstacles.

Finally, ethnic Russians generally hold negative attitudes towards Muslim minorities in the North Caucasus, particularly the Chechens. There is a perception that these minorities are deeply involved in criminal activities, and many Russians are also resentful of their success as merchants, as they often run numerous fruit and vegetable markets across Russia. Yeltsin might have anticipated that the Russian population would support a strong and resolute Russian president in bringing discipline to the rebellious republic and restoring order. He may have also believed that, like many American presidents before him, taking action against a security threat was essential to maintain his own authority and to demonstrate that he had addressed Russia's statehood crisis.

The choice to initiate the invasion was not driven by a desire to undermine democracy or engage in ethnic cleansing in the North Caucasus. Instead, it stemmed from a significant political miscalculation, resulting from a deep failure to grasp the military and political ramifications associated with such an invasion (Walker, 1995: 2-3).

Reactions to the Chechen Crisis:

Initially, Western nations chose to remain discreetly silent about the Chechnya crisis because they were concerned that taking a more vocal stance could further strain their already fragile relations with Russia.

Tensions had escalated following the Budapest summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), primarily due to Russian opposition to NATO expansion. The West was wary of jeopardizing their personal relationships with Boris Yeltsin.

At the onset of the Chechen crisis, a Western diplomat conveyed the sentiment, “We still want to give Yeltsin a chance. We're not going to engage in a confrontation with him over a self-declared, troublesome region on the outskirts of his country.” Consequently, Western leaders hoped for a swift resolution of the Chechen conflict with minimal loss of life, resulting in a period of uncomfortable silence in Western capitals. They consistently emphasized that the Chechen conflict was an “internal matter” within Russia.

Western leaders also expressed apprehension about the possibility of the Chechen crisis triggering a cascading effect, potentially causing the breakup of the Russian Federation and a loss of central authority. Such a scenario could result in a lack of control over Russia’s nuclear arsenal. Malcolm Rifkind, the British Defense Secretary, stressed the importance of Russia maintaining stability and internal peace because Russia still possessed nuclear capabilities.

By the second week of the crisis, Western leaders started showing greater worry regarding the increasing and alarmingly high number of civilian casualties. The British Foreign Office emphasized their concern and urged the necessity for a prompt resolution that would prevent further loss of life and ensure the people in the region could fully exercise their human rights.

Another growing concern was the outlook for Yeltsin, encompassing his health, decision-making capabilities, and political stability.

Criticism of the Western world’s restrained official stance on the Chechnya conflict emerged as Moscow escalated its aerial bombings in Chechnya, predominantly hitting civilian areas.

After President Yeltsin’s speech on 28 December 1994, where he promised to halt the bombardment of civilian areas in Chechnya, the Russian air force continued to miss ‘strategic targets’ and hit civilian buildings. This led to stronger protests that Yeltsin had ‘broken his word’ after the terror bombing of Chechen civilians continued. German Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel said in an interview in the German newspaper *Berliner Zeitung* that:

“The methods which the Russian government is using to try and resolve the conflict are cause for the utmost concern. ... We find it hard to understand the reaction of the Russian government. There must be respect in this conflict for human rights, the basic principles of the OSCE and for the appropriateness of the means used.”

Chancellor Kohl made his initial public statement on January 5, 1995, in which he continued to express support for Russian reforms personified by Yeltsin. He opposed imposing sanctions but characterized the Chechen crisis as “complete madness.” German Finance Minister Theo Waigel, however, reminded Russia that financial aid was contingent on progress in the reform process. While Defense Minister Ruehe wasn't in favour of severing ties with Russia, he advocated openly identifying which agreements were violated, emphasizing the importance of maintaining dialogue with the Russians even when addressing challenging issues. Klaus Kinkel conceded that Russia warranted “severe criticism” because no nation had the right to defend its territorial integrity by causing extensive destruction to entire neighbourhoods.

The French, Dutch, and Belgians collectively urged Russia to adhere to the OSCE Code of Conduct, commence negotiations, and cease the “disproportionate” application of force, as this approach was undermining Yeltsin’s credibility (Kuzio, 1996: 97-100).

The Unrepresented Nations and People's Organization (UNPO), consisting of 43 member nations, located in The Hague, called upon the United Nations (UN) and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) to use their influence to put an end to Russian military operations in Chechnya, a UNPO member. It said:

“Human rights, including the right to self-determination, are an integral part of international law. As such their violation is the legitimate concern of the international community and is by definition not a domestic or internal affair of any state.”

Relations between Russia and the European Union (EU) remained tense, with the European Parliament condemning significant human rights abuses committed by the Russian military and calling for an immediate cessation of hostilities. A crucial trade agreement between Russia and the EU would not proceed until there was a return to the observance of human rights (Kuzio, 1996: 103).

Turkey and Iran have been particularly outspoken in their opposition to Russian military involvement in Chechnya. They have strongly criticized the significant number of civilian casualties and have called for the pursuit of a peaceful resolution. Additionally, both Turkey and Iran view the Caucasus as their immediate neighbouring region and are concerned about the potential for the Chechen conflict to spread throughout the area.

The Turkish Foreign Ministry stated that: ‘Turkey was the first country to express its concern at government level about the dispute in Chechnya and the need for a peaceful solution’ (Kuzio, 1996: 106). It expressed disapproval of Russia’s efforts to establish a new administration in Chechnya without the involvement of President Dzhokar Dudayev.

Iran has articulated its concern, stating that it cannot disregard the plight of the Chechen Muslim population, and it firmly believes that the conflict should be resolved through negotiations, not military force. Similar to Turkey, Iran has offered its assistance as a mediator to help reach a peaceful resolution. However, as the conflict escalated, Iranian criticism grew more pointed. The head of the Iranian Majlis (parliament) remarked that Russia's actions were reminiscent of the Stalin era, characterized by a climate of terror and intimidation.

The Organization of the Islamic Conference in Jeddah released a statement expressing that Muslims worldwide were closely monitoring the situation in Chechnya with concern. They expressed the hope that the fundamental rights of Chechen Muslims would be given due consideration (Kuzio, 1996: 107).

Russia's interactions with the Muslim world have been significantly harmed due to its military involvement in Chechnya and its backing of the Serbs during the Bosnian conflict. The Chechen crisis has left a lasting negative impact on Russia's relationship with the Chechens, and Russia might resort to military action again if the Chechens persist in demanding complete independence.

The geopolitical consequences of the Chechen crisis will deeply influence Russia's relations with Western nations, Central Europe, the Muslim world, and former Soviet republics. Furthermore, it will tarnish the reputation of Russia's leaders and raise questions about their commitment to democratic principles (Kuzio, 1996: 109).

The turn of the Conflict in Chechnya towards Islamic Fundamentalism:

As the conflict appears to have no end in sight and Russian actions continue to be intolerable, Islamic terrorists and fundamentalist ideologies are finding increasing support and influence in Chechnya. There have been instances where in August 1999, one of the fundamentalist leaders, Ibn Khattab, played a role in leading Chechen rebels in a raid into the Russian province of Dagestan, which prompted a harsh military response from Russia. Chechnya had become a pressing security concern for Russia. However, it was the devastating September 1999 bombing of a residential building in Moscow, resulting in the deaths of approximately 300 people and allegedly carried out by Chechen terrorists, that triggered a new Russian military intervention (Brownfeld, 2003: 138-139).

Further, certain Chechen individuals have resorted to acts of terrorism, such as the assault on a Moscow theatre in the autumn of 2002 and more recent attacks in the summer of 2003. In the past year alone, suicide bombers have been responsible for the deaths of at least 175 individuals. These suicide bombings have attracted significant coverage in the Western media, underscoring the unstable situation in Chechnya and the risks associated with the growing influence of radical Islamism in the region.

Chechnya has been marked by a state of lawlessness and is effectively controlled by various warlords. Over the past nine years, a staggering 180,000 Chechens have lost their lives, and an additional 350,000 have been forced to flee their homes (United Nations High Commission for Refugees, January 2002). This devastating toll on the population comes in the context of a total population of only 1.1 million in Chechnya.

The human rights crisis in Chechnya is of unprecedented magnitude. According to the International Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, recent data on the disappearances of Chechens suggests an ongoing and severe assault on the Chechen people, reaching a level that can be considered close to genocide (International Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 23 July 2002). Russia has deployed roughly 80,000 troops to this region, which is approximately half the size of Belgium.

Human Rights Watch, based in the United States, has documented the Russian military's involvement in numerous grave violations, including hundreds of forced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and widespread incidents of torture and abuse (Human Rights Watch, 7 April 2003).

Additionally, a disturbing statistic reveals that Russian authorities have classified about 73 percent of Chechen territory as environmentally contaminated. This contamination primarily results from oil spills caused by increasingly rudimentary production methods. Furthermore, other pollutants such as nuclear waste, radioactive materials, and sewage from disrupted systems have contributed to this environmental degradation (Brownfeld, 2003: 138-139).

Given the geographical proximity of the Caucasus to Afghanistan and the ongoing turmoil in Chechnya, there is a high likelihood that displaced terrorist training camps and cells have either already relocated to Chechnya or will do so in the future. Jean-Louis Bruguiere, a prominent French investigative judge specializing in terrorism cases, has expressed his concern, stating that the Caucasus, particularly Chechnya, is becoming a hub for international terrorism. He emphasized that Chechnya holds a similar status in the Islamic world as Afghanistan did a few years ago.

Some experts believe that this transfer of terrorist activity to Chechnya may have already occurred. Rohan Gunaratna, a terrorism expert and author of "Inside Al Qaeda," noted that Chechnya and the Pankisi Gorge in Georgia have partially taken the place of Afghanistan as centres for terrorist training. He pointed out that the initial wave of terrorists who are now entering Europe received training in Chechnya or Algeria.

Magnus Ranstorp, director of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St. Andrews in Scotland, also highlighted that there is a prevailing belief in the security community that Chechnya has become the new focal point for terrorists, not only in Chechnya itself but also in the surrounding

regions. Moscow views these developments not as a sign that its military campaign in Chechnya is failing but as further justification for its actions, leading to a cycle of violence.

In response to the global focus on counterterrorism efforts, Moscow has made significant efforts to portray its conflict in Chechnya as part of this larger battle. Russian authorities consistently label all Chechen guerrillas as “terrorists” and draw parallels between Russia's struggle and America’s anti-terror initiatives. They have suggested that Chechen terrorists, along with groups like al Qaeda and the Muslim Brotherhood, are interconnected components of an international terrorism network responsible for major acts of terrorism worldwide over the past several years (Brownfeld, 2003: 141-142).

US intervention in Russia’s ‘Internal Crisis’:

While the Chechen crisis was initially seen as Russia’s internal issue, this didn’t translate into non-intervention by Western powers. The West often attempted to weaken Russia and create instability within it. The situation in Chechnya presented an opportunity for them to advance their longstanding goal, which was the second phase of Russia's disintegration. Although with variations in approach and objectives, the United States, Europe, and even certain regional nations viewed the Chechen crisis as a favourable arena to pursue their own strategic interests (Edward, 1993: 23).

The U.S. administration believed that the Chechen crisis presented an opportunity to advance its strategic interests, specifically in establishing connections between the Caucasus region and its political, economic, and military concerns. The ultimate objective of the United States, along with several regional allies, was to push Russia out of the strategically vital Caucasus region. This involved cutting off Russia’s access to the Black Sea and Caspian Sea ports, gaining control over Caspian energy resources and their transportation routes, and pressuring Russia to return to its historical boundaries from the 16th century, specifically during the time of Ivan IV. Consequently, the United States (US) aimed to create a series of smaller states encircling Russia's borders by supporting separatist movements in the region, ultimately laying the groundwork for the country’s potential disintegration over the long term. As aptly noted by Craig Nation,

“The United States has been drawn to the window of opportunity to forward a policy of reducing Russian influence and promoting the sovereignty of the new independent states and ‘geopolitical pluralism’ within the post-Soviet space; assuring access to the resources of the Caspian; and securing regional allies and potential military access (over-flight and potential basing), extending its strategic reach into Inner Asia” (Nation, 2007: 5).

According to Russian authorities, the United States and Turkey are allegedly attempting to disrupt Russia’s critical areas around the Caspian Sea, including Dagestan and Chechnya. These areas serve as transit routes

for Russia's oil and gas pipelines and play a significant role in transporting Caspian energy resources to global oil markets. The supposed aim is to hinder Russia's vital oil-related infrastructure, potentially clearing the way for these pipelines to pass through Turkey.

However, after the events of September 11th, the U.S. shifted its priorities with the "global war on terror." Interventions in Afghanistan and the fight against al-Qaeda required cooperation from Russia. This necessitated a more accommodating stance from the United States towards Russia regarding the Chechen crisis. While the Chechen crisis has been defused for now, it should be noted that the possibility of its resurgence cannot be ruled out in the future (Vaezi, 2008: 70-72).

Implications for Russia:

The Chechen crisis carries significant implications for the Yeltsin administration, the progress of democratization and market reforms, and the future of Russia as a whole. Many experts believe that the Yeltsin government has suffered severe, possibly irreversible damage due to the Chechen conflict, regardless of its ultimate military outcome. The government likely had initial hopes of the Dudayev regime surrendering in the face of overwhelming force or achieving a quick and relatively bloodless military victory, but these outcomes now appear unachievable. Yeltsin's popularity has reached an all-time low as a result of the Chechnya situation, and political opposition is gaining momentum from various sides.

Regardless of its impact on Yeltsin, many experts believe that the Chechen conflict will have negative consequences for both democratization and economic reform in Russia. The immediate economic implications of the conflict are also detrimental. The cost of the conflict is already significant, with a senior economic advisor to Yeltsin estimating on January 9th that it would consume approximately \$1.3-1.5 billion, equivalent to about 2 percent of the 1995 budget. Other estimates suggest even higher costs. It is widely agreed that if the Chechen conflict continues for an extended period, it could severely strain the budget and disrupt reform efforts. This could derail the government's plans for fiscal responsibility and inflation reduction, make Russia ineligible for IMF assistance and a ruble stabilization fund, and discourage significant foreign investments (Goldman and Nichol, 1995: 12).

Many individuals in Russia's 32 ethnically-based republics and regions, especially those in the North Caucasus republics, strongly criticized the military operation in Chechnya. They were concerned that it might escalate the conflict or erode the freedoms they had gained through decentralization of power to local authorities. Some early speculations even suggested that the Chechen crisis could spark uprisings in neighbouring areas like Ingushetia and Dagestan, as well as in other discontented regions. Fortunately, Moscow seems to have avoided this worst-case scenario, although there is ongoing debate about whether this was due to Moscow's use of force

or in spite of it. While leaders in Russia's ethnic enclaves may not immediately push for separatist demands because of the Chechen conflict, tensions in federal relations are evident.

There were reports of volunteers from various Russian ethnic enclaves and other regions joining Dudayev's forces in Chechnya. In an attempt to prevent such support, Russian troops created a barrier around Chechnya and shut down the borders between Russia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. This had serious economic consequences for those neighbouring states. While Moscow appears to have successfully prevented a potentially catastrophic surge in secessionist movements, a more plausible, though not guaranteed, scenario in Chechnya is an extended guerrilla conflict in the rugged mountains to the south of Grozny.

Chechnya holds greater political significance for Russia compared to its economic importance, although it does play a role in the petroleum industry. Chechnya has some oil production and significant refineries. During the 1980s, Chechen refineries were responsible for producing a majority of the Soviet aviation fuel. Of strategic importance is an oil pipeline running from Russia's Black Sea port of Novorossisk, passing through Chechnya, and linking the Russian pipeline network to Azerbaijan. Moscow's plans to tap into Azerbaijan's abundant Caspian Sea oil resources and its ability to transport oil via the Black Sea rely on this pipeline. However, it presents an attractive target for Chechen guerrillas and poses logistical challenges in terms of defense (Goldman and Nichol, 1995: 13-14).

Way ahead:

According to Alexander Iskanderyan, who leads the independent Centre for Caucasian Studies in Moscow, he characterizes the conflict in Chechnya as primarily an effort for independence. He suggests that the influx of external funds and the influence of Islamic ideology came later and, to some extent, were the result of Chechnya's deteriorating conditions. Nonetheless, at its core, the Chechen rebellion is fundamentally about seeking secession from Russia. As a result, Iskanderyan emphasizes that a political resolution, rather than a military one, is the necessary approach to address the conflict (Brownfeld, 2003: 144).

Although Russia vehemently opposes any form of international intervention in Chechnya, there are several potential advantages to consider. These include resolving the long-standing issue of dealing with this contentious segment of its population and relieving Russia from the economic burdens associated with the Chechen conflict, as well as mitigating the international political embarrassment stemming from human rights concerns in the region.

However, it's important to note that Russia also has significant interests in the area, particularly regarding its oil and natural gas resources, which are connected to pipelines that lead to the Black and Caspian Seas. These assets are something Russia is not willing to relinquish. Additionally, there is a worry that permitting the

establishment of an independent state in Chechnya, especially a Muslim one, could set a precedent that other neighbouring republics might follow.

Crucially, Russia must engage in direct negotiations with the elected leadership of Chechnya to work out a comprehensive and enduring peace agreement. This agreement should incorporate elements that address Russian security concerns while also granting Chechnya a substantial level of self-governance, whether that takes the form of autonomy within the Russian Federation or complete independence. Simultaneously, the Chechen leadership needs to exert control over the rogue factions that have been operating independently (Brownfeld, 2003: 145).

Russian President Vladimir Putin had successfully crushed the secessionist movement in Chechnya by declaring the Chechens as terrorists and relating the movement with 'global war on terror'. The two-pronged approach of the current leadership has brought peace in the disputed region. Putin had adopted a co-optation policy in Chechnya by creating a puppet government in this part of the world to involve in capacity-building and building trust between the warring parties. The constructive solution has been only by creating people to people contact and engaging the civil society. This would manage to preserve long-term peace in this troubled zone of Russian Federation. The removal of the current leadership in Chechnya, Ramzan Kadyrov, the key ally of Russia would bring back past memories or will it be able to maintain stability in the disputed area, will remain a test of time.

References:

“Adequate Security Conditions do not Exist in Chechnya to Allow the Return of Displaced Citizens,” International Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights, 23 July 2002.

“UNHCR Paper on Asylum Seekers from the Russian Federation in the Context of the Situation in Chechnya” (Geneva: United Nations High Commission for Refugees, January 2002) p. 3.

Bellocchi, Luke P. (1995) "Recent Developments: Self-Determination in the Case of Chechnya," Buffalo Journal of International Law: Vol. 2: No. 1, Article 5. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/bjil/vol2/iss1/5>

Brownfeld, P. (2003). The Afghanisation of Chechnya. *The International Spectator*, 38(3), 137-145.

Dunlop, J. B. (1998). *Russia confronts Chechnya: roots of a separatist conflict*. Cambridge University Press.

Edward, O. (1993). The North Caucasus Triangle. *Megapolis Express*, (21).

Goldman, S. D., & Nichol, J. (1995, January). Russian Conflict in Chechnya and Implications for the United States. Congressional Research Service, Library of Congress.

Kovalev, S. (1997). Russia after Chechnya. *New York Review of Books*, 44, 27-30.

Kuzio, T. (1996). International reaction to the Chechen crisis. *Central Asian Survey*, 15(1), 97-109.

Mahmood, V. (2007). The Geopolitics of Crisis in Central Asia and the Caucasus. *Foundations and Actors, Tehran: Institute for Political and International Studies*.

Nation, R. C. (2007). *Russia, the United States, and the Caucasus*. Strategic Studies Institute.

Oliker, O., Szayna, T. S., Pace, S., & Wilson, P. A. (2003). *Faultlines of Conflict in Central Asia and the South Caucasus: Implications for the US Army*. Rand Corporation.

Robert Conquest, *The Nation Killers*. New York: Macmillan, 1970

Vaezi, M. (2008). Geopolitical Changes and Crises in the Caucasus. *Geopolitics Quarterly*, 3(4), 56-79.

Walker, E. W. (1995). The Crisis in Chechnya. *ASN Analysis of Current Events*, 6(6).