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Islamic Insurgency troubles Russia's North Caucasus

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ABSTRACT

The instability in the autonomous republics of Russia continue to struggle with some forms of Islamic insurgency till date. The disturbance in the North Caucasian region is not a recent one but can be traced to the centuries of imperial conquest. This study seeks to deepen the understanding regarding the causes of increasing violence, instability and social discontent in the North Caucasus. The region comprises of Chechnya, North Ossetia, republics of Dagestan, Ingushetia, Kabardino-Balkaria, etc. This research shall reflect on comprehending the bond between the transnational jihadists and the internal sources of insurgency and also elaborating in what manner does all this is perceived by countries like Iran, Turkey, etc.The erstwhile Soviet Union had committed the error of establishing independent republics on the grounds of ethnicity, which sowed the seeds of interethnic rivalry.Hence it is imperative to outline the ways in which violence and religion intersect in the Russian federation and the erstwhile colonies. The Caucasian Imamate, in an Islam-based resistance movement, in Dagestan and Chechnya lost to the Russian army which uses guerilla tactics.This study shall delve deep to find out the various groups that existed and also the cause that are exacerbating the interethnic tensions. The study also aims to know in granular detail what has been the governance and security challenges in North Caucasus region over the past decades.The present leadership of Russia in the form of Vladimir Putin does not entertain rebels and staunchly believes in crushing any voices opposing Russia's authority over its erstwhile colonies.This research also seeks to list the challenges faced by the state to curb the North Caucasus insurgency over the period and also discusses in detail who does the insurgency targets. It is important to outline the grievances of the ethnic populace and the conflicts that they engage in henceforth. The article shall also deal in the religious element in the insurgency relating with the fundamentalism it ushered the movement in and also the state's answer to all the conflicts and growth of insurgency. The study discusses in some details both the hard-security modes to wipe out radicalism and the soft-dialoguesstrategywith the Salafis adopted by the state of Russia. The article further highlights the insurgency and counter-insurgency dynamics that have sustained for so many years in the North Caucasus region.

Key Words : Instability, Russia, Islamic, North Caucasus, Insurgency, Ethnicity, Putin, Salafis

INTRODUCTION

The North Caucasus is a republic within the Russian federation; it is a part of the federation that moves upwards close to the primary ridge of the mountains of Caucasus. The Caucasus Mountains are on the border which separates Asia and Europe. The region of North Caucasus has people of various nationalities and ethnicity such as Circassians, Ossetians, Balkars, Kabardians, Abazins, Hunzib, Bzhedugs; the major religion being Islam. This region, in the last census of 2010, show an upward trend in the population growth while the rest of Russia experienced a decline[1] . The present population of North Caucasus is approximately 9.5 million with Chechnya and Dagestan contributing to the highest growth in number of people[2], which is 15 per cent by each region. The North Caucasus region is primarily a Muslim-dominated republic which boasts of low mortality and high birth rates. But this republic suffers low rates of employment which results in people migrating to the other regions

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predominantly Moscow; it's the most affluent city of Russian federation. The reason for the migration to more affluent societies can be attributed to high unemployment, prevalence of extreme poverty, and existence of highly corrupt governance.

The last 30 years, since the collapse of former USSR, have been plagued by terrorist activities, wars, and Islamist insurgencies in the small republics that form Russia's North Caucasus region. The region of North Caucasus lies between the Caspian and the Black Sea beautifully contouring snow-capped mountains, plunging waterfalls and also cascading gorges. However this inherently picturesque aesthetic region is not just culturally fragmented but also ethnically diverse. This region is measured larger in size than France and is situated on the split lines of civilizations.

The armed conflict on low scale between the militants which are Caucasian emirates and Russia, later on, joined by groups from Islamic State of Iraq and Levant[3] .North Caucasus is not just houses several ethnic groups but also is harbinger of several Islamic movements. The variant of Salafi and Hanafi Muslims reside in all directions of the republics. The prevalence of Muslims have increased at a rate that shall ultimately alter the demographic make-up of the region in the near future. The business populace, in Dagestan, have spread their business to all corners and also boast of their Salafi inclinations with no hesitation. This shall further create barriers for the modernization of the North Caucasian societies and also their integration with the Russian Federation.

By 2009 Russia has repeatedly claimed that Russian troops no more indulges in "counter terrorism operations" in Chechen region. Chechnya, although, had declared autonomy from Russia in 1991, when the USSR had disintegrated. The militants have engaged in major attacks outside Chechnya led by warlord Shamil Basayev who is suspected to have masterminded most of the militant operations. In order to instil fear in Russian people, the Chechens had employed suicide bombers as the most effective way to fight the Russian security[4] . There was Beslan School Siege in 2004, Women blew up in Moscow metro in 2010 and a suicide bomb blast at Moscow's Domodedovo airport in 2011. These are the activities by which the radical jihadist pose immense threat in the region. These threats also emphasise the fact that neither insurgency nor radicalism is limited to Chechnya or Dagestan but affects all parts of North Caucasus region[5] .

The former Russian President Dmitry Medvedev has emphasised on increasing violence in the region of North Caucasus as one of the greatest menace that Russia has to deal with in the contemporary times, elaborating the increase in separatists as "a cancerous tumour". The violence in Chechnya now is reaching Ingushetia, resulting in deaths of thousands of people. When the militancy by Chechen insurgents escalated then even Ingushetia experienced rise in number of attacks. The youth in the North Caucasus region is enamoured by the radicals who provide them with the opportunity to avenge the wrongs besides a way of life which is rid of societal ills hence become insurgents[6] .

Causes of Instability in the North Caucasus Region:

The region of North Caucasus has been disturbed for the two decades because of widespread corruption, incessant insurgencies and various gang wars which also shock the Russians. Some of the regions have been very dangerous for a long period of time; Dagestan is the most dangerous of all the republics. The prominent causes of conflict in North Caucasus is the diversity in ethnicity and religion, political affiliations and historical experiences, future aspirations have made it difficult to ameliorate the local issues and connect them with the rest of the country[7] . Any form of conflict resolution policies shall demand a clear understanding of the plural nature of conflicts and implementation of the policies keeping in mind the reconciliatory approach.

The insurgency which has deep roots in the North Caucasus region is a form of resistance to state rule by the Russian Federation and began as war in response to Russian imperialism. Insurgencies in the autonomous republics of North Caucasus is primarily driven by religious identities and ethno-nationalism. Therefore the instability in the region can also be attributed to the ideological affiliations and grievance-driven, also incorporates the struggle for national-liberation from Russia. The rebels who stake all they have to fight Russia is due to the preservation of their ethnicity and autonomy. Another argument to underscore the violence in North Caucasus by the local leaders is the ideology of 'perverted reciprocity of violence' by the Russian federation[8] .

The two bloody wars that resulted in uncountable deaths poses the challenge of ethnic nationalism in Chechnya. The separatists in the regions have demanded complete autonomy since 1990s, for their republic. However the Chechens lacked any state-building

approach and also were tried in a high-handed manner by Russia which aggravated their nationalist demand into an Islamist one, with a jihadi element. The state began to use absolute force in order to resist the indiscriminate use of terrorism by the Chechen militants[9]. The policy of Chechenisation, was adopted post 2003, which accorded substantial administrative, political and security operations to ethnic Chechens. There have been widespread discrepancies pertaining to rule of law and governance in the republic but the loss of humans have significantly reduced. The deadly insurgency continued to show effects in the North Caucasus region.

Just like faith and fighting, religious violence is also very old. Just like the world, Russia also bears the brunt of philosophies and teachings to fight out and justify radicalism and instability. We cannot deny the cost-benefit theory of the rebellion in the North Caucasus region. The reason for the insurgency is also because it incentivizes the influential leaders who are at the fore front in expressing the grievance. The main reason for the radicalism can be the grievances of the wider population but the potential and the resources to radicalize fuels the expression of the grievance for the masses[10]. This shows that the insurgency is an outcome of a cost-benefit formula and not merely driven due to the element of grievance.

Challenges in the Integration of North Caucasus with Russian Federation:

In Russia, the North Caucasus region North Caucasian region in Russia is deemed as one of the most deadly region in Europe, and the radicalism shall not end anytime soon. There are concerted efforts by the state to revert extremism with iron fists, whether the militancy is claimed by Chechen separatists or pro-jihad insurgency that have affected the Caucasus communities[11]. The strategies incorporated by the state in order to counter the radicalism in the Caucasian region have fallen short of being effective as desired. It is believed that the diverse nature of the cause of incessant friction caused by religious, ethnic, economic and political grievances require flexible and comprehensive strategies to curtail insurgency in the region. Russia is completely conscious of the increasing strife among ethnicities and is experimenting new policies and approaches to bring back normalcy in the region which was brought into the Russian federation. The North Caucasus region has been a matter of concern historically for the state of Russia.

The Republics in the North Caucasus houses Muslims predominantly but also has sizeable population of orthodox Russians, Jewish Community and Christians in minority. Therefore the republics are diverse in terms of ethnicity. The Islamic state (IS) is taking root in the North Caucasus region and that offers high security risk to the residents as they pose severe challenges to the policies of Russia. The Al-Qaeda use to criticise the government's policies, but IS tries to manipulate the youths in a positive and subtle manner by offering the utopian social justice and welfare, equality agendas[12].

The growth and spread of radical Islam remains one of the most dreadful concern of the world today. Radical Islam has left to perennial terrorism in most parts of the civilized world which was hitherto too opulent to be affected. Islamic terrorists have resorted to barbaric actions in the North Caucasus, given the global nature of the terror unleashed this is an undeclared war against a civilized society.

Corruption has been one of the reasons for the instability that took roots in the North Caucasian region. The widespread socio-economic challenges which prevents any development to penetrate in the region creates menace. The economy and infrastructure both were badly destroyed the two Chechen wars and hence this regions lags behind in terms of significant progress. The birth rates are quite high while only 40 per cent of kindergarten schools exists. Also the Republic of Dagestan has its health care in bad shape, runs with insufficient number of hospital beds. Furthermore most of republics depend on the funds from Central government to even support their basic infrastructure.

Role of Religion in Aggravating the Conflicts:

North Caucasus experiences violence in places like Dagestan and Chechnya, on a regular basis and also bears perennial instability in the region. Russia attempts to resolve the long-standing conflicts and instability in North Caucasus because of the geopolitical imperative to control and bring tranquility in the region. This region acts like a prime defensive buffer for the federation, which safeguards Russia from the Islamic forces such as Iran and Turkey[13]. The region albeit has not been easy to be subdued by Russia. Despite the disintegration, Russia had extended its border outreach and wrestled to control the North Caucasus. The locals and the governance in North Caucasus have resisted Russian rule with all might, and deem it as another invading force. During the USSR era, Stalin had adopted a high-handed

manner to deal with ethnic separatist groups and deported substantial number of them to Siberia or Central Asia.

There were many conflicts confronted by Chechnya in particular during the post-Soviet era. The two major wars fought by Russia in which it sought to create an autonomous state in the 1990s. These confrontations initially were just separatist motives and nationalist aspirations but later transformed into a religious one. Muslim population dominated the regions comprised by the North Caucasus like Dagestan, Ingushetia and Chechnya. The orthodox Russians endeavoured to fight with the Chechens which took a religious colour and attracted extremists and local jihadis to join the Chechen forces. The wars fought against Russian federation by the local Chechens also viewed the participation both ideological and resources from Islamic countries like Saudi Arabia[14].

The socio-economic pattern in the North Caucasus, increase in radicalism and influence of Islam in the region, rise in ethnic tensions and nationalism have contributed in a big way in causing instability in Russia's erstwhile colonies. Today, North Caucasus can be termed as an "Islamic region" because the religion has delved deep into the common practices in the society and has redirected the life of the masses in the Islamic way[15]. The influences of the Islamic religion is so much so that it diversifies the geographical contours and also shifts the Caucasian roots. The Islamists have planned to gather resources and consolidate groups which shall help in establishing a caliphate across the North Caucasus. Russia thwarted the Chechen separatists, primarily by playing with the internal disagreement inside Chechnya between Islamists and nationalists and appointing pro-Russia clans to power.

There are various Salafis movements which have begun to grow and take hold of media, politics and also business in most North Caucasian region. Islam, during Kadyrov's times, was used to hold Chechnya together is not abused to spread radicalism and unrest in the society so as to prepare younger generations for perennial clash with Russian Federation. Previously Islam had two creeds; where Sufism was deemed to be "good" Islam which was essential to uplift the society and Salafis was considered as "bad" Islam which could deteriorate the fabric of a progressive society[16]. As time passed by, now Salafis has been gaining support from all corners of the society.

Salafis movement, therefore, is now the mainstream movement with which each citizen of North Caucasus relates with. The consequence of Salafis movement makes Sharia law the means to address the social, economic and political challenges which the society has failed over the years[17]. The young minds have been captured by Sharia law in such an extreme manner that Kremlin had to offer to open an Islamic education centers so as to curtail the learning of powerfully disruptive creeds of the religion and also prevent the drift towards the Arab world[18].

Changing nature of Secessionism:

The North Caucasus region sought independence from Russia since its disintegration, and has the legacy of two wars fought to achieve that independence. The republics could not attain authority of the republic, albeit had gained autonomy briefly between 1994 and 1999. The North Caucasus region transformed into a failed state due to lack of governance and authority. The ethnic secessionism that is being elaborated here failed to gain acceptance from parts of the region. The anti-Russian radical sentiments have now softened eventually to make way for ethnic nationalism. The decision to hold the Winter Olympics in February of the year 2014 In Sochi which has stirred the ethno-nationalist aspirations among the Caucasians.

In 1990s the radicalism and violence was a norm just in the North Caucasus region, however now the violence is dramatically spreading to the heart of Russian federation. For instance, the suicide bomb that was blown at Domodedovo International Airport which caused 200 injured and 40 deaths. The insurgency then began to occupy the centre stage for Russians and also for foreigners. There was terrorist bombings on important Russian transits like Nevsky Express of 2009 and Moscow Metro attacks in 2010. The blatant bombings and attacks in the capital and major cities of Russia, made it clear that Russia's efforts to eradicate violence from Chechnya and other republics and to bring stability to the aforementioned states have failed thoroughly[19]. The various strategies to curtain the widespread prevalence of insurgency has been proven ineffective and inappropriate.

A worker of the Fair Russia Party, named Semyon Bagdasarov who was pro-Kremlin once stated on television that, "We need to fight this not only with force, but in ideological terms. Otherwise, our forces will destroy one terrorist and the ideological conveyer belt will produce

20 terrorists,"[20] The shift of many radical Muslims from the North Caucasus region to countries like Syria and Iraq took place between 2012 and 2017[21] . The exodus from violent stricken regions of Russia to countries like Turkey was smoothly facilitated by the Russian government and helped to stabilize the region which experienced great Islamist insurgency for couple of decades, if not more. The region of North Caucasus have been pretty calm since 2016, however ISIS introduced other radical outfits in the region.

Conclusion:

The North Caucasus region is afflicted with numerous insurgency that makes the region highly unstable and also leads to disintegration of the North Caucasus region with the rest of Russia. Some of the characteristics of the insurgent region in the North Caucasus is akin to the frontier zone in Pakistan known as Federally Administered Tribal Area (FATA). The initial instability in the North Caucasus began as the struggle to assert the autonomy of the republics. Due to deadly and brutal means adopted by the Russian security forces to prevent insurgency from spreading, the Chechen aspirations for independence transformed into an Islamic insurgency. The violence that was caused by the Jihadis was initially a local one, gradually began to impact most parts of Russia like Moscow, Sochi, etc. It is imperative and wise to stay in the security and economic umbrella of the Russian Federation as the North Caucasus region has anyway failed to govern the people in a desired manner. Also because any kind of secession has never been successful world over the world.

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