

MIIS-MGIMO DIALOGUE SERIES

Divergent Approaches of the United States and Russia in Defining and Combating International Terrorism

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Students from the Middlebury Institute of International Studies (MIIS) participated in a video conference with their counterparts from the Moscow State Institute of International Relations (MGIMO) and guests from the National Research Nuclear University (MEPhI). Their discussion focused on the divergent approaches of the United States and Russia in defining and combating international terrorism. The participants compared national security doctrines and other official documents from both states, analyzed what measures each side uses to fight terrorism, and considered mechanisms of possible cooperation.

The problem of combating terrorist threats has a special place in the official documents of both Russia and the United States. In the U.S. National Security Strategy and the Russian Foreign Policy Concept, the spread of extremist ideology and the activity of terrorist organizations in a number of regions (primarily in the Middle East) are considered to be among the most dangerous realities of the modern world. In both states, in addition to these foreign policy doctrines, special documents have been developed that outline the main directions of the fight against terrorism. In Russia, this is the Comprehensive Plan for Countering the Ideology of Terrorism, which includes targeted preventive measures aimed at reducing the number of Russians traveling abroad to participate in the activities of international terrorist organizations. A similar document in the United States is the National Anti-Terrorism Strategy, which focuses on the threat posed by jihadist terrorists.

Despite the fact that the concept of the global “War on Terror” is still considered an effective way to combat the terrorist threat, the era of digitalization creates new channels of communication for members of terrorist organizations that are not only difficult to track, but also almost impossible to block. This is illustrated by the attempt to ban social networks in the Russian Federation that are allegedly used by extremists in the preparation of the attacks.

The Russian Federation and the United States of America differ in the ways they fight terrorism and quite rarely see eye to eye. One reason for this divergence is the mismatch between the lists of designated terrorist organizations banned in each of the two countries, mutual accusations of sponsoring terrorism, as well as a sharp deterioration in U.S.-Russia relations since 2014. Another impediment commonly raised by the U.S. intelligence community is the deeply embedded mistrust when it comes to intelligence sharing: both sides are afraid to expose their sources and compromise ongoing counterterrorist operations.

Nevertheless, there is reason to believe that cooperation between the Russian Federation and the United States in the fight against international terrorism has a future. It can be assumed that the interaction between the two states will be effective in certain areas, such as countering CBRN terrorism (preventing non-state actors from acquiring weapons of mass destruction or materials for their production) and maritime piracy. This belief rests on a number of examples of U.S.-Russia counterterrorism cooperation in the past, such as the use of Ulyanovsk Airport to transit NATO forces to Afghanistan or the establishment of the Global Initiative to Combat Nuclear Terrorism.

Maintaining contacts between the military and experts should be instrumental in building cooperation in countering terrorism, as they could design a “contingency plan” to follow in case of an urgent need for intelligence sharing or joint action on the ground. This measure might serve as a basis for making contacts between the two nations in counterterrorism more regular and consistent.