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The Russo-Georgia War and the Challenge to American Global Dominance

Herbert P. Bix

The five-day Russo-Georgian War in the Caucasus brought into sharp focus many conflicts rooted in the region's history and in aggressive US-NATO policies since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Notable among these were the military encirclement of Russia and attempts to control energy resources in areas long dominated by the Soviet Union. The net effect was to hasten a dangerous new era of rivalry between the world's two most powerful nuclear weapons states, one which will be shaped hereafter by the current global recession and the changes it is bringing about in the economic practices of all states.



President Bill Clinton's resort to force in Kosovo in 1999 was crucial in precipitating this situation. At that moment the US moved to thrust aside international law and the primacy of the Security Council. Clinton justified war as a matter of establishing a more humane international order, and every civilian death that resulted from it became "unintentional collateral damage," morally justifiable because the end was noble. By substituting a quasi-legal, moral right of humanitarian intervention for the long-established principles of national sovereignty and respect for territorial integrity, US-NATO aggression against Serbia prepared the ground for the Bush administration's unilateral military interventions. Now, bogged down in illegal, unjust wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the US government suddenly appears to have rediscovered the usefulness of norms of international law that it had denied in Kosovo. But it invoked the principle of state sovereignty selectively, attacking Russia for its intervention in Georgia while simultaneously sending its own armed forces and aircraft on cross-border raids into Pakistan.

The search for causes of the Georgia conflict also brought to the fore the American quest for unchallengeable, global military dominance, which requires the Pentagon to plant military bases at strategic places around the world and the Congress to pass ever larger military budgets. In 2002 President George W. Bush adopted the Pentagon strategy, first formulated a decade earlier by Dick Cheney and Paul Wolfowitz, of making the US the sole superpower, deterring foes and allies alike from even aspiring to regional dominance. When, in pursuit of this ultimate goal, the US pushed NATO further eastward toward the borders of Russia while pouring money and armaments into Georgia and training the Georgian army, it paved the way to the August war. Or, more precisely: the Russo-Georgian War exhibited the features of a proxy war pitting US-NATO imperialism against Russian nationalism. [1] Russian forces thwarted Georgia's armed provocations and issued a challenge to American and NATO policies in the borderlands.

Another disruptive trend highlighted by the war is the increasingly fierce competition between US and Russian corporations for control of Caspian Sea and Central Asian oil and gas resources. Georgians, Ossetians, Azerbaijanis, Kazaks, and other peoples in the eastern Caspian Sea basin are hapless pawns in this struggle, which goes on continuously, affecting their territorial and ethnic conflicts in ways they cannot control. The struggle over oil and gas has led the US Central Command, originally established to deal with Iran, to extend its operations from the Middle East to the oil and gas rich Central Asian and Caspian Sea states of Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, thus underlining the geopolitics that lay behind the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, and now the Russo-Georgian War.



Oil and gas pipelines in Russia, Central Asia

When Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev ordered Russian forces to move through South Ossetia and cross the border into Georgia, they violated the UN Charter. [2] Their initial justification--defense of the Ossetian's right of self-determination--was as arbitrary as the one the US and NATO put forward for US-NATO attacks on Kosovo and Serbia, where (unlike in Russia's case) their own self-defense was never involved. So, in responding unilaterally to a very real threat that had actually materialized, did Russia commit an act of aggression, "the supreme international crime?" Neither the Security Council nor the General Assembly could make that legal determination. Even if they had, Russia would not have taken seriously a US-NATO charge of aggression that served only to emphasize the egregious double standards of their accusers.

In the course of conducting the war, Georgian ground troops and tanks, and some South Ossetian militia, deliberately targeted civilians, committed acts of ethnic cleansing, and wantonly destroyed civilian property in Tskhinvali, the South Ossetian capital, and in villages along South Ossetia's border with Georgia proper. The legal scholar Richard Falk argues that Russia too targeted "several villages in the region populated by Georgians." [3] If so, there is little evidence that Russia carried out anything like ethnic cleansing. If Russians committed war crimes, they pale in comparison to the crimes the US and its allies perpetrate every day on Iraqi and Afghan civilians. But, as Falk says, all such charges should be investigated regardless of their magnitude.



Last, the crisis in the Caucasus highlighted the narrowly nationalist mindset of Western policy-makers and many of their publics. Secessionist movements exist in many of the multi-ethnic satellite states of the former Soviet Union, where Russians are in the minority. American and NATO policy-makers and neo-conservatives have been only too eager to exploit them. But once Russian tanks and ground forces moved into Georgia, abruptly halted US-NATO encirclement, and exposed the limits of American military power, the Western mass media immediately poured fiery scorn on "brutal Russia," while ignoring (a) Georgia's role in starting the conflict, and (b) US and Israeli military support for Georgia. Saakashvili made it easier for them to cover the war by hiring Aspect Consulting, a European PR firm that sent in a top executive to disseminate, daily, sometimes hourly, falsehoods about rampaging Russians attacking Georgian civilians.[3a] American journalists fostered Russophobic sentiment by spreading disinformation. American journalists fostered Russophobic sentiment by disseminating slanted war news, demonizing Russia as the evil aggressor and championing "democratic," peace-loving Georgia. The American business magazine Fortune decried the bear's "brutishness" and its threat to an interdependent world; [4] Forbes lambasted Russia "a gangster state" ruled by a "kleptocracy." [5] TV newscasters likened the Russian Federation to Nazi Germany at the time of the 1938 Munich crisis. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice even asserted an American moral right to lecture Russia on how a "civilized country" should behave in the 21st century. All of which led Vladimir Putin to comment sarcastically, "I was surprised by the power of the Western propaganda machine. . . I congratulate all who were involved in it. This was a wonderful job. But the result was bad and will always be bad because this was a dishonest and immoral work." [6]

The Russo-Georgian-South Ossetian War

When we try to clarify the basic facts of the war, we discover that virtually everything about it is contested, especially the question of who started it. But an abundance of published evidence disconfirms Georgian propaganda and indicates that Georgia's President Mikheil Saakashvili provoked the war with encouragement and material support from the Bush administration. Years earlier, Saakashvili's regime had drawn up plans for invading South Ossetia, which had been seeking independence from Georgia ever since 1920. He was emboldened to implement those plans (in the midst of the Beijing summer Olympics) because he expected aid from American and NATO allies, whose Afghanistan and Iraq wars he was supporting with 2,000 Georgian troops. [7]

An on-the-scene report written by the Organization for Security and Co-operation (OSCE) military observers stationed in landlocked South Ossetia reportedly confirmed that "shortly before midnight on August 7" Georgian forces fired the first shots. Before that time Russian jets had occasionally entered Georgian air space; there had been minor skirmishes between South Ossetians and Georgians; and Georgian spy drones had flown over Abkhazia, which has important ports on the Black Sea. These actions did not start the war. What did was the late-night bombardment and ground offensive, ordered by Saakashvili, in which U.S. and (to a lesser extent) Israeli-trained Georgian army units used rockets, heavy artillery, and Israeli-supplied cluster bombs to attack Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia and kill Russian soldiers.

It is hard to gauge the resulting scale of death and physical destruction from the Georgian army's bombardment and land assault, which targeted not only Russians and Ossetians, but also fellow Georgians living in South Ossetia. Russian officials initially claimed that the Georgian attack killed 2,000 South Ossetians, who were Russian citizens. [8] Later underestimates given in the Financial Times (Sept. 5), suggest the Georgian attack killed "at least 133 civilians," and 59 Russian soldiers. The Russian ground and air response and aerial bombardment of Georgia killed 146 Georgian soldiers and 69 civilians. [9] In addition, Russia lost four planes and an unknown number of airmen. Some 30,000 South Ossetians who fled into North Ossetia, plus the Georgians living in Abkhazia and South Ossetia who were driven from their homes, will have to be counted among the victims of the war.

Western intelligence agencies, monitoring signal intelligence from the battle area, have added further details. In breaking the cease-fire and starting the war on the night of August 7-8, Georgian forces had two objectives: one was to oust Russia's small contingent of lightly-armed peacekeepers who had been in the two semi-autonomous regions since the signing of the 1992 Sochi Agreement establishing a ceasefire between Georgian and South Ossetian forces; the other was to close the narrow Roki tunnel through the Caucasus, cutting off South Ossetia from Russia. The Russian army, though it was alert to an imminent attack, did not begin returning fire or launching air attacks until several hours after Georgia had initiated its offensive. [10] The estimates of Russia's response time range widely from 7-8 hours to 12-15. [11] Moreover, on August 8, before sending large contingents of ground forces across the border into Georgia, Moscow convened an emergency meeting of the Security Council to pass a cease-fire resolution that condemned Georgia for having initiated the conflict. US and British diplomats blocked the Council from acting. [12]

In short, Russia initially acted defensively to shore up the status quo in South Ossetia and abortively sought UN help. But then its forces pushed deep into Georgia in order to drive home a strategic lesson for the Bush administration, NATO, and its Black Sea neighbors. Having routed the Georgian army, Russian forces quickly occupied strategic points within Georgia, destroyed US-supplied military weapons and infrastructure, including a new, US-built military base. They also destroyed Georgia's small navy and coast guard. However, Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, was carefully avoided, signaling that neither American-style "regime-change" nor post-conflict occupation were Moscow's goals.

The fighting within Georgia ended on August 12. Acting on behalf of the EU, French president Nicolas Sarkozy brokered an ambiguously worded cease-fire. The document committed Russia to withdraw from Georgia and provided for the stationing of observers from the European OSCE in buffer zones between Russian and Georgian forces. After weeks of negotiations the OSCE bowed out and the European Union agreed to send 200 unarmed observers to the buffer zones. But the Bush administration objected and got Sarkozy to write a secret letter to Saakashvili concerning the phrase "additional security measures" and to make that letter part of the agreement. Georgia and the US then used the "Sarkozy letter" to claim that Russia was not living up to the written agreement because of its establishment of buffer zones and checkpoints. But Russia insisted that the agreement gave it the right to do so; the "Sarkozy letter" lacked legal standing. [13a]

On August 26, Russia's president formally recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, soon visited their capitals. In the Abkhaz capital of Sukhumi he announced (Sept. 14) that the new states would have to participate in any future talks with Georgia, the US, and the EU. [13] No longer engaging in combat, Russia delayed for many weeks before finally withdrawing its troops from most of Georgia proper and indicating that EU monitors would not be allowed to patrol inside the breakaway states. Russia left some troops, however, in the narrow security zones it had set up around South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Concurrently, NATO's militant secretary general, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, kept the pressure on Russia by condemning its conduct of the war and restating his "hopes for Georgia's 'accelerated' integration with NATO." [14]

Then on October 9, at the World Policy Conference in Evian, France, Medvedev announced that Russia had vacated the buffer zones in Georgia a day in advance of the deadline specified in the armistice agreement. For this he was commended by Sarkozy, who, for the first time, publicly censured Georgia for its "aggression." But tensions between Europe and Russia, are certain to continue as long as the US persists in using Georgia and Ukraine to advance its national policies, while tensions between Georgian forces, Ossetian soldiers and Russian peacekeepers remain undiminished. A new chapter in the conflict between the US-NATO and Russia, however, has definitely opened, signaled by Medvedev's speech to Europe's leaders. He reiterated that Russia was "absolutely not interested in confrontation" and called on them to forge "a new global security framework that would challenge the United States' 'determination to enforce its global dominance.'" [15]

Meanwhile the Russian people have lost any remaining illusions about "the West," while Russia's leaders must now worry about zones of ethnic conflict spreading from the North Caucasus through the Black Sea region to Central Asia and beyond.[16]

Framing the War: From the Soviet Union's Collapse to the "Kosovo Precedent"

Russia's conflicts with the non-Russian peoples of the Caucasus go back centuries, but the developments that led directly to the Georgian-Russia war start with the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991-2. The Soviet collapse ignited euphoria among American and European elites. Imagine how they felt: a new world order in the process of being born, one in which they would be able to redesign Europe without having to take into account the preferences of the Russian giant on their doorstep. While admitting Russia to full membership in the IMF and the World Bank, and making hard currency loans to it, they quickly began to chart a new offensive mission for NATO.

Russia plunged into a protracted, multi-sided decline. [17] It abandoned its dominant position on both the Baltic and Black Seas coasts. Azerbaijan, Armenia, and the five ex-Soviet republics of Central Asia emerged as independent states, eager to attract Western investment, and some even receptive to hosting American military bases. Ukraine, which owns the Crimea, where Russia bases its Black Sea fleet, proclaimed its independence (1991) and soon thereafter expressed a desire to join NATO. [18] In 1996 Poland joined both NATO and the EU. Once Eastern Europe became wide open to Western economic intervention, Russia could do little to prevent the region's elites from gravitating to full incorporation in the US empire.

Economically, Russia was sorely beset. Under Boris Yeltsin it had chosen to transit rapidly from over-reliance on central planning to reliance on capitalist markets. Its huge economy contracted; its armed forces' weaponry and ships decayed. Social pathologies of every kind deepened. Many Russians experienced acute economic hardship while a handful seized opportunities to purchase state-owned enterprises, enrich themselves overnight, and enter the class of Russia's new elites.

This era of rapid economic redistribution, national humiliation, and social disintegration lasted for about eight years. By 1999 expectations began to rise, driven by rapid economic growth. Russia soon paid off its debts. It did not, however, recover from its enormous demographic decline. No longer a military

superpower, its leaders saw Russia as a nation-state with special security concerns because it spanned Eurasia from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific coast, shared borders with 14 other states, and was fully nuclear armed. Over the next few years Russia's self-confidence grew and its booming market economy allowed it to reappear on the world stage as a major energy exporter to Europe.

In 2000 there were leadership changes in Moscow and Washington. Vladimir Putin, a former KGB official, took over from Yeltsin and established a personal relationship with the new American president, George W. Bush. Although Putin would have Bush's full support in suppressing the long-suffering Muslim population of Chechnya, Bush would never treat Russia (or any other country) as an equal. Nor would Bush ever listen to Putin's criticism of America for acting as if it owned the world and could do as it pleased.

The Bush-Cheney administration believed that the laws and customs that applied to other states did not apply to the United States. It continued to assume, as Clinton's had, that Europe's future could be planned with scant reference to Russia's strategic concerns. Clinton, during his election campaign of 1996, decided to enlarge NATO in order to discipline Russia. Bush went further. He withdrew from treaties and launched repeated assaults on the international order anchored in the UN Charter. Then, in revenge for the 9/11 terrorist attack, he bombed and invaded Afghanistan, which shares a border with Russia. Next, in 2002, over vehement Russian objections, Bush unilaterally withdrew the US from the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. That same year the US publicly asserted a right to wage "preventive war" (or war of "anticipatory self-defense") against states that it unilaterally determined to be threats. In 2003 the Bush administration launched such a war of choice against oil-rich Iraq.



Bush informs Putin of US withdrawal from the ABM Treaty

The next year popular protests in Georgia led to toppling its government. Dubbed the "Rose Revolution," the political change was funded partly by the State Department, the National Endowment for Democracy (a semi-official NGO and cold war relic from the Reagan era), and the billionaire investor George Soros. Neither the US nor Britain would ever have tolerated such blatant "democracy promotion" on their soil. Overnight American propaganda turned the autocratic state of Georgia into a "beacon of liberty," a "democracy" with a "free market economy," deserving to be supported for NATO membership despite its ongoing ethnic conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Americans, through their "democracy"-promoting organizations, played a similar role in funding the peaceful "Orange Revolution" in Ukraine. First, they helped the anti-Russian Viktor Yushchenko rise to power in a politically divided country, less than half of which leaned toward the West; then they supported Ukraine's right to apply for NATO membership.

For more than a decade, Russian leaders had repeatedly protested US efforts to turn its neighboring states into US clients. But recognizing their own national weakness, and the growing interdependence of nations, their options were limited. They had to work with Washington, and, in principle, were committed to doing so. However, as American leaders pursued their quest for global military dominance, and as they and EU leaders pushed NATO ever closer to Russia's borders, the leadership in Moscow came to believe they had made too many compromises of vital security interests in order to stay in Washington's good graces. Just how far could statesmanship and international law go in safeguarding Russia's borders? Or preventing Georgia from being turned into the "Israel of the Caucasus"? For Russia, events in the multi-ethnic Serb province of Kosovo in 1999 and then in early 2008 highlighted the danger.

In March 1999, the US and NATO began bombing Serbia and Serbian units within Kosovo, claiming (among other things) that Belgrade had lost its sovereignty over the region and that the Serbian population deserved the suffering being inflicted upon it. A short time later, NATO formally abandoned its original policy "of only defending the sovereignty and security of its member states from external attack" and embraced "a new self-given right to intervene all over the world." [19] The US-NATO bombing of Serbia, which lasted for 74-days, killed about 500 Serbs, turned half the Albanian population of Kosovo into refugees, and did massive physical damage to Serbia's capital and infrastructure. The US and NATO unleashed their violence without explicit UN Security Council authorization and in flagrant breach of the UN Charter's provisions governing the use of force in self-defense. Championing the rights and lives of Kosovar-Albanians was their pretext. Weakening Serbia--the sovereign regime at the core of the Yugoslav federation that had refused to allow NATO forces on its territory--picking off Kosovo, and constructing a new security configuration throughout the Balkans were their real purposes. More than a century of Great Power interventions in southeastern Europe lay behind the bombing of Belgrade, which occurred in the same period that US and British planes were bombing military targets and civilian infrastructure over 3,200 miles away in northern Iraq.

Clinton and his NATO allies asserted their authority to wage wars to avoid humanitarian catastrophes at the very moment that Russia was starting to recover from its economic crisis and military collapse. Russia, which had no voice in NATO policy, was cooperating with the US in reducing nuclear weapons and using its oil and gas resources to develop a market economy. Out of weakness it could do no more than protest vehemently the US-NATO bombing of its long time ally, Serbia. UN ambassador and soon-to-be foreign minister, Sergei Lavrov, denounced the war "as an act of open aggression." He warned that this action would in time spread the "virus of illegal unilateral approaches." [20] "Madeleine [Albright]," said the Russian ambassador in Washington to Clinton's secretary of state, "don't you understand we have many Kosovos in Russia." [21]

All over the world nations condemned the American-European violation of international law. But Washington prevailed. Both the global hegemon and liberal elite opinion in the West vigorously affirmed the propriety of the air campaign against Serbia (i.e. humanitarian interventionism). Thus was overthrown Serbia's Slobodan Milosevic regime that had defied U.S. and NATO demands; thus too was set a precedent for legitimizing the Bush invasion of Afghanistan and the "humanitarian war" in Iraq.

Nine years later, when Kosovar-Albanian nationalists unilaterally declared independence from Serbia and requested international recognition (Feb. 17, 2008), the US, Britain, France, Germany, and Italy, wanting to legitimate their aggression, quickly granted formal recognition. At the State Department, a spokesman declared that Kosovo would never again be part of Serbia. [22] Serbs, of course, protested the loss of sovereign rights. They held rallies and even burned the US embassy in Belgrade. Many other nations facing separatist movements also reacted negatively. Spain, Azerbaijan, Sri Lanka, Indonesia, and China (whose embassy in Belgrade was bombed by NATO planes) all condemned the move, as did Greece, and many Balkan nations including Romania. [23] Russia refused to recognize Kosovo, while the leaders of Georgia's tiny separatist republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which looked to Russia for protection, said they would soon send requests to the UN to recognize their independence. Western officials arbitrarily dismissed their assertion of a right of national self-determination on the ground that Kosovo is "a special case," not an example for Abkhazs and South Ossetians to copy. [24]

By this time, the whole environment of European and global politics had changed. NATO had expanded in 2004 into the former Soviet republics of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia, all of which bordered Russia. The "Rose" revolution had opened the possibility of eventual NATO membership for Georgia. And the government of Victor Yushchenko, who had been brought to power in the "Orange Revolution," was discussing with NATO Ukraine's possible future

membership. For Russia, NATO represented a potential threat along the entire periphery of the former Soviet Union. But even more ominous was the US policy of implanting a first-strike weapons system in the new NATO states of Eastern Europe, notably Poland, which shares a border with Russia and whose territory once offered routes for Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union. For American domestic consumption, the Bush administration rationalized the missile shield as targeting non-existent Iranian nuclear missiles, but US Polish-based-missiles will actually be aimed at neutralizing Russia's nuclear defense system.

Thus, inexorably, Russia's leaders saw the dominos falling, themselves targeted by the encroaching American missile defense system, and their influence in the Caucasus being rolled back. Then the NATO ministers, at their April summit in Bucharest, "welcom[ed] Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership" and agreed to grant them a plan for future admission.[25] Clearly, Russia's protests had failed to deter NATO expansion or eliminate the possibility of American missile defenses being emplaced on Ukrainian or Georgian territory. This was the context in which war in the Caucasus erupted.

Consequences for Central Asia, Georgia, Russia, and the United States

Fallout from the war was felt first in the Caspian and Black Sea regions. Azerbaijan, which since 1994 had allowed Western companies to develop its gas and oil resources, decided to lower its reliance on the trans-Caucasus oil pipeline from its port of Baku to Georgia (for transport to Ceyhan in Turkey), and make a small but permanent increase in oil shipments to Russia and Iran. "We don't want to insult anyone . . . but it's not good to have all your eggs in one basket, especially when the basket is very fragile," said the vice-president of Azerbaijan's state oil company. Kazakhstan's reaction was to enter into talks with Moscow on "new export pipelines to Russia" now that its Georgia route had become less secure. [26]

Georgia, which the US valued primarily for reasons of control over gas and oil pipelines to Azerbaijan and Central Asia, [27] and which Israel supported as a market for arms sales and in hope of obtaining the use of air bases from which to attack Iran, has been shorn of its small autonomous enclaves. Although its impetuous strongman, Saakashvili, has redoubled his efforts to secure membership in NATO and military-economic assistance from the West, neither the EU nor NATO are likely to admit Georgia in the near future, let alone allow Saakashvili to manipulate them. Georgia's resounding defeat has diminished the importance of its pipelines.

Russia showed the world that it would shed blood to prevent further security threats from developing on its own borders, though it would not wage war on a genocidal scale for the sake of controlling foreign oil, as the US does in Iraq. Russia also demonstrated that it could at any time end Georgia's role as a secure energy corridor through which gas and oil was piped, via Turkey, to the West. At the same time, Putin took pains to reiterate points he and other Russian leaders had been making to Washington for years: namely, there was no need for confrontation and certainly "no basis for a Cold War" or "for mutual animosity." "Russia has no imperialist ambitions." [28]

Indeed, Russia's aims were very limited. For nearly two decades it had tried unsuccessfully to get the US and EU to recognize its national security needs and build a real partnership. South Ossetia, which had long been pro-Moscow, did not want to become part of Russia, though Abkhazia did. But Russia had no intention of annexing either one and exposing itself to the charge of territorial expansionism. [29] Russia's answer to the Kosovo precedent was to grant formal recognition of their de facto independence and to sign friendship treaties with South Ossetia's leader, Eduard Kokoity, and Abkhazia's Sergei Bagapsh. The treaties included pledges to defend them by stationing troops (3,600 in each region) and building military bases. At the signing, Medvedev reiterated that "We cannot view steps to intensify relations between the [NATO] alliance and Georgia any other way than as an encouragement for new adventures." [30]

But did the Georgian military campaign make Russia more secure from the threat of a nuclear attack? Did it shatter the curve of encirclement that the US and NATO were constructing around it? The Georgian aggressor was easily "punch[ed] in the face" (Putin's stern words). Yet looking at US-NATO policy, Russia's leaders see that they have not stopped NATO's eastward drive and the American implantation of ABM missiles in Poland. The danger remains of the US spreading an arms race through the Caucasus and in Europe generally. NATO defense ministers, coming at this from a confrontational angle, recently reviewed plans to establish a "rapid-response" military force to fight Russia's future military actions. Medvedev's announcement (Sept 26) that Russia would build a "guaranteed nuclear deterrent system," and a new "aerospace defense system," and have it in place by 2020, should be read as a response to the Georgian war and Western encirclement, even though the planning antedated the crisis. [31] At a time when Russian leaders need to invest more in modernizing infrastructure and improving the lives of their people, they are forced to cope with the determined efforts of US and EU leaders to surround them with military bases and nuclear missiles. [32]

Russia cannot ignore either the threat of economic and diplomatic isolation for the South Ossetians and Abkhazians. [33] Inability to secure international recognition will make it harder for them to prosper, whereas Georgia is already the recipient of a large IMF loan and new promises of EU and American aid. To see Georgia made into a Western showcase state while Ossetia and Abkhazia languish would further harm Russia's image in the West.

In the process of defending its borders from a real security threat, Russia, partly through its own actions, would suffer a setback in the court of world opinion. Only tiny Nicaragua joined it in formally recognizing the two breakaway republics. The local parliament in separatist-inclined Crimea called on Ukraine's national parliament to follow Russia's example, but Ukraine's pro-Western leaders refused to do so. [34] The major Western powers refused to accept the validity of the border changes that the war had brought about. South Ossetia and Abkhazia met the factual criteria for statehood, but not the European and American political criteria for recognition. [35] The consensus of US and NATO leaders was that they lacked real independence from Russian control and did not respect the rights of their minorities, as if the Kosovar Albanians in Europe's new colony respected the rights of their Serb and Roma minorities. One cannot fail to see the blatant hypocrisy of this stance given US-NATO practice with respect to the successor states of the former Yugoslavia.

On the other hand, Russia's position, which holds that Georgia had forfeited its claim to these territories by its abuse of the Ossetians and Abkhazians, is equally hypocritical in the light of Putin's brutal suppression of Chechnya's secession movement. [36] It also looks two-faced in Serb eyes especially because recognition of the new Caucasus states appears to violate the principle of territorial unity and integrity, thus undermining Russia's previous moral opposition to the Kosovo precedent. [37]

What may be one of the most dangerous outcomes of the Georgia-Russian war is the confrontational response of the Bush administration and most American politicians. While locked into a self-defeating "global war on terrorism," overstretched militarily, and weakened by a deepening global economic crisis, the US persists in extending its sphere of influence into the Black Sea region. The Bush administration wants to hold on to Georgia as a "transportation route for energy" and a staging base from which to pursue its interests in Eurasia. [38] It refuses to see the Georgian war as an historically-rooted territorial dispute and continues to encourage Georgia and Ukraine in their bid for eventual NATO membership. Presidential candidates John McCain both Barack Obama publicly endorse the Bush confrontation with Russia and neither offers any principled critique of US foreign policy. In fact, they seem as willing as Bush to take virtually any action that will keep "Russia bogged down in the Caucasus if it saps Russia's capacity to play an effective role on the world stage." [39]

The major European governments pursue a slightly saner approach, if only because they depend on energy supplied by Russia and are less unified in their foreign and domestic policies. But they are deeply divided on how to treat Moscow, with Germany apparently eager to deepen amicable relations.

Ironically, Russia remains for the time being a US "strategic partner." The US needs its continued cooperation in Afghanistan, and in dealing with Iran, Iraq, and North Korea. Putin and Medvedev are not denying the US military the right to ship non-military supplies through Russian territory to NATO forces in Afghanistan, though that option is available to them. But they have weakened US and UN sanctions on Iran, against whom the Bush administration is waging economic and covert war. Russia also sells weapons to Iran and is completing construction of Iran's Bushehr Atomic Reactor Complex. [40] In July 2008 Russia strengthened oil ties with Iran by a cooperation agreement that the giant state corporation, Gazprom, signed to develop Iran's oil and gas fields. It recently concluded similar deals with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. In short, when it comes to dealing with hostile US-NATO actions in Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and especially in its "near abroad," Russia has on its side geography as well as many diplomatic options.

Herbert Bix, author of [Hirohito and the Making of Modern Japan](#), which won the Pulitzer Prize, teaches at Binghamton University, New York, and writes on issues of war and empire. He is a Japan Focus associate.

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Notes

[1] Political scientist Kato Tetsuro kindly alerted me to the insights of Japanese writers who perceived the Russo-Georgian official state of war as a proxy conflict pitting Russian nationalism against American imperialism. Because Georgia is too far away to have any effect on Japan's bilateral relations with either Russia or China, and Japanese attention focused on the Beijing Olympics and the Tibet issue, the Japanese mass media and popular journals all but ignored the Russo-Georgian war. That was not the case in India, where sharp commentators quickly noted the proxy nature of the war. See Rama Sampath Kumar, "From Kosovo to Georgia: The US, NATO and Russia," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Sept. 6, 2008.

[2] See Richard Falk, "Assessing the Georgian Crisis," Sept. 14, 2008, posted at Falk's ZSpace Page, Znet

[3] Falk, "Assessing the Georgian Crisis."

[3a] Peter Wilby, "Georgia Has Won the PR War," *The Guardian* (Aug. 18, 2008); Pio d'Emilia, "Embed-time in Ossetia," *Foreign Correspondents Club of Japan*, No. 1 *Shimbun* (Oct. 2008). Gavan McCormack kindly brought d'Emilia's first-hand account to my attention.

[4] Bill Powell and Mina Kimes, "Just How Scary Is Russia?" *Fortune* (Sept. 9, 2008), pp. 80-83.

[5] *Forbes*, Oct. 13, 2008, p. 25.

[6] Michael Stott, "[Analysis: 'Dangerous gulf' opens between Russia and the West](#)," Reuters North American News Service, Sept. 25, 2008.

[7] Reuters, "Saakashvili 'planned S. Ossetia invasion'—ex-minister," Sept. 14, 2008.

[8] CBS News, "Georgia Pushes for Truce With Russia," posted Aug. 10, 2008.

[9] "US Military Trained Georgian Commandos," *Financial Times*, Sept. 5, 2008.

[10] SPIEGEL Staff, "[Did Saakashvili Lie? The West Begins to Doubt Georgian Leader](#)," Sept. 15, 2008 at Spiegel On Line.

[11] Posted at moonofalabama.org, Aug. 10, 2008.

[12] Mark Ames, "Getting Georgia's War On," *The Nation*, Aug. 8, 2008.

[13] BBCNEWS, "[Russia stands by Georgia actions](#)," Sept. 14, 2008.

[13a]. See Moon of Alabama, "[The Mysterious 'Sarkozy Letter'](#)," posted Aug. 23, 2008.

[14] BBCNews, "[Nato restates backing for Georgia](#)," posted Sept. 15, 2008.

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- [29] AP wire dispatch, "Russia's Lavrov: S. Ossetia not Joining Russia," Sept. 11, 2008.
- [30] Reuters, "Russia in Pact with Georgia Regions," New York Times, Sept. 17, 2008; BBC News, "Russia in Georgia Separatist Pact," Sept 17, 2008.
- [31] BBC News, Sept. 26, 2008.
- [32] Bridget Kendall, "Putin defends Georgia offensive," BBC News, Sept. 11, 2008. Putin "accused the Western press of an 'immoral and dishonest account of what happened'" and is quoted by the BBC correspondent as asking: "What did you want us to do? Wave our penknives in the air and wipe bloody snot off our noses? . . . When an aggressor comes into your territory, you need to punch him in the face—an aggressor needs to be punished."
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