

**The World after the Russian Invasion of Georgia:
Lessons for the United States from the Current Crisis**

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The Russian invasion of Georgia is one of those rare events like the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 or the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack on the United States which have such dramatic consequences that most peoples and governments view them for a long time as dividing line between what took place before and what happened afterwards.

But if we are to make sense of what has been taking place there and even more if we are to learn how to respond in ways that promote both our interests and our values, then we must be very clear in our own minds not only about what has taken place but why and about what we might have done differently as well as what we should be prepared to do in the future.

Hearings like this one can make an important contribution to that effort, and I would like to offer some observations on precisely these issues by focusing on three things:

First, I would like to point out that what happened in Georgia was a disaster waiting to happen, one that occurred not only because of the poison pills the Soviet system left behind but also because all too many officials in the West were too ready to proclaim victory, to focus on only a narrow set of issues and mechanisms of influence, and to assume that more had changed than in fact has proved to be the case.

Second, I would like to call attention to some of the specific features of this conflict, not in order to provide a history but rather to call attention to the asymmetries whose reality and implications some in Moscow and the West have refused to acknowledge. To anticipate my argument, the most important of these is that however misguided Tbilisi's actions have been, Georgia did not violate international law, and however justified Moscow may have convinced itself or others its actions were, Russia did.

And third, I would like to suggest some specific lessons we should learn from this current crisis both because it is important in its own right and also because, since other countries around the periphery of the Russian Federation, share some its characteristics, we are going to confront analogous challenges in the future. And it would be a very good thing, one that might even prevent or mitigate those challenges, if we were far more attentive to what the Georgian events can teach us.

A Disaster Waiting to Happen

The recent events in Georgia have roots in both the Soviet period when Stalin drew the borders internal and external of that republic and the post-Soviet period when few in the region or the world more generally were willing to recognize and thus address the “poison pills” that the Soviet dictator inserted not only in that republic but across entire region to make any change difficult and dangerous.

But if we are to understand what has taken place in Georgia, what is likely to take place elsewhere, and what we should do, we need to examine these pills which Russians have taken to calling “unexploded mines.”ⁱ

When Stalin created the Soviet Union -- and it was his project far more than anyone else's -- he built it on the basis of politicized, territorialized and hierarchically arranged ethnicity, a system that could function only if Moscow used the kind of force that Stalin deployed with such consistent viciousness.

Before the 1917 Revolution, many people in the Russian Empire did not identify themselves in ethnic terms. The tsarist state did not encourage them to do so, and many saw themselves in terms of class or faith. But Stalin insisted that everyone have an official nationality because he understood that you cannot play the divide-and-rule politics of building an empire if people don't identify themselves as members of one or another nationality.

Moreover, Stalin linked nationality to territory, something the tsars had tried in almost every case to avoid. No book was more important during Soviet times than the periodic editions of the administrative-territorial divisions of the country. That is because your rights as a member of an ethnic group depended on whether Moscow gave you the status of an autonomous formation or a union republic.

But there was one more aspect to this. Many people believe that Stalin drew the lines so as to put all or most members of a given nationality together. This is nonsense. He drew lines to create tensions between ethnic groups, ensuring there was always a local minority that would do Moscow's bidding in return for being protected by the Soviet center. The Armenian-dominated enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan is the most famous of these arrangements, but it is far from the only one.

And finally, Stalin instituted the Orwellian principle that "all animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others," an arrangement that guarantees interethnic hatred. Members of small nationalities without a territory got few or no ethnic or linguistic rights and were slated for absorption by others. Members of larger groups got such rights on their territories but nowhere else. But members of the largest nationality -- the Russians -- got such rights regardless of where they lived.

What were the consequences of this system? First, Stalin's system not only raised the importance of nationality and borders, but it ensured that anyone who sought to dismantle his totalitarianism would have to cope with ethnic anger and borders that guaranteed it would likely get worse.

Second, when Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev did reduce the level of coercion and introduced glasnost, he guaranteed that the Soviet Union would fall into pieces, not along economic lines or regional ones but precisely along the lines Stalin had drawn.

And third, when the Soviet Union collapsed, both the Russian leadership and the international community, largely because they hoped to make the process of imperial decay as

easy and peaceful as possible, decided to accept certain aspects of Stalin's system -- namely, the borders he drew and the ethnic hierarchy he established -- while expecting that other aspects of Stalin's system, his tyranny, be jettisoned.

Why did this happen? For many, it was simpler and more convenient than doing anything else. Many in Western governments had no idea about the location, let alone the character, of the union republics, and even fewer knew about the autonomous ones. It was easier to accept the union republics as the only possible countries and their borders as the only acceptable ones, especially since addressing the bigger problems would have taken a long time.

And further, any focus on autonomous republics and their rights would have put at risk in the first instance the Russian Federation. After all, maps showed that 53 percent of the territory of that republic was covered by non-Russian autonomies. Addressing its imperial nature, many feared, could trigger "a nuclear Yugoslavia."

But what has that decision meant? Most obviously, it has meant that few have been prepared to focus on the legitimate rights of ethnic minorities who feel they are trapped within a larger country or to consider that Stalin's borders were not designed to resolve conflicts but to intensify them. Anyone who looks around Eurasia will see that in many countries, and in Russia above all, the demands of minorities are only growing, and border tensions are on the increase.

But that 1991 decision has had another consequence, which continues to reverberate throughout the region. Stalin made his system work by means of an authoritarian state. Just because so many people wished for an end to authoritarianism has not guaranteed in Russia or elsewhere that this would happen, and his commitment to ethnocratic arrangements in which one ethnic group dominates others continues as a policy imperative, again regardless of what anyone wants.

The events in Georgia are only the latest example of what happens because governments and peoples in the region continue to be forced 17 years after the end of the Soviet Union to swallow Stalin's poison pill. They will not be the last. And the ones ahead, including more ethnic conflicts and more authoritarianism will not only be more serious but will affect the Russian Federation first of all.

Georgian Miscalculations and Russian Aggression

For many people, the Georgian crisis began on August 1 or August 8, but in addition to the more distant and general causes of these events just mentioned, the key event for understanding what has taken place was the Bucharest summit last spring. That meeting featured American efforts to include Georgia in NATO and an angry Russian reaction suggesting that Moscow would do what it could to preclude the Americans said they wanted to do. American expressions of support led Georgian President Saakashvili to conclude that he would have the U.S. behind him regardless of the warnings other officials delivered, and Russian anger was dismissed by many at the time as more for domestic consumption than indicating that Moscow was planning to violate the rules of the game.

But beginning at that time, Russia took a variety of steps designed to lead Tbilisi to take the kind of steps that could be a pretext for Russian action, and Tbilisi under Saakashvili in early August did just that, falling into what had been a carefully laid Russian trap. As a result, many around the world were inclined to blame the Georgians rather than the Russians for what happened next, a chronicle of which is far beyond the scope of this testimony. That was a terrible mistake, one that suggested a moral equivalency or worse in Georgian and Russian actions.

In fact, it must be said that while Saakashvili made a mistake – after all he sent troops into a region that the international community says is part of Georgia despite being warned not to – the Russian government of Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin committed a series of crimes – violating international and humanitarian law.ⁱⁱ Not only are those quite different things but they should be assessed differently as well.

And just as many observers have failed to go back to the periods out of which this crisis emerged, assuming that it came into existence when they first noticed it, many are failing to see that the crisis is not over, even though they have turned away from it. French President Sarkozy's latest visits to Moscow and Tbilisi will convince many more than everything is being resolved, when in fact what the accord he has secured – the second after all – is only one more step in a long and difficult process which is not over inside Georgia, inside the former Soviet space, or for us.

Lessons for the Future

Many countries and governments are going to be drawing lessons from this conflict. Georgia along with her neighbors is going to have to learn that 1991 did not repeal history or geography or lead to a new world in which all the old rules were repealed and in which Tbilisi and other capitals in that region can count on the West to do what it and they cannot do for themselves. The Russian Federation is going to have to learn that the international community, however willing it has often proved to be to go along with much that Moscow does, cannot and will not go along with such blatant violations of the international order and will impose punishments of one kind or another.

But it is the lessons that this crisis offers the United States that are the most important for our consideration. There are dozens, some having to do with our ability to understand, others with our ability to communicate, and still a third group with our ability to defend our interests and advance our principles. I would like to point to five especially important lessons that I very much hope we will draw from what has been happening in Georgia and the region around it.

- *First, despite our hopes and expectations, the end of communism in Eurasia did not mark the end of history or guarantee the rise of democratic, free-market allies of the United States. Indeed, for reasons I have given above, our earlier failure to address Stalin's poison pills means that many of our biggest problems are ahead of us.*
- *Second, we need to overcome our proclivity to build our relations on the basis of ties our leaders have with their leaders, a situation that sometimes leads us to sacrifice our ideals and interests in the name of maintaining that friendship and sometimes makes us hostage to the actions of a leader who feels confident that our support will allow him to ignore the views of his own people..*
- *Third, we need to learn how to deliver consistent messages to leaders and to populations. On the one hand, we need to recognize that many governments do not know how to read us when we say one thing in private and another in public or when leaders at one level say something different than leaders at another. And on the other, we need to ensure that*

we will have a continuing conversation with the populations involved by expanding rather than cutting US international broadcasting and by promoting other channels of public diplomacy.

- *Fourth, we need to insist on universal standards for ourselves and for others. We cannot credibly ask other countries to play by the rules if we do not, but at the same time, we must insist that other countries live up to those standards as well. The current Russian government complains about “double standards” when in fact what it wants is to be treated differently than anyone else, free to use military force abroad to secure the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia but unwilling to recognize the principle of national self-determination within its own borders.*
- *And fifth, we need to recognize that with the Russian Federation as with all other countries, there are and will always be issues on which we agree and issues on which we disagree. If we understand that, we will be able to navigate among them and to ignore suggestions that any disagreement means “a new Cold War.” People who invoke that term are using it not descriptively but to promote a policy line they support and to force us to retreat from an active defense of our interests and our principles.*

Even if we learn all these lessons, we will fail to promote our values unless we recognize that we are not going to achieve what we want overnight. Russian forces are not going to leave or be driven out of Abkhazia or South Ossetia anytime soon, however desirable that might be. And consequently, we need to think about a longer term strategy to deal with the current situation, a strategy that we can put in place and maintain until we achieve our goals.

From my perspective, there are three such policies that we should adopt: First, just as we did when the Japanese invaded Manchuria and when the Soviets invaded the Baltic states, we should reassert our longstanding policy that the United States does not recognize changes in borders brought about by force. From 1940 to 1991, that policy kept hope alive in the Baltic countries and was ultimately crowned by the recovery of their de facto independence and their full re-entry into the international community.

Second, we need to expand our ties with the peoples of this entire region. We know too little and we have too few experts. There should never be a time again when the State Department says it cannot spare one person to travel with an EU and OSCE delegation because its stable of experts is too small. I think we should think about the restoration of the National Defense Education Act Title VI program which helped to create the body of expertise that helped us in the past.

And third, we should reaffirm our commitment to the right of nations to self-determination, a principle we for our own often selfish reasons effectively suspended in 1992 after the demise of the Soviet Union, and we need to work with other members of the international community to develop mechanisms to protect the rights of ethnic minorities and also, when there is no possibility that communities can live together except at high levels of coercion, to structure a political process that will allow them to achieve independence.

Doing that, indeed, doing any of these things, will not be easy and will certainly not provide the quick fix that so many in this city want. But if we make an effort in those directions,

then the tragedy of Georgia in recent months will be mitigated, and both its people and the world will be better off as a result.

ⁱ This section is adapted from a larger article I wrote for the *Moscow Times* entitled “Stalin’s Poison Pills” It appeared on August 29, 2008, and is available online at www.themoscowtimes.com/article/1016/42/370529.htm

ⁱⁱ To give but one example of the latter, the United Nations has now documented via satellite that the Russians and their allies destroyed 50 percent of the Georgian villages in South Ossetia while Georgian forces destroyed less than five percent of the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali (unosat.web.cern.ch/unosat/asp/prod_free.asp?id=101).