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“Lessons of the Russian-Georgian War and Its Implications for U.S. Policy”

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Russia’s war on Georgia is one of the most significant events in post-Cold war Europe and highlights the critical choices the United States faces not only in dealing with Moscow, but in creating a stable and sustainable security architecture for Europe. Regrettably, it also demonstrates serious failures in American policy. In the aftermath of this tragic conflict, it is vital to understand what happened and to learn several key lessons. On that basis, the United States must develop new, more realistic, and more effective policies that establish clear and enforceable red lines for Russian conduct in the short term while working toward salvaging and ultimately strengthening Europe’s security architecture over the long term.

What Happened?

Understanding what happened when the Russian-Georgian war began on the night of August 7 is not easy. The Georgian and Russian chronologies of events predictably differ considerably. Two things are very clear, however. First, Russia had prepared extensively in advance of the conflict and was waiting for an excuse to intervene, and second, Georgia knowingly gave Russia that excuse.

Defense analysts writing in both the American and Russian media seem to agree that Russia’s rapid and apparently well-coordinated invasion of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Georgia proper would not have been possible without detailed planning and pre-positioning of troops, supplies, and logistical support. However, several reports—including a detailed assessment in *The Washington Post*—describe how top Georgian defense officials decided to respond decisively to South attacks with a massive military deployment to which Russia responded. Georgia’s Defense Minister, Davit Kezerashvili, has specifically stated that "At 6, I gave the order to prepare everything, to go out from the bases" in a major move against the South Ossetian separatists.¹

Some have argued that Russia’s military preparations prove that Russia would have invaded Georgia sooner or later no matter what. We will never know whether this is true or not, though there is a chance that it may be, especially in view of Russia’s attempts to

¹ Peter Finn, “A Two-Sided Descent into Full-Scale War,” *The Washington Post*, August 17, 2008.

justify its actions through the precedent established by NATO's attacks on Serbia over Kosovo and Kosovo's declaration of independence. Alternatively, it is possible that Russia's general staff had existing contingency plans for an intervention and that the Kremlin decided to leave forces in the area after Russia's Caucasus Frontier 2008 exercise in July and wait to see whether a suitable opportunity arose. Even if Russian intervention was inevitable, however, the way in which it actually happened matters—especially in Europe, where many now view Georgia as partially responsible for the conflict and are accordingly less willing to take strong positions on Tbilisi's behalf. Had Tbilisi not deliberately escalated the conflict, the Georgian government would have been in a much better position to argue that it was a victim of unprovoked aggression rather than a willing party to the conflict.

The practical consequences of this distinction are readily apparent. Visiting Tbilisi on August 17, German Chancellor Angela Merkel stated explicitly that she remains committed to eventual NATO membership for Georgia but was quite vague about when it might happen. Some have interpreted Ms. Merkel's words as strong support for Tbilisi, but the reality seems somewhat different. Realistically speaking, once she decided to visit Georgia—in itself a political necessity—failing to express this commitment would have been a serious blow not only to Georgia but also to the United States and the European countries supporting the Bush Administration's efforts to bring Georgia into the alliance sooner rather than later. Chancellor Merkel tellingly refused to speculate when Georgia might be offered a Membership Action Plan and specifically stated that NATO's December ministerial meetings would be “a first evaluation of the situation” and added “I can not tell you when this step will be taken.”

Lessons of the Russian-Georgian War

What lessons should American policymakers draw from the conflict? In my view, there are several:

First, the Bush Administration has profoundly over-personalized U.S. relations with Georgia—as the executive branch often does under presidents in both parties—by excessively and needlessly praising Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and often stressing American support for Mr. Saakashvili personally. At their most recent joint press availability, in the Oval Office on March 19 of this year, President Bush went so far as to say that he “admires” President Saakashvili—just four months after the Georgian leader used force to disperse opposition protesters and imposed a state of emergency. While President Bush and other officials surely appreciate Mr. Saakashvili's loyal and vocal support for the administration's foreign policy, identifying the United States too closely with Mr. Saakashvili undermines American interests both in Georgia—where many have reservations about his leadership—and in the region, where it has created a false impression that the United States may have tacitly encouraged Georgia's military action in South Ossetia.

Minimal public criticism of President Saakashvili's many departures from democracy only contributed to this problem. The administration has offered perfunctory criticism of

Mr. Saakashvili's poor record in the area of democracy and human rights when absolutely necessary, but otherwise applied only limited public pressure. Thus, for example, when mandated by Congress to assess Georgia's performance in its annual Human Rights Report, the State Department found "serious problems" with Georgia's human rights record, including "excessive use of force to disperse demonstration", "impunity of police officers", and declining respect for freedom of speech, freedom of the press, freedom of assembly and political participation.² Likewise, when asked direct questions during press briefings, administration spokesmen expressed concern. But neither the President, nor the Secretary of State, made a public statement when President Saakashvili forcibly broke up demonstrations, closed television stations, and took other starkly undemocratic steps in late 2007. And just a few months later, the Bush Administration and President Bush personally continued to press reluctant NATO allies to offer Georgia a Membership Action Plan on the basis of shared values.

All of this is especially unfortunate because, with assistance from U.S. democracy programs, Georgia does have a pool of capable leaders who are committed to democratic methods and to friendship with the United States. Tellingly, many of them have expressed serious concerns about President Saakashvili's rule. Speaking last fall at The Nixon Center, Salome Zourabichvili, a former French diplomat of Georgian origin who served for a time as Georgia's Foreign Minister, said that "Georgia is no longer moving in the direction of democracy" and that "fear is back in Georgia". At the same event, David Usupashvili, the leader of Georgia's Republican Party and someone who worked for several years on USAID-supported rule of law programs in Georgia, said "if one makes a checklist of what democracy is about...we will have a very, very dark picture."³

Second, U.S. officials must be much more careful when and how they put American credibility on the line. Our nation's reputation in the former Soviet region has been seriously damaged because the Bush Administration allowed Georgians, Russians, and others to believe that Georgia was a close U.S. ally and then failed to offer meaningful help in the currency of alliance relationships—military assistance—in Georgia's hour of direst need. This is especially problematic in light of Georgia's willingness to send 2,000 soldiers from its very limited force to Iraq to assist the United States. One can only draw the conclusion that administration officials were so desperate to collect troops for the coalition of the willing—the first Georgian troops arrived in Iraq in August 2003—that they failed to think through the very predictable expectations the step would create in Georgia and other countries in the region. Or that those expectations could soon be tested in a region where a known conflict already existed.

Losing this credibility has a cost. Those forces within Russia that favor a more assertive foreign policy in Russia's immediate neighborhood have been both empowered and emboldened. Within Russia, they are now credited with Russia's first post-Cold War

² Department of State, Georgia Country Report on Human Rights Practices, 2007, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/hrrpt/2007/100560.htm>

³ National Interest Online, "A Country in Crisis", September 28, 2007, <http://www.nationalinterest.org/Article.aspx?id=15642>.

victory—and a victory over America at that. At the same time, the Russian military press is already burgeoning with calls for more and newer equipment and better training to improve military performance in potential future conflicts. What might happen next? Hopefully nothing. But if Moscow correctly assesses Washington's relatively limited commitment to other countries in the Caucasus and Central Asia, for example, Russia could considerably expand its influence. Alternatively, if Russia underestimates the American commitment to Ukraine, the result could be a crisis far more serious than what took place in August. Outside Russia, many governments in the region have new doubts about the U.S. that will make it more difficult for us to achieve our foreign policy objectives. Some media reports have already suggested that Azerbaijan no longer supports Western aims to build the Nabucco natural gas pipeline to bring Central Asian gas to Europe without crossing Russia.

Thirdly, it is now clear that Russia's commitment to and interests in Georgia and other former Soviet Republics along its southern frontier exceed our own. Russia is willing to pay a higher price to advance its goals in this region than the United States and, in fact, has even been willing to risk its relationship with Washington. In contrast, many Americans watched anxiously on television when Russian tanks entered Georgia, but by now they have changed the channel. In a time when we are at war in Iraq and Afghanistan, combating terrorism worldwide, worried about Iran's nuclear program, and angry about energy prices, no one has made a compelling case to the American people that vital U.S. national interests are at stake in Georgia. In fact, few have seriously tried. If we do not either build genuine support for deep U.S. engagement in the Caucasus and Central Asia or, alternatively, align our policy with what the American public seems prepared to support, we risk repeating the current situation elsewhere in the region.

Fourth, we should learn a powerful lesson about “precedents” and “vetoes”. American officials and others argued vociferously that NATO military action against Serbia without approval of the United Nations Security Council, and American and European recognition of Kosovo's independence without Serbia's consent, did not establish a precedent because Kosovo was a unique case. The problem with this is that we are not in charge of what others interpret as a precedent. We decide on our national interests, the best policies to advance them, and the best arguments to explain them. We don't get to decide how others see what we do or how they decide to respond.

American and European officials have likewise argued repeatedly that Russia does not have a veto over whether Georgia or Ukraine join NATO. They are correct. Russia does not have a veto. But it doesn't matter. America, our European allies, and the Georgians and Ukrainians will decide among themselves whether and when the two countries enter the alliance. Then Russia will decide how to react, and we will not have a veto over the Russian response, as we did not in South Ossetia or Abkhazia. Rather than spending time preparing and issuing empty statements, our policymakers would do well to focus on analyzing how Russia and others may respond to U.S. actions and incorporate these assessments into their decision making. Making our first move without seriously thinking about at least our second and third moves is reckless.

Finally, we should remember what NATO did right during previous rounds of enlargement: insist that prospective new members resolve internal problems with their ethnic minorities. In the 1990s, this was seen as an essential step in order to avoid importing potential conflicts into the alliance. It was a serious mistake to attempt to bring Georgia into NATO without settling the disputes with South Ossetia and Abkhazia first.

Implications for U.S. Policy

The Russian-Georgian war requires both short-term and long-term responses from U.S. policymakers. America's short-term priority must be to salvage what we can of our credibility and strategic position in the Caucasus and the post-Soviet region. This requires several immediate steps, including:

- Ensuring that Russia follows through on President Dmitry Medvedev's commitment to withdraw his country's troops from Georgia proper by October 1.
- Continuing to support Georgia's government, though with less emphasis on President Saakashvili personally, and to support Georgia's right to join NATO. The United States must ensure that the Russian government understands we will do everything we can—short of direct military intervention—to prevent Moscow from toppling the Georgian government. Likewise, we must avoid giving Russia grounds to believe that its actions have affected U.S. policy toward Georgia.
- Providing significant economic bilateral and multilateral assistance, which the administration has already announced, to alleviate suffering and rebuild Georgia's damaged infrastructure. While Georgia's short to medium-term prospects for continued rapid economic growth are not good, the U.S. should do what is necessary to prevent a serious economic crisis that could lead to a rapid collapse of the current government.
- Beginning to prepare for the possibility of a post-Saakashvili Georgia. President Saakashvili's current term in office ends 2013 and Georgia's constitution does not allow for the removal of a president except in cases of treason, violation of the constitution, or other serious crimes. Still, the combination of the loss of South Ossetia and Abkhazia with likely economic setbacks and pre-existing dissatisfaction with President Saakashvili has seriously damaged his political future and he could be forced to resign politically rather than legally.
- Preserving as much as possible of the existing post-Cold War European security architecture and overall strategic architecture. In this context the Bush Administration is correct to avoid efforts to "punish" Russia for its conduct.

Over the longer term, America must move from salvaging its position in the region to building effective and sustainable European security architecture to advance U.S. interests in the twenty-first century.

To do this, the United States should:

- Acknowledge to ourselves that South Ossetia and Abkhazia are lost to Georgia and

that the United States cannot afford to make the two territories a defining issue in U.S.-Russian relations. America has too many truly vital interests at stake in relations with Moscow, starting with nuclear arms control and global non-proliferation. We should not lead the Georgian government or people to believe that America has the capacity to return the two regions to Georgia.

- Avoid excessive concern when President Saakashvili eventually leaves office. With the help of U.S. assistance, Georgia has a deep bench of democratically-oriented and pro-Western political leaders. Some of them—and some of the Georgian people—may currently be somewhat disillusioned with the United States, but very, very few want closer relations with Russia.
- Put off discussions of Georgia's NATO membership for the time being without creating an impression that Tbilisi has been disinclined. Given the views of our major European allies, this will be a practical necessity.
- Likewise, put off discussions of Ukraine's NATO membership. In the interim, engage deeply with our European allies to seek to define a path for Ukraine into the European Union. Ukraine remains deeply divided over joining NATO, and it is not in America's interest to press the issue when Russia the levers it has to influence Ukrainian politics. Moscow would be in a weaker position to obstruct EU membership, however, and a credible path toward the EU—leading to deeper economic ties between EU members and Ukraine and tangible benefits for Ukrainians—could gradually shift the terms of Ukraine's internal debate on NATO and draw Ukraine closer to Europe.
- Have serious discussions, both domestically and with our allies, about NATO and its role. To a large extent, enlarging NATO has been a substitute for defining it, in part because our attention has been focused elsewhere and we saw our choices as cost-free. NATO is now much larger and much more diverse than it was during the Cold War and its decision-making shows these strains. NATO is also deeply challenged in Afghanistan, raising serious questions about the future of so-called out-of-area operations. The Congress can play a crucial role in ensuring that America addresses these issues seriously.
- Outside Europe, work closely with China. Russia often seeks Chinese support for its foreign policy goals. However, as demonstrated by the war in Georgia, Beijing is quite selective in what it is prepared to support—especially where the United States is concerned. As a result, America's position vis-à-vis China is considerably stronger than Russia's: we want China to remain neutral, while Russia seeks China's active support.
- In parallel with our discussions with other NATO members, engage with Russia to develop a new mutually acceptable and sustainable security architecture in Europe. We will have to wait to begin this process both because we must not give Moscow the impression that our engagement is a consequence of Russia's actions in Georgia and, on a more practical level, because it will take some time before all sides are politically ready for a constructive dialogue. This new architecture must not sacrifice any truly important American interests and must include understandings regarding enforceable red lines for Russian conduct. To be viable, it must also include a more significant role for Moscow in European security than presently exists.

Building such security architecture will not be easy. Russia is a difficult negotiating partner at best. Moscow is increasingly confident, and U.S. credibility has been weakened. Even with European backing, America cannot dictate terms to Russia and will need to take important Russian interests into account. At the same time, however, Moscow enjoys little support, as demonstrated by the tepid reaction of both the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (the security arm of the CIS) to the Russian-Georgian war. And more fundamentally, the United States remains considerably wealthier, more powerful, and more influential than Russia both in Europe and globally. With strength, judgment, creativity, and patience, America can work with its allies and with Russia to bring about lasting peace and stability in Europe.