

‘Geopolitical Tsunami’:

The Georgia-Russia conflict and the changing balance of forces in the Caucasus

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THE CAUCASUS HAS been witness to something of a ‘geopolitical tsunami’ over the course of August 2008. Georgia’s attempt to pacify its irredentist region of South Ossetia and Abkhazia saw a rather muscular reaction from Moscow and blustering rhetoric from the West, particularly America. This has revived the not-too glorious memories of the East-West Cold War confrontation that dominated and defined international politics for the greater part of forty years following the end of the Second World War. Concerns are that these events could herald a new Cold War with the potential to further complicate inter-state relations in an era of perverse unconventional warfare (terrorism). While neither Moscow, Washington, nor Brussels appears to be prepared for a new Cold War, the manner in which they have conducted themselves since the events in Georgia suggests elements that could produce a new type of Cold War, even if only by accident.

Beyond the risk of a new Cold War and of more immediate consequence, however, are the implications of the fall-out of the conflict over Georgia on the geopolitical balance of forces in the Caucasus and the broader international system. The Georgian conflict provided Moscow with a long-awaited opportunity to vent its frustration against the West for what it perceives as multifaceted provocations and betrayals since the end of the Cold War. The swiftness and near mathematical precision of the Russian deployment following Georgia’s infiltration of South Ossetia seem to suggest that Moscow had been preparing for this moment. On the other hand, America and its western allies’ response point to the fact that even with clear signs of Russia’s growing economic and political influence, they continued to take it for granted. They were, therefore, taken by surprise by Moscow’s firm response towards Georgia and subsequent refusal to budge over the recognition of the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Against this background, this policy brief seeks to examine the dynamics of the conflict and its implications on the geopolitical balance of forces in the Caucasus and the broader international system. It begins by examining Moscow’s relationship with the West after the end of the Cold War, focusing on what Russia perceives as provocations and betrayals by the West; it then proceeds to examine the window of opportunity presented to Moscow by Georgia’s infiltration of Southern Ossetia. This is followed by an analysis of the geostrategic fallout of the conflict. It concludes by discussing some implications of the conflict for the broader international system, on the basis of which it also makes some recommendations.

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Figure 1: The South Caucasus Region



Source: BBC News.

Moscow and the West Post-Cold War relations: a mixture of provocation and betrayal

Ever since the demise of the former USSR and the end of the Cold War, Russia ceased to be recognized as a great power, let alone a super-power. Washington, in particular, has only been prepared to engage Moscow as a junior partner, as a country that embraces Western values of market democracy and that will ungrudgingly accept America's unilateral leadership of the global system.¹ Despite inclusion into the G8 and the creation of a NATO-Russia Council, there has been little enthusiasm from the West in drawing Russia into the main fold. For example Moscow is not part of the G7 of Finance Ministers, which plays a key role in the multilateral financial institutions and the wider global economy.² Indeed, from the outset, Washington has done everything to blunt any Russian attempt to revive its former position as a superpower that could pose a challenge to America's global hegemony.³ As such, America and its European allies have tended to conduct themselves in a manner that seemed to suggest that Russia simply did not exist, or that if it existed, it no longer mattered and therefore, had no interests that needed to be protected in the international system. This attitude fed perceptions within Russian foreign policy circles that the West deliberately sought to marginalize the country and exploit its weakness.⁴ Acting from the basis of this perception, Russia's Foreign Minister Sergie Lavrov, cautioned that '[i]nteraction with Russia is possible only on the basis of full equality, respect for the security interests of each other, and mutual benefit.'⁵ Nevertheless, the West has continued to take actions that in the 'hey days' of the Cold War would have qualified as unacceptable provocation. This has included the eastward expansion of NATO,

plans to place parts of the US missile defense shield virtually at Moscow's doorstep in Poland and the Czech Republic, and the recognition of Kosovo as an independent state despite Russian protests.

The expansion of NATO and the independence of Kosovo

In 1949 the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) was established as a collective security arrangement, underwritten by America, and crafted to shield Western Europe from USSR aggression during the Cold War. Following the demise of the USSR and the end of the Cold War, expectations were that NATO would be disbanded, particularly as the Russian Federation was seen as a partner of the West. Despite questions concerning the identity and purpose of the organisation, NATO continues to re-interpret its position internationally, assuming the mandate of a global peacekeeper and enforcer which clearly encroaches on the domain of the United Nations. Moscow had been particularly wary of NATO's new role in a post-Cold War era. These concerns were, however, allayed by the West's promises that NATO would not threaten Russia's national interests in any way. In the post-Cold War spirit of understanding between Moscow and Washington, both President George W. Bush and Bill Clinton personally assured the Kremlin that NATO would not encroach into what Moscow identifies as its sphere of influence.

Contrary to these promises, NATO has continued to expand eastwards towards Russia's doorstep, in what Moscow perceives as both a betrayal and provocation. This has seen the incorporation of Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Estonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia into the security organization.⁶ It is noteworthy that in terms of Russia's foreign policy, the 'near-abroad' or the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), is a priority area within which Moscow feels that it reserves the right to protect its interests (security, economic, and social).⁷ Critically, Moscow wants to insure itself against military intimidation, hence its deep displeasure with the eastward expansion of NATO and its hostility to US plans to build missile defenses in Eastern Europe.⁸ This sensitivity towards perceived western hostility was bolstered by the involvement of the US and Europe in re-building the armaments and military capabilities of new NATO members, including Georgia, which according to the Russian Foreign Ministry, is 'an overt invitation to new reckless ventures.'⁹ For Georgia's former Communist leader, Eduard Shevardnadze, 'the West's erection of radars in Czech

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Republic and planned missile shields in Poland is a betrayal of the consensus (friendship) between the West and the East that facilitated the end of the Cold War. If the West is still friends with Russia, then it really does not need these defense systems.¹⁰

The former states of the Soviet Union are increasingly alarmed by the re-emergence of a politically, economically and militarily powerful Russia. According to Ivanenko they 'see a newly confident Russia as a historical threat to be contained at the expense of their own prosperity.'¹¹ Russia's efforts to project its growing power, particularly through the leverage bestowed by its abundant oil and gas resources, have not endeared it to its immediate neighbours. If anything, it has 'stoked anxiety and driven these countries to seek alliances and take other steps to protect themselves from Russian pressure.'¹² The pro-West independent states seem to believe that security against possible Russian aggression is attainable through their membership of NATO. In practice, however, this has only served to contribute towards militarization and growing insecurity in the region. Indeed, in responding to the deployment of elements of the US missile defence system within Poland and the Czech Republic, Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev, averred that this action 'only exacerbates the situation. And I have already talked about this: we will be forced to respond in kind. Our American and European partners have also been warned about this. We are convinced that national security cannot simply be maintained on the basis of good faith.'¹³

Talks about the inclusion of Georgia and the Ukraine in NATO, although reportedly blocked by France and Germany, serve to reinforce the idea of Russian containment within the Kremlin.¹⁴ As Foreign Minister Lavrov points out:

Bloc politics, based on the logic of containment, dominated in Europe for too long. And now we are confronted with what can only be interpreted as the restoration of a sanitary cordon to the west of Russia's border. Favoritism in this part of Europe is generating an unsound atmosphere, encouraging the growth of nationalist sentiments, which pose a major threat to the continent's unity. Does the past imperative of ensuring the U.S. presence in Europe, while excluding Russia and blocking Germany's rise, remain valid?¹⁵

For Moscow, NATO is undermining Russia's return to a position of '*derzhavnost*' or 'great powerness.'¹⁶ Indeed, despite what the Russian Foreign Ministry has described as Georgian aggression in South Ossetia, NATO's Secretary General, Jaap

de Hoop Scheffer, has continued to promote the idea of Georgia's future membership of the organization. At the same time, the US proceeded to block an emergency NATO-Russia Council meeting on the conflict in South Ossetia. Russia's permanent representative to the Organization was particularly disgruntled when it emerged that the Georgian ambassador had been given the opportunity to address NATO while 'they weren't ready to meet with their Russian partner, to hear the questions I have for our American colleagues about their share of the responsibility for the preparation of the blood-bath in South Ossetia. This is unacceptable.'¹⁷

Russia's growing resentment towards the West, following NATO's eastward encroachment, was compounded by the decision to recognize Kosovo's independence. In February 2008, Kosovo declared its independence against the wishes of both Serbia and Russia. Indeed, Putin warned that 'to support the unilateral independence of Kosovo is wrong both from the moral and legal points of view.'¹⁸ Lavrov points out the discrepancy in international actions when he notes that while Kosovo had been granted recognition following continued violence, Palestine had not seen a similar decision.¹⁹ The 1999 war in Bosnia was waged without a mandate from the UN; rather it was a NATO action following a veto by both Russia and China. Russia has always claimed that there was insufficient evidence that there had been killing on the scale suggested by the West. However, as George Friedman points out, '[s]ince Russia was not a member of NATO, and since Russia denied the urgency of the war, and since Russia was overruled, the bombing campaign against Kosovo created a crisis in relations with Russia.'²⁰ Nevertheless, as the conflict intensified, the West turned to Russia, in desperation, to negotiate a peace agreement. Despite Moscow's part in negotiating the agreement that saw a cessation of hostilities, Russia was not seen as part of the peacekeeping operation, nor was it involved in the final decision-making processes on the future of Kosovo.²¹

By 2007, Kosovo's bid for independence had gained momentum, with the US clearly expressing its support for the idea. Despite a Russian warning that, in recognising Kosovo's independence, the West provided 'a template for its own actions in the pro-Russian, separatist regions of the former USSR,'²² President Bush continued to indicate that the end result of the ongoing talks should see independence for Kosovo, while Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice posited that '[t]here's going to be an independent Kosovo. We're dedicated to that.'²³

Russia's window of opportunity

The decision by Tbilisi to send troops into South Ossetia on 7 August 2008 provided Moscow with a window of opportunity to demonstrate its position not only towards the region, but also its ability to adopt an active role in international affairs. It is useful to recall that tensions between Russia and Georgia over the separatist regions of South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Ajaria have been a constant in relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, and have been a major security challenge in the region following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Although South Ossetia formed part of the sovereign territory of Georgia, the region has resisted and rejected Georgian rule, both prior to the existence of the Soviet Union, and shortly after its fall.²⁴

Georgia's 'Rose Revolution' saw Mikhail Saakashvili assume the position of president following the overthrow of former communist leader, Eduard Shevardnadze. Just like former Georgian President, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Saakashvili has been an avid proponent of restoring 'constitutional order' over the region and pledging reunification of the country.²⁵ To give impetus to this position, Saakashvili moved swiftly to secure the inclusion of the former separatist region of Ajaria under Tbilisi's central control in the first few months after assuming the presidency in January 2004.²⁶ Assured of the West's, and particularly America's backing, Saakashvili has, over the years, set out to achieve the same objectives in the irredentist regions of Southern Ossetia and Abkhazia despite Moscow's strong objection to such a move.

The seemingly disproportionate but strategic response to Georgian intervention in South Ossetia not only demonstrates Moscow's 'threshold of tolerance' beyond which it would not be willing to entertain western backed provocation, but also represents Russia's public re-affirmation of its willingness and ability to assume an increasingly prominent role in the Caucasus and on the broader international stage. As a matter of fact, since Vladimir Putin's assumption of the presidency in 2000, there has been a concerted effort to reposition the country and regain its former status as an international power, able to shape global affairs and balance the unipolarity of the United States.

Moscow's design to re-invent its global power status is well captured in its 2008 Foreign Policy Concept Paper. The paper articulates the country's approach to international relations, anchored on four major axes:

- foreign policy should be guided by the principles of international law;
- the importance of a multipolar world;
- the protection of Russian citizens wherever they may be;

- the importance of strengthening ties with the immediate region.²⁷

Russia's response to Georgia's military move into South Ossetia is in line with the core elements of this Foreign Policy Concept Paper. In the first instance, Russia has argued that its actions are within the ambit of international law, particularly with regard to the protection of human lives, and especially the lives of Russian citizens. According to Medvedev, 'in accordance with the Constitution and the federal laws, as President of the Russian Federation it is my duty to protect the lives and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they may be.'²⁸ This has implications not only for Georgia, but other former states of the USSR, including the Ukraine, that have large numbers of residents of Russian extraction. Indeed, following the dissolution of the USSR former citizens of the Union were offered Russian passports. Certainly, Moscow's actions have demonstrated the country's propensity to take action within its perceived sphere of influence, a clear signal to governments, including those of Ukraine and Georgia, which have been particularly pro-West. In fact, Russia's actions in Georgia have serious geostrategic implications for the region and the broader international system as the section that follows demonstrates.

The geostrategic fallout of the Georgia-Russia war

Although Russia had been included in institutions such as the G8, the EU-Russia Permanent Partnership Council, with talks on Russia's inclusion into the WTO, the West has never (until South Ossetia) seriously considered allowing a renascent Russia to play a pivotal role in international affairs. The international response to Saakashvili's decision to send troops into South Ossetia depicts an over-estimation of the ability of the West to undertake decisive action against Russia, and an underestimation of Russia's political and military resolve to re-assert its power on the international stage.²⁹ Indeed, analysis emanating from the US indicates that policy and decision-makers should not be hasty in their outright attack of Russian actions. As Kupchan notes, 'Washington's condemnation of the Russian invasion is certainly warranted, but the Bush administration's response has gone from appropriately firm to rashly confrontational.'³⁰ Rather than undertake responses that isolate Russia, which will only add to Russian perceptions of being 'contained', actions should be taken that draw the Federation into the international system.³¹

In 2007, Lavrov noted that relations between the US



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and Russia should not be held hostage to domestic election cycles.³² In the US, the crisis in the Caucasus and the Russian 'threat' has been used by both presidential candidates in demonstrating foreign policy competencies in the run up to the November 2008 elections. Certainly Senator John McCain has used the opportunity to highlight Barack Obama's inexperience in foreign affairs. McCain's top foreign policy advisor, Randy Scheunemann, 'attacked the presumptive Democratic presidential nominee's response to the situation in Georgia, saying that his experience with the region amounted to a handful of paper statements.' In response, Obama's senior foreign policy advisor noted the impact that McCain's stronger pronouncements might have on the situation, pointing out that Obama had adopted a 'measured and reasoned approach.'³³ Both candidates have, however, adopted a broadly antagonistic approach towards Russia.

Moscow actions have served to re-emphasise the challenges facing the EU in achieving a common foreign policy standpoint. On the one hand, Britain (which has experienced rising tensions with Moscow since the inquest into the death of former Russian spy, Alexander Litvinenko, and the tit-for-tat expulsion of diplomats) and the countries from the Baltic and Eastern Europe have been supporting a tough stance towards Moscow. On the other hand, Germany, France and Italy have been more reluctant to adopt a tough line.³⁴ The result has been the EU adopting a more cautious line towards Moscow, partly because of its energy dependency on Russia, opting against imposing sanctions on the Federation.³⁵

Analysts from the US have been particularly critical of Europe's inability to take decisive action. George Freidman has for example, pointed out that 'Europe has neither the military weight nor the will to actively resist Russia. ... The Europeans are not a substantial factor in the equation, nor are they likely to become substantial.'³⁶ Writing off the Europeans as too 'divided, dependent, and dispirited,' to challenge Russia is, however, to overlook their substantial diplomatic potential (soft power). Rather than the outright condemnation of Russia that the US has chosen to pursue, Europe may ultimately play a significant role in drawing Russia closer into the international fold, serving as a bridge between hardened Russian and US positions. Indeed, the central role played by current EU President and French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, in brokering a six point peace plan that facilitated the cessation of hostilities in Georgia should be seen in this light. Events have, however, overtaken the initial agreement. For example, although the Plan made provision for discussions to start regarding the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, on 26 of August Russia declared its recognition of the inde-

pendence of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. This has fundamentally altered the dynamics of the conflict since Russia now argues that it has completed the withdrawal of its troops from Georgia, in line with the EU-brokered agreement. As far as Moscow is concerned, its troops currently in Southern Ossetia and Abkhazia are legitimately stationed there at the request of two sovereign friendly states. By every indication, Saakashvili's attempt to pacify Southern Ossetia provided Moscow with the opportunity to avenge the West's recognition of Kosovo's independence. It would seem that for Moscow, the independence of Southern Ossetia and Abkhazia is non-negotiable, unless of course, Kosovo's independence is also opened for re-negotiation.

The West's dominance in the international system has been a source of frustration not only to Russia, but also to emerging powers, such as China, India, and Brazil. However, only Moscow has been able to challenge this dominance by means of visible military action. Other powers have not been willing to go beyond using soft political and economic power. Even the use of soft economic and political power has been cautious and very measured for fear of dire consequences, particularly from Washington. This for example, prevented former president Boris Yeltsin's proposal to form a strategic partnership with China, India, and Iran as a counter-balance to the West from materializing.³⁷ Under Putin, Russia has extended and strengthened ties with the regional powers of India and China as well as North Korea. Moscow actively participates in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO).³⁸ Russia is also part of the BRICs grouping (Brazil, Russia, India and China). Alongside the EU, these emerging blocs could, through the use of economic and political soft power at their disposal, shape new operational parameters in the international system that could reduce the tendency of both Washington and Moscow to resort to the use of hard military power.

It was Moscow's expectation that the changed global political economy, alongside its membership of these emerging power blocs, could provide a common framework for challenging America's global hegemony. Unfortunately, the emerging countries have not shown any interest in challenging America's global leadership. In the specific case of the Georgian conflict, although the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) gave some tacit support to Russia's 'active role in promoting peace' in the region, none of its members has joined Russia in recognising the independent status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.³⁹ It would, therefore, seem that Moscow has not been able to garner the kind of support it

needs to challenge, or let alone match the West. This has partly encouraged the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, to come to the not-too-accurate conclusion that Russia's actions have 'put it on a path of isolation and irrelevance in the international system.'⁴⁰

Rice's scathing criticism of Moscow could be seen as part of America's official propaganda to downplay the embarrassment suffered by Washington as a result of its inability to defend its ally, Georgia. However, it seems that despite Moscow's remarkable signs of revival, the nature and depth of this revival is open to question.⁴¹ Secondly, Moscow's seeming dependence on oil and gas exports does not bode well for the long term survival of the country because of the traditional volatility of commodity-based economies. Moreover, Moscow's inclination to use its energy resources as an instrument of foreign policy seems to be earning it more enemies than friends. As Peter Rutland argues, 'there is scant evidence that energy is a viable tool of international diplomacy.'⁴² Evidence of this was provided by the backfiring effect of Moscow's attempt to influence political outcomes in the Ukraine during that country's presidential elections in 2004 by offering support to Viktor Yanukovich, including promises of cheap energy supplies. Rather than fulfilling Moscow's wish of installing a pro-Moscow regime, Russian actions instead triggered support for Viktor Yushchenko and the Orange Revolution that overturned the rigged first round of election results.⁴³

Importantly also, Moscow has still not fully dealt with all of its Soviet legacies, including the modernization of its economy to make it more competitive in an increasingly integrated and competitive global economy.⁴⁴ Russia's attempts to punish the Ukraine in 2006 by hiking energy prices and shutting down pipelines, only earned it international condemnation. Finally, Moscow's high-handedness over Estonia and Latvia only precipitated their membership of NATO and the EU.⁴⁵ Overall, engaging in costly, Cold War-like confrontations with the West is definitely not in the best interest of Moscow; particularly since memories are still fresh among Russians that the collapse of the USSR came about partly as a result of the economic burden of executing the Cold War.

On its part, the West is not itself in a position to continue to ignore Moscow, or to even choose Georgia over Russia. In the first instance, Russia remains a nuclear power with significant nuclear capability and is a major arms exporter globally. Secondly, Russia is the largest producer of natural gas and second largest producer of oil, on which Europe is increasingly dependent. Finally, Russia holds a central position in the United Nations as a permanent member of the

Security Council. The continued inclusion of and cooperation with the Federation is necessary in meeting a number of challenges facing the international community, particularly negotiations on climate change and international security.⁴⁶ Moreover, the West and especially America are currently facing a multiplicity of challenges such as the debilitating financial and mortgage crisis and the unfinished wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that do not provide the luxury of a complete fallout with Moscow. Overall, despite the acrimony brought about by the stand-off over Georgia, the intertwined destinies of Moscow and the West provides an impulse for dialogue as opposed to following a logic of confrontation, as prophets of doom seem to suggest.

Conclusion

Russia's intervention in South Ossetia is not a reaction to a single isolated event but a response to a broader perception of its marginalization and threats to security. Externalities, including the expansion of NATO and recognition of Kosovo's independence, are an intrinsic part in explaining Russia's military actions. Although Saakashvili may have made the first move in his attempt to bring the separatist areas under Georgia's central control, his actions provided Russia with the means to demonstrate its capacity to challenge the West, particularly when its vital interests are threatened. As Fiona Hill notes: 'Russian hard power is still present and still deployable. Saber rattling tendencies persist, and the real danger remains that 'restorationists' in the military and security services, as well as in the Russian parliament will try to reassert themselves in foreign policy.'⁴⁷ The ripple effect of these actions, however, will have lasting implications for the geo-strategic balance in international affairs. A new geo-political landscape is emerging, but it is not the new Cold War that media headlines suggest. It is important, however, to bear in mind that wars are sometimes products of accidents, and as Kupchan observes, 'rushing to judgment and pronouncing a return of the Cold War risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.'⁴⁸ It would seem that the Kremlin is conscious of this and, therefore, supports the pursuit of a pragmatic foreign policy rather than one based on ideological preferences. As Eduard Shevardnadze has asserted, 'both Putin and Medvedev would be intelligent enough not to believe that the USSR could be reconstructed.'⁴⁹

Finally, while the EU has been dismissed as an 'inconsequential' actor in resolving tensions between Russia and the West, it is important to recognize the central role that it

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has played in securing the cessation of hostilities between Georgia and Russia. Moreover, as oil prices drop from over \$130 a barrel, and governments continue to invest in 'clean' renewable energy resources, Russia will need to address its own dependencies. Indeed, despite growing economic and military power, the country continues to face a number of internal challenges that will negatively impact on its ability to pursue a vision of re-inventing its great power status.

Recommendations

- A move away from polarized positions - There is a growing tendency within the US and Russia to view international politics in terms of black and white, good vs. evil, rather than matters where states have both competing as well as coinciding interests. There is a need to move away from the polarisation of positions on both sides of the US-Russia divide which only serves to exacerbate a further deterioration in relations.
- Linkage diplomacy - An opportunity exists for linkage diplomacy. In this case, in an effort to produce an agreement to diffuse a crisis and save face, discussions concerning Russia's recognition of the breakaway regions could be linked to a review of America's missile defense shield project in Poland and the Czech Republic, and the status of Kosovo.
- NATO enlargement - Questions concerning NATO enlargement will need to be revisited to take into account Russian sensitivities. The instability within the Caucasus region has the potential to increase the reluctance of current NATO members regarding the inclusion of Georgia and the Ukraine. As a result, the applications of Georgia and the Ukraine to join the Organisation should be deferred to a later date.

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