

Eurasia: US Geostrategic Plans at Risk

Instability in Georgia. A rocky beachhead

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The bloom has officially faded on Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's 2003 rose revolution. The 13 opposition parties in this nation of 4.7 million are united and determined, and began their latest series of demonstrations 9 April, when as many as 100,000 demonstrated in Tbilisi, capturing the nation's mood of frustration and, increasingly, contempt for their oversize, fanatically pro-American president. They have vowed to persist with a campaign of civil disobedience until he resigns.

Saakashvili's allies are abandoning him in droves, with former parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze one of the protesters. Arrests last month of members of her Democratic Movement for a United Georgia, accused of seeking to overthrow the government by force, burned any remaining bridges for her. Reflecting the broad sentiment, she said Saakashvili lost all credibility as president when he launched war against Russia last August and that any negotiations would be only over the transition of power. Former prime minister Zurab Noghaideli's Movement for a Just Georgia organised a protest in his hometown of Batumi.

After brutally quashing demonstrations in 2007, the president is now forced to play to his US/EU patrons. Saakashvili addressed the nation 10 April, piously emphasising his efforts in "protecting, ensuring, and defending the people's fundamental right to demonstrate peacefully" shortly before the opposition deadline for him to step down expired, which he chose not to mention. The Interior Ministry stayed in the background, though a "cleaning crew" sent to the main square Saturday morning tore down their banners and ripped up their computer cables. Opposition leaders described them as a 50-strong mob which attacked them. Considering Saakashvili's unpopularity, any *bono fide* cleaners would surely have joined the protesters instead of threatening them. Of course, the Interior Ministry denied any knowledge of the cleaners.

Yet another defector from the Saakashvili camp, former foreign minister Salome Zurbishvili, said: "From Monday a new wave of protests will start...No one should try and frighten us it won't work in any case."

The man to watch now is businessman Levan Gachechiladze, another former supporter of Saakashvili who broke with him months after the 2003 coup, accusing him of corruption in the privatisation of an aircraft factory. He joined opposition activists staging a hunger strike during the 2-7 November protests in Tbilisi and was injured during the police crackdown on the rally. "Grechka" (buckwheat in Russian) garnered 27 per cent to Saakashvili's disputed 52 per cent in last year's presidential election and his widespread popularity has put him on the path to replace his nemesis. Whatever happens in the next few days, he will remain the chief thorn in Saakashvili's side until he finally departs - his term officially ends in 2013.

Georgian “democracy” has not had a smooth path, to put it mildly. The first post-Soviet president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, was overthrown in a violent uprising in 1992, as was his successor Eduard Shevardnadze in Saakashvili’s rose coup in 2003, though without violence (just lots of US-EU-sponsored NGOs). Now he too is yesterday’s man following the ruinous war with Russia that even the most nationalistic Georgian realises was a conflict that the country could not win.

All this just days after triumphal celebrations of the 60th anniversary of NATO in Strasbourg, where support for Georgia’s entry into this club was reaffirmed. But the vow was empty, and everyone present knew it. Georgia must meet the NATO bottom line – no outstanding conflicts with its neighbours or foreign troops on its territory and compliance with member-nations’ military regime. Independent Abkhazia and South Ossetia put off any Georgian membership indefinitely. Thank you, Mr Saakashvili.

It will not be easy for Obama to let go of Georgia, which is the US beachhead in the pursuit of its war in Afghanistan, according to analyst Rick Rozoff. The momentum for this plan began long before Obama pledged his allegiance, long before the ill-fated war against Ossetia last summer, and continues apace. It is a plan laid down by Zbigniew Brzezinski in his 1997 *Foreign Affairs* article, pursued enthusiastically by Bush/Cheney, and Obama is unlikely to disagree, considering Brzezinski is his close patron and adviser.

Recent evidence of the continued importance attached to Georgia includes the US-Georgia Charter on Strategic Partnership signed in the fading days of the Bush regime in January. In February, the Georgian Defence Ministry released Vision 2009, outlining the plan to make Georgia’s military compliant with NATO standards. In early March, Georgian Defense Minister David Sikharulidze said Georgia’s military was now being rapidly rebuilt with US aid and that “our capabilities and tactics will be designed to meet a considerably superior force ... As NATO seeks alternative routes to Afghanistan, we understand our strategic responsibility as gateway to the East-West corridor. Georgia will provide logistical support to NATO, opening its territory, ports, airfields, roads and railroads to the alliance.”

The American warship the USS Klakring docked in the Georgian Black Sea port of Batumi 30 March, as part of its tour “participating in theatre security cooperation activities which develop both nations’ abilities to operate against common threats,” according to the US military. General James Cartwright, vice chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff, joined the festivities, and was reminded by Saakashvili of Georgia’s troop commitments to Kosovo and Iraq (there were 2000 in Iraq till last summer) and promise to send 300 to Afghanistan. He then demanded a *quid pro quo*: “Our struggle continues and it will end after the complete de-occupation of Georgia’s territory and expelling the last soldier of the enemy from our country.” Cartwright added some nonsense words of his own: “I want to say that you have a very good army and we know what they have done.” Saakashvili has even offered to turn the Sachkhere Mountain Training School into a permanent NATO Partnership for Peace Training Centre, where it will host the annual NATO South Caucasus Cooperative Longbow/ Cooperative Lancer exercises on 3 May with troops from 23 nations.

Former Indian diplomat MK Bhadrakumar says the US plans to move materiel to Afghanistan via the Black Sea port of Poti in Georgia through Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. “The project, if it materialises, will be a geopolitical coup – the biggest ever that Washington would have swung in post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caucasus. At one stroke, the US will be tying up military cooperation at the bilateral level with Azerbaijan,

Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan,” drawing these countries closer into NATO’s partnership programmes.

While very clever, this plan must overcome the Bush/Cheney legacy of intrigue and chaos. Attempts to sneak Georgia and Ukraine in NATO’s back door have backfired. Continuing on this path so clearly anathema to Russia will only make access to Afghanistan more and more unpredictable. Trying to juggle all the “stans” is a perilous act. Georgia is already a weak link, soon to be weaker. When the inevitable happens and “Grechka” or someone else with a modicum of common sense takes over, they will rush to make up with Russia and try to salvage something from the morass Saakashvili bequeaths them.

Obama has vowed to improve relations with Russia. With the arrival of the Klakring, Russia decided it officially had had enough, and sent a strong warning 2 April to the US about its plans to rebuild Georgia’s military following last year’s war. The Foreign Ministry said helping arm Georgia would be “extremely dangerous” and would amount to “nothing but the encouragement of the aggressor”.

The US needs Russia, but could lose it along with Georgia as its grab for control over Central Asia and the Muslim world lurches forward, forcing it instead into a humiliating retreat from this cauldron. With Americans increasingly focussed on their domestic crises – the other Bush/Cheney legacy – such a retreat, if done without provoking WWII, could be Obama’s greatest legacy, be it one that will be remembered as another Vietnam for the US.

Nobody (except a few Saakashvilis) wants the US as the world’s leader anymore. The EU and the BRICs are going their own way, and the Georgias are dangerous toys best left alone. Obama should be intelligent enough to realise this and acquiesce to the inevitable. By continuing to support, however unenthusiastically, failed Bush policies such as the Caucasus gambit, he merely makes any accommodation of America with the other major powers all the more difficult, weakening his hand in the long run.

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