

Punishing Russia could prove costly

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On the eve of his visit to Ukraine, David Miliband, Britain's foreign secretary, said he wanted to forge "the widest possible coalition against Russian aggression in Georgia". The next day, he warned that Russia must not start a new cold war.

Russians reacted defensively, saying a cold war is not what they want, yet arguing it is better to lose so-called friends in the West than lose national dignity.

The row that has started over Russia's using force to rebuff a Georgian military attack on a separatist minority is now continuing over Moscow's decision to recognize the de-facto independence of the two pariah statelets that have been effectively self-governed for the last 16 years.

Russia's decision to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia should come at no surprise to those who know the region. South Ossetia had never been a part of Georgia until Joseph Stalin separated the Ossetian homeland into two parts and attached the northern part to Russia, while giving the South to Stalin's native Georgia.

Stalin's plan included a measure of autonomy for Abkhazia and the two Ossetias. However, yet another Georgian dictator, Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1939 - 1993), abolished South Ossetian autonomy and liquidated the autonomous status of the Abkhazian Republic even before the Soviet Union formally ceased to exist in 1991. At about the same time, when Georgians proclaimed their independence from Moscow, the parliamentary assembly of the Republic of Abkhazia reasserted its sovereignty and announced separation from Georgia. Tbilisi responded by sending bands of looters to both breakaway regions.

Gamsakhurdia's officially chauvinist policy of "Georgia for the Georgians" encouraged the ethnic cleansing that followed. When South Ossetians and Abkhazians tried to throw the rascals out with the help of popular militias specifically assembled for that purpose, Georgia sent in police forces and regular troops. This started an armed conflict which lasted until a 1992 ceasefire agreement brokered by the Russians. All sides agreed to accept Russian troops as peacekeepers.

For the last 16 years, Moscow had staunchly refused to heed numerous requests of the separatist leaders to acknowledge their de-facto independence from Georgia. Even so, the one and only channel of material aid reaching breakaway enclaves was coming from Russia. Tbilisi has not contributed a penny to help restore cities and villages ravaged by the Georgian fire. As time went by, more and more Georgians left for Georgia proper. Abkhazian and South Ossetian economies lost all connections to Georgia and became fully oriented toward Russia.

Georgia's claims of sovereignty over the separatist republics are based on the Soviet precedent and the Western desire to "discipline" Russia, while rewarding the US-propped regime of Mikheil Saakashvili. The idea of North Ossetia and South Ossetia reuniting as a new republic of the Russian Federation is simply unpalatable to the West, no matter how many referendums would prove the people's will and how genuinely democratic those referendums would be. After all, as former US national security advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski argued, Russia was too big even in its curtailed post-Soviet form; would it not be great to tear apart Siberia and the Far East?

Interestingly, some people among the Russian so-called "liberal" elite met the idea with sympathetic understanding. Indeed, if your personal fortune is based on an indiscriminate sell-off of the country's natural riches, central oversight is not the first thing on your mind.

During the whole Boris Yeltsin decade, Russia's foreign policy did not significantly deviate from the master plan devised in Washington. The country was ruled by the oligarchs, not by the elected government. The West has called this "democracy". While the two small Caucasian nations were clamoring for protection, Moscow's hands were tied by the fear of Western disapproval.

The slightest sign of independent orientation in foreign policy was cited as a proof of Russian "imperialism". Never mind that thousands in both unacknowledged republics were carrying Russian passports. Russia was forced to turn a blind eye to the continuing misery of the people that could not live as a part of Georgia - and were not allowed to exist independently.

In the meantime, humanitarian reasons worked well for East Timorese, Kosovars, and factually independent Kurds in Iraq. Not so for Abkhazians and South Ossetians. On August 8, the Georgian army was given a command to "retake" South Ossetia, and launched a barrage of GRAD rockets against the civilian population of Tskhinvali. Close to 2,000 Ossetians were soon dead, and 30, 000, or one quarter of the total population, fled their destroyed homes, many ending up on the Russian side of the border. A dozen Russian peacekeepers were killed in the attack. The UN was "concerned", yet nobody among the Western leaders indicated even a slightest displeasure.

However, the displeasure became pronounced when Russian troops moved in to protect the threatened minority and stop the conflict. The Russian offensive accomplished these tasks in five days and with minimal bloodshed.

Western displeasure grew into a universal chorus of condemnation when President Dmitry Medvedev, acting on a direct and unanimous mandate of both chambers of the Federal Assembly, decided to extend Russia's recognition of independence to the two nations that have been factually independent since 1992, and paid in blood for that privilege.

Rather than seeing Russia's actions as dictated by considerations of humanity, or, at the very minimum, sheer political realism (can anyone in their right mind believe that fiercely proud North Caucasian nations would voluntarily accept the rule by those who deny their very right of existence as separate ethnicities?), the Western press is chanting cold war.

Moscow's position is, if friendship with the West can only be bought by standing idly by and ignoring desperate pleas for help from a kindred, ethically affiliated nation, Russia cannot afford such a friendship. Cold war or not, the time of a politically correct, US-style Russia is

now over.

Instead, it is the time of a Russia that has restored the dignity of its elected government offices; a Russia that owes nothing to the world financial institutions, and itself holds near US\$100 billion in US agencies' debt; and a Russia that supplies one-third of Europe's total gas. This is a country whose army is, once again, capable of procuring world-class armaments and training soldiers in their proper use.

This Russia is prepared to beef up its military collaboration with China, ensuring comprehensive modernization of the Asian giant's forces. This new Russia has re-established its diplomatic and economic presence world-wide, has friends and partners in both hemispheres, and is capable of influencing geopolitical situations in the areas much further distanced than the neighboring Caucasus.

Attempting to punish this new Russia, one way or another, may be a rather costly adventure. Is the West prepared to bear those costs – just to show Russia “who is the boss here”, while denying two smaller nations that very same right of self-determination that Georgians now enjoy?

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