

Russia and Georgia: Caucasian calculus

By [Eric Walberg](#)

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Georgia is to Russia as Colombia is to Venezuela, and Kaidanow spells trouble

War clouds refuse to disperse a year after Georgia waged war against Russia. On the anniversary of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's ill-fated invasion of South Ossetia 8 August, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev warned: "Georgia does not stop threatening to restore its 'territorial integrity' by force. Armed forces are concentrated at the borders near Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and provocations are committed," including renewed Georgian shelling of the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali.

What is the result of the Ossetia fiasco? Did Russia "win" or "lose"? Has it put paid to NATO expansion? What lessons did Saakashvili and his Western sponsors learn? Analysts have been sifting through the rubble over the past few weeks.

Some, such as Professor Stephen Blank at the US Army War College, dismiss any claim that Russia was justified in its response, that "even before this war there was no way Georgia was going to get into NATO." He insists that Russia lost, that its response showed Russian military incompetence and weakness, resulting in huge economic losses, with the EU now seeking alternative energy sources and the US continuing to resist Russian sensitivities in its "near abroad". Georgetown University Professor Ethan Burger compared the situation to "Germany's annexation of Czechoslovakia", with the US playing the role of plucky Britain facing the fascist hordes. Apparently Burger sees the Monroe Doctrine as a one-way street. Tell that to the Hondurans.

Indeed, the Russian military is a shadow of its former Soviet self, as is Russia itself, having been plundered by its robber barons and their Western friends over the past 20 years. Although the Georgian army fled in disarray, "major deficiencies in operational planning, personnel training, equipment readiness and conducting modern joint combat operations became evident," though "it proved that it remains a viable fighting force," writes Vladimir Frolov at russiaprofile.org.

And the West, angry at the de facto Russian "win" in Ossetia, pulled out many stops to undermine the Russian economy afterwards. Beside the \$500 million military operation itself, "capital flight" reached \$10 billion and currency reserves decreased by \$16 billion. Overall, it is estimated that the war cost Russia \$27.7 billion.

Other analysts, such as German Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) analyst Alexander Rahr, see the war as a blip in East-West relations. "The West has forgotten the Georgian war quickly. Georgia and Saakashvili are not important enough to start a new Cold War with Russia. The West needs Moscow's support on many other issues, like Iran. The West is not capable of solving the territorial-ethnic conflicts in the post-Soviet space on its own. The

present status quo suits everyone.” He even predicts that if Moscow decides to stay in Sevastopol after 2017, “there will be no conflict over this issue with the West.”

Sergei Roy, editor of the Russian Guardian, notes that the conflict produced “greater clarity or, to use a converse formula, less indeterminacy both in the international relations and domestically”. He recalls that Putin tried to reach Bush on the hotline established for precisely such crises. “There simply was no response from the other side. Dead silence,” a definite sign of that other side’s “direct complicity in Saakashvili’s bloody gamble.” Roy mourns that superpower rivalry is alive and well, though “Russia, has done everything it realistically could (ideologically, politically, militarily, economically, culturally) to embrace and please the West. Everything, that is, except disappearing entirely. But disappear it must.”

Roy is referring to the overarching US/NATO plans to promote instability and disintegration throughout the former Soviet Union (and not only). The strategy is Balkanisation of the Caucasus (Dagestan, Chechnya and other autonomous regions), with the same strategy applicable to Iran, Iraq and China. The principle being, “Don’t fight directly, use secessionist movements within your adversary to weaken him.” Though on the back burner as a result of the Ossetia setback, the US has been perfecting this strategy for decades now, most infamously in Yugoslavia, sometimes by direct bombing and invasion, sometimes by bribery, NGOing and colour revolutions.

While Western media accuses Russia of doing this in Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia are best viewed as stop-gap entities asserting Russian hegemony in a world of US-sponsored pseudo-democracies. A new, more sober Georgian political regime which recognises the situation for what it is and establishes a pragmatic, even cooperative relationship with Russia could probably negotiate some kind of compromise within the Commonwealth of Independent States, though according to leader of the Georgian Labour Party Shalva Natelashvili, “dozens of Latin American states, Bolivia, Venezuela, Cuba, Honduras, Ecuador and others, intend to recognise Abkhazia and so-called South Ossetia. While our poor president is busy preserving his throne, Georgian disintegration continues and deepens.”

The war certainly destroyed any prospects of Georgia’s membership in NATO (which were very real, despite Blank’s denial). However, NATO plans for Georgia and Ukraine stubbornly proceed apace. Ex-deputy assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian affairs Matt Bryza brought Saakashvili \$1 billion as his parting gift to rebuild tiny Georgia’s military in conformity to NATO specifications. Oh yes, and to train Georgian troops bound for Afghanistan. In other words, to prepare Georgia for incorporation into US world military strategy, whether or not as part of NATO. After all, Colombia isn’t part of NATO and is getting the same red carpet treatment, a conveniently placed ally in the US feud with Venezuela. Perhaps NATO’s Partnership for Peace can do the trick with Georgia.

The new Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Tina Kaidanow, explained her qualifications for US-sponsored Balkanisation in April: “I worked in Serbia, in Belgrade and in Sarajevo, then in Washington, and I went back to Sarajevo and am now in Kosovo.” Andrei Areshev, deputy director of the Strategic Culture Foundation, warned on PanArmenian.net that her new appointment “is an attempt to give a second wind to the politicisation of ethnicity in the North Caucasus with the possibility of repeating the ‘Kosovo scenario’.” The US will simply continue its double standard of recognising Kosovo’s

secession while arming Georgia and Azerbaijan to overturn the independence of Abkhazia, Nagorno Karabakh and South Ossetia — none of which “seceded” from anything other than new post-Soviet nations they never belonged to.

All this petty intriguing masks a much more important result of the Russian response to last summer’s provocation. Very simply, Russian resolve prevented a 1914-style descent into world war. This time, quite possibly a nuclear war, especially in light of Russia’s much taunted military weakness in relation to the US. A desperate nation will pull out all the stops when backed to the wall, which is where the US and its proxy NATO have positioned Russia. “Had Russia refrained from engaging its forces in the conflict, the nations of the northern Caucasus would have serious doubts about its ability to protect them. This would in turn lead to an array of separatist movements in the northern Caucasus, which would have the potential to start not only a full-scale Caucasian war, but a new world war,” according to Andrei Areshev.

Plans for carving up Russia by employing Yugoslav-style armed secessionist campaigns were laid out in 1999 when the conservative Freedom House thinktank in the United States founded the American Committee for Peace in Chechnya, with members including Zbigniew Brzezinski and neocons Robert Kagan and William Kristol, according to Rick Rozkoff at globalresearch.ca. This frightening group has now morphed into the American Committee for Peace in the Caucasus “dedicated to monitoring the security and human rights situation in the North Caucasus.”

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov recently confirmed that plans around last August’s war were on a far larger scale than merely retaking South Ossetia and later Abkhazia, that Azerbaijan was simultaneously planning for a war against Armenia, a member of the Russian-sponsored Collective Security Treaty Organisation. NATO-member Turkey could well have intervened at that point on behalf of Azerbaijan, and a regional war could have ensued, involving Ukraine (it threatened to block the Russian Black Sea fleet last summer) and even Iran. Ukraine has long had its eyes on pro-Russian Transdnister. It doesn’t take much imagination to see how this tangled web could come unstuck in some Strangelovian scenario.

Just as the origins of WWI are complex, but clearly the result of the imperial powers jockeying for power, the fiasco in Georgia can be laid squarely at the feet of the world’s remaining imperial superpower. The mystery here is the extent of Russian forbearance, the lengths that Russia seems willing to go to accommodate the US bear. Over the past decade, Russia watched while the US and NATO attacked Yugoslavia, invaded Afghanistan, set up military bases throughout Central Asia, invaded Iraq, assisted regime collapse/ change in Yugoslavia, Georgia, Adjara, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, and schemed to push Russia out of the European energy market. The question is not why Russia took military action but why it hasn’t acted more decisively earlier.

And, now, why it has given the US and NATO carte blanche in Afghanistan. The US continues to strut about on the world stage and, with its Euro-lackeys, to directly threaten Russia with war and civil war, taking time out to sabotage its economy when it pleases. Its plans for Afghanistan as a key link in its world energy supplies (which could, of all goes well, exclude Russia) are well known. The Russians are also not unaware of evidence of US complicity in the production and distribution of Afghanistan’s opium, even as the US piously claims to be fighting this scourge. Sergei Mikheev, a vice-president of the Centre for Political Technologies, said, “NATO’s operation in Afghanistan is dictated by the aspiration of the US

and its allies to consolidate their hold on this strategically and economically important region,” which includes Central Asia. He criticised Russian compliance with US demands for troop and materiel transport. According to Andrei Areshev, “Russia’s position on this issue has not been formulated clearly.”

More ominous yet, writes Sergei Borisov in Russia Today, the operation in Afghanistan is “a key element of the realisation of the project of transforming the alliance into an alternative to the UN.” While the original invasion of Afghanistan was rubber-stamped by the UN, it was carried out by the US and NATO, and the UN has been merely a passive bystander ever since. NATO is being transformed from a regional organisation into a global one: “If the norms of international laws are violated, then with time the Afghan model may be applied to any other state.”

Perhaps it’s a case of “Damned if you do, damned if you don’t.” While a direct attack like that of last August simply had to be met head-on, Russia has to be careful not to unduly provoke the US, which can unleash powerful forces against Russia on many fronts — economic, geopolitical, military, cultural — picking up where it left off in 1991 with the destruction of the Soviet Union. Russians are not cowards, but realists, and appear to be pursuing a holding action, hoping to wait out the US, counting on its chickens coming home to roost. Meanwhile, as Roy urges, Russia can use the current breathing space it have gained from pushing back the NATO challenge to “lick its armed forces into shape” and prepare for the next unpleasant surprise.

Eric Walberg writes for Al-Ahram Weekly <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/>. You can reach him at <http://ericwalberg.com/>

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About the author:

Canadian Eric Walberg is known worldwide as a journalist specializing in the Middle East, Central Asia and Russia. A graduate of University of Toronto and Cambridge in economics, he has been writing on East-West relations since the 1980s. He has lived in both the Soviet Union and Russia, and then Uzbekistan, as a UN adviser, writer, translator and lecturer. Presently a writer for the foremost Cairo newspaper, Al Ahram, he is also a regular contributor to Counterpunch, Dissident Voice, Global Research, Al-Jazeera and Turkish Weekly, and is a commentator on Voice of the

Cape radio. Eric Walberg was a moderator and speaker at the Leaders for Change Summit in Istanbul in 2011.

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