

## COMMENTARY

**A Resolute Strategy on Georgia**

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As Russia's occupation of Georgia drags on, it has become increasingly attractive to some analysts to blame Georgia for the conflict, to assert that continued U.S. security assistance to Georgia risks an irreparable fracture in the U.S.-Russia relationship that would threaten progress on issues of greater importance, and to maintain that in any case, the Russian attack has proven that Georgia is militarily indefensible. These analysts go on to conclude that continued U.S. and European military assistance to Georgia could easily be undone by Russia whenever it chooses and hence aid should be limited to humanitarian and economic reconstruction projects. However, such a strategy risks encouraging Russian leaders to continue their occupation of Georgia, undertake further military intimidation of its neighbors, and challenge the United States and its NATO allies more directly. The lessons of U.S. and NATO strategy of firmness and negotiation in the 1970s have relevance today.

**Sowing the Seeds of War**

The assertion that Georgia is to blame for precipitating this conflict simply ignores the long pattern of Russian actions designed to either force Georgia into intervening militarily in these areas—at which time Russia would release an overwhelming military response—or to permit their gradual but inexorable annexation by Russia. It also ignores the immediate pre-conflict actions of both Russia and Georgia. These show a Russian government executing a deliberate and methodical plan and a Georgian government under considerable strain, in considerable confusion and feeling increasingly isolated as the international organizations charged with overseeing the peacekeeping operations in Georgia proved unable to respond effectively to Russian actions. The pattern of Russian provocations against Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity is well known, but bears repeating in order to show the cumulative effect they had on Georgia's government and the extent to which they reveal a long-term, calculated Russian plan.

From March through May 2008 Russia engaged in a process of changing facts on the ground in Abkhazia: lifting the military and economic embargo there; dealing directly with the separatist authorities instead of using the Georgian government as an interlocutor; deploying an additional battalion of Russian troops there under the auspices of increasing its peacekeeping contingent; deploying railroad troops to repair the railway line between the Russian border and a major port—ostensibly for humanitarian purposes but later used to transport Russian military equipment; and shooting down an unarmed Georgian reconnaissance drone. Having failed to respond to these provocations, the Georgian government certainly realized at some point this spring that the facts on the ground in Abkhazia dictated that its return to Georgia was no longer a reasonable possibility. Russia had increased its military presence and infrastructure to the point where a Georgian military attack would certainly have failed and had increased its direct political engagement with the separatist authorities there to the point that Georgia and the international community had little to no leverage to compel a diplomatic solution that would preserve Georgia's territorial integrity.

Then, in July, Russia's attention shifted to South Ossetia: on July 3 there was an assassination attempt against the head of the Georgian-backed administration there; on July 4, the South Ossetian de facto government—over a dozen of whose members are Russian officials—ordered a general mobilization; on July 8 Russian aircraft violated Georgian airspace, loitering for some 40 minutes; and on August 1 two bombs exploded in Georgian-controlled territory in South Ossetia, wounding five Georgian policemen. From there, things rapidly escalated into a pattern of exchanges of artillery and mortar fire between Georgian and South Ossetian forces—sometimes with the South Ossetians being shielded by Russian peacekeepers as they fired on Georgian forces. Finally, on August 7, a Georgian envoy traveled to South Ossetia to meet with Russian special envoy Popov and South Ossetian chief negotiator Chochiev, both of whom failed to show up. Having exhausted attempts to defuse the situation, on the evening of August 7 Georgia declared a unilateral cease fire in South Ossetia and appealed for new negotiations, offering broad South Ossetian autonomy with Russia as the guarantor of that status.

We may never know conclusively which of the many sparks of the next 12 hours ignited the conflagration that started soon thereafter. Georgia claims that it responded to continued South Ossetian shelling of its troops and an incursion into South Ossetia by Russian forces, while Russia maintains that it only intervened after Georgia had attacked South Ossetia, and that its intervention was intended only to restore peace and to the region. Whoever moved first, a review of the location and disposition of Russian and Georgian forces at the beginning of August is instructive. Georgia's ground forces consist of four infantry brigades, plus a fifth that was being formed when the war broke out. Two of these brigades—the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup>—are located at bases in central and eastern Georgia and therefore in a position to influence any military action in South Ossetia; the other two—the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>—are located in western Georgia and therefore in a

position to influence military action in Abkhazia. As tensions in South Ossetia mounted, the bulk of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade—2,000 of its 3,300 troops—was deployed to Iraq and the 4<sup>th</sup> Brigade was being trained by the U.S. for a future deployment to Iraq. In other words, Georgia had very few ground forces able to militarily influence the situation in South Ossetia—hardly the stance of a military about to precipitate a conflict there.

Russia, on the other hand, had recently staged a significant military exercise in the North Caucasus involving exactly the units that participated in the invasion of Georgia only a few weeks later. The exercise and the invasion both involved significant elements of the Russian 58<sup>th</sup> Army, which is stationed in the North Ossetian capital of Vladikavkaz. According to Jane's, the 58<sup>th</sup> Army is one of Russia's premiere combat formations and boasts more than twice the number of troops, five times the number of tanks, ten times the number of armored personnel carriers and twelve times the number of combat aircraft as the entire Georgian Armed Forces. Clearly Georgia's military was overmatched by the sheer power of its opponent, and this mismatch was compounded by the fact that Russia had long planned for this war and had staged a series of provocations designed to start it on terms most favorable to Russia.

### **Avoiding a Rift with Russia?**

Many of those who blame Georgia for starting the war also argue that the U.S. cannot allow Georgia to force a rift in the U.S. relationship with Russia, whose assistance they claim we need on a variety of issues ranging from missile defense to North Korea to Iran. First of all, this assertion overlooks the fact that Russia has been far from helpful on a number of these issues to this point. At its best, Russian behavior has been neutral, while at its worst it has actively or passively attempted to sabotage U.S. objectives.

Increasingly, a resurgent Russia's international behavior has begun to mirror that of its Soviet predecessor—insisting it has a right to apply its power and leverage at the time and place of its choosing within its self-described “Near Abroad” while simultaneously insisting that other, stronger actors on the world stage (especially the U.S.) gain approval from international bodies prior to acting. Those arguing for accommodating Russia by abandoning Georgia see Russia as they want it to be, not as it is.

The assertion that our relationship with Russia is too important to subvert to a U.S. policy of assisting Georgia in both rebuilding from the Russian invasion and furthering its Euro-Atlantic aspirations also ignores the fact that, for all its bluster, Russia understands and respects power and resoluteness. Again like its Soviet predecessor, the Russian government, when confronted with a clearly delineated red line from a united West, will become much more accommodating. When it perceives weakness or disunity, it will attempt to exploit both to its advantage.

At a time of growing Russian nationalism and assertiveness, backed by its energy-driven prosperity and leverage, the Western response needs to be balanced so as not to trigger a completely confrontational relationship with Moscow where we are unable to resolve important differences through peaceful negotiations. A historical example is instructive here: the deployment of Soviet SS-20 medium-range nuclear missiles to Eastern Europe in the late 1970s was not rolled back by negotiations alone, nor was it accepted by the U.S. as a case of the U.S.S.R. simply exercising its prerogatives in its sphere of influence. Rather, it was reversed by resolute action in the face of increasingly hysterical Soviet threats and pronouncements. What finally brought the Soviet Union to the bargaining table was the deployment to Europe of U.S. Pershing-II nuclear missiles and cruise missiles to counter the Soviet SS-20s. The resulting agreement on Intermediate-Range and Shorter-Range Nuclear Forces [INF] Treaty provided for the removal of all missiles with ranges between 500 and 5,500km, making Europe and Europeans inarguably more secure. Similarly, a U.S. decision to assist Georgia need not destroy the U.S. relationship with Russia or destabilize the wider Eurasian region as long as U.S. statements and actions make it clear that, on the one hand, we will not be deterred in our intent to rebuild Georgia and champion its Euro-Atlantic integration and on the other, this effort—like our current missile defense effort—is not directed at Russia and poses no threat to Russia.

### **Looking Ahead**

The third assertion often-heard since Russia's invasion is that Georgia is militarily indefensible, and that therefore any U.S. military assistance can easily be undone by Russia whenever it so chooses. This assertion essentially takes the current campaign and projects its outcome into the future, ignoring several key facts.

The most important of these is that past U.S. military assistance to Georgia was not designed to equip it for war with Russia. Instead, it was designed initially to give the Georgian military the capability to rid its territory of Chechen militants Russia claimed were using it to rearm and refit, and later to train it in counter-insurgency operations as Georgian forces began to take on a significant role in Iraq. At no time did the U.S. attempt to train or equip the Georgian Armed Forces for a conflict with Russia—in fact, the U.S. deliberately avoided training capabilities such as artillery, armor and attack aviation since they were seen as too provocative.

If the U.S. and other European allies make the decision to engage in a comprehensive program of rebuilding Georgia's military capability, it will be an expensive and long-term task to be sure. However, building a military capable of protecting Georgia's future sovereignty and territorial integrity—however these end up being defined—is well within the capabilities of the U.S. armed forces. The capabilities required include secure command and control systems, an integrated air defense and air sovereignty system, a robust

maritime defense capability, counter-artillery radar systems and a highly lethal anti-armor capability. All of these are capabilities the U.S. has in large quantity and that it has previously exported to allies and friends. The United States would also need to continue its efforts to train Georgian forces in counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism to ensure that—once they are able—Georgian forces can once again deploy alongside U.S. and other coalition forces to Iraq, Afghanistan or other contingencies.

Ironically, Russia's attack on Georgia might make the job of rearming Georgia to defend what remains of its territorial integrity easier. U.S. policy-makers no longer have to wrestle with questions of what type of military assistance might be seen as too provocative in light of Georgia's frozen conflicts. If, as is highly likely, Russia completes the process of annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia begun months ago and leaves significant forces there, a Georgian incursion into either of those areas would become military unthinkable. This would leave the Georgian Armed Forces with only the mission of protecting what remains of Georgia from future Russian attack, a mission that they are certainly capable of fulfilling if the U.S. assists.

## **Conclusion**

The claim that Georgia precipitated this conflict and therefore bears much of the blame for what has befallen it since then, the claim that our relationship with Russia is too important to damage on Georgia's behalf and the claim that Georgia is militarily indefensible simply do not stand up to scrutiny. Although convenient, they fail to account for clear evidence that Russia planned this war long ago, for increasingly irresponsible Russian behavior that will only get worse if left unanswered, and for the fact that building a Georgian military capable of defending Georgia's remaining territory is not an insurmountable task.

They also fail to acknowledge that Georgia and the Caucasus are an area where American values and interests converge. Prior to the Russian invasion, Georgia was an emerging democracy, an increasingly vibrant market economy, the third largest contributor of forces to Iraq, a key transit route for trade between Europe and Asia and the only transit route for Caspian energy not controlled by Russia. Russia's invasion was designed to damage or destroy all of these and to give pause to other countries on Russia's borders considering independent foreign and security policies. To this point it has succeeded.

Standing by Georgia at this point will require a significant diplomatic effort backed by robust military and economic assistance and will certainly elicit protests, threats and possibly more from Russia. It will require a focused and nuanced U.S. policy that attempts to hold NATO together on this issue, to reassure Georgia and other countries in the region that we will not permit a re-establishment of a Russian sphere of influence in the region and to offer inclusion in Euro-Atlantic institutions for those who qualify. At the same time, this policy will need to avoid bringing the U.S. into open conflict with Russia, and on this count what is required is a clearly stated goal of rebuilding Georgia backed by resolute action and reassurances to Russia that a rebuilt Georgia—even one in NATO—will not be a threat to Russia in the region. As with the SS-20 issue some 30 years ago, the only way to ensure future security for Georgia is to negotiate from a position of strength.

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