A Green Light for Russia

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Policy missteps by Georgia and its allies in Washington opened the door for Moscow's armed intervention.

Once again the television news is filled with appalling images of bombed-out apartment blocks and distraught civilians in the Caucasus. This is the sixth war in the region since 1990 – and arguably the most senseless and avoidable of the lot. We know by now what modern weapons can do to peaceful cities in a matter of hours. But what we don't know is how to make politicians accountable for their actions.

Western governments appeared to be taken by surprise by the conflict, but there is no excuse for their inattention. Throughout this year, and escalating in recent weeks, a series of incidents highlighted the rising tension between Georgia and the separatist provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The speed with which armored units were deployed shows that both sides had been preparing for war for months. This was not a war that happened by mistake or miscommunication. It was a war that the leaders on both sides wanted.

Ever since taking office in 2004, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has stated that his priority was the restoration of Tbilisi's sovereignty over the breakaway regions of Ajaria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia. Ajaria's separatist regime toppled within months of Saakashvili's accession to office, but the other two regions were intransigent, primarily because of the presence of peacekeeping troops from Russia. On 7 August, Saakashvili appears to have decided that it was time to cut the Gordian knot and launched his troops into an all-out assault on Tskhinvali. He was gambling that a swift victory would present Russia with a fait accompli. It was a reckless error, for which Georgian citizens are now paying the price.

How could Saakashvili imagine that Russia would stand idly by and watch as its peacekeepers were shelled and 30,000 Ossetians (most of them Russian citizens) fled into Russia? Wasn't he listening to his own speeches about Russia as an "evil empire"?

Perhaps Saakashvili was hoping that the new tandem leadership of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and President Dmitry Medvedev would be unable to coordinate a response for a few precious days, especially with Putin four time zones away, in Beijing, attending Olympics ceremonies. Perhaps he was expecting a swift declaration of support from the United States that would deter Russian retaliation.

There is a strange symmetry to the situation. Ossetia and Abkhazia, outnumbered 30 to 1 by Georgia, turned to Russia for help. That caused Georgia, outnumbered 30 to 1 by Russia, to turn to the United States for assistance. But there the symmetry ends. The US is 5,000 miles distant, while Russia is adjacent. Georgia is not of vital national interest for Washington, whereas Russia has already fought two wars (with Chechnya) to defend its

frontier in the Caucasus.

Saakashvili's behavior reminds us of one of the loopholes in the "democratic peace" theory – the idea that democracies do not go to war against other democracies. Democracies, and especially new democracies, are perfectly willing to wage war on non-democracies, especially if they are being given moral and military support by the world's "sole superpower."

ANOTHER U.S. DISASTER

Washington also shares some of the blame, having played a critical role in bringing about the current crisis. The Georgian war can be seen as the latest in a series of U.S. foreign policy disasters: Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and North Korea. The U.S. role in Saakashvili's military buildup has not been highlighted in American commentary on the war. But it has not gone unnoticed in Europe. On 11 August French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner, who traveled to Tbilisi on a peace mission, told French radio that the United States is "in a sense part of the conflict" through its support of Saakashvili.

Georgia has, somewhat improbably, become a U.S. poster child for democratic transition, economic reform, and military partnership. State Department statistics show that Georgia, with 4.5 million people, has received about $830 million in American aid since fiscal year 2002. In 2006 it was the third highest recipient of U.S. aid per capita in the world, garnering $93 per head, behind Iraq ($150) and Armenia ($107) but ahead of Afghanistan ($62) or Israel ($49). The State Department requested $50 million for the promotion of reforms in Georgia for 2008, describing the country as "an anchor for regional stability and prosperity."

This despite the fact that Freedom House had downgraded Georgia's democracy ranking in light of the closure of independent TV stations and a crackdown on opposition protesters in November. Freedom House now ranks the quality of Georgian democracy as lower than it was in 2000, under President Eduard Shevardnadze, who was ousted in the 2003 Rose Revolution. (Freedom House can hardly be accused of an anti-Georgian bias: the author of its latest report on the country, Giorgi (Ghia) Nodia, is now minister of education under Saakashvili.)

Georgia had received a total of $178 million in U.S. military aid through 2006, and perhaps another $30 million since then. (The official Tbilisi defense budget is now $1 billion a year, one-third of government spending.) The first major "train and equip" program was launched in May 2002 (before Saakashvili came to power), as part of Donald Rumsfeld's war on terror, on the grounds that al-Qaeda may have been operating among Chechen refugees in northeastern Georgia's Pankisi Gorge. In 2003, the rationale changed, to that of helping prepare Georgian troops for service in Iraq, where their contingent grew to 2,000 soldiers, the third largest.

The United States arranged for deliveries to Georgia of surplus Soviet-model tanks from Bulgaria and the Czech Republic, and provided five U.S.-built helicopters (and training

for 23 pilots). In 2007 Israel started supplying pilotless drones to Georgia (along with technical advisers). One of them was shot down by a Russian aircraft in April, and on 6 August reports surfaced that Israel was suspending all military cooperation with Georgia, presumably in response to pressure from Moscow.

What are the strategic calculations on the Russian side? As the years passed, Russia showed no interest in withdrawing from the two breakaway regions, which it had occupied under a peacekeeping mandate since the early 1990s. On the other hand, Moscow also did not make any moves to diplomatically recognize the two enclaves, either. It seemed content with the status quo. Though it was unhappy to see the growing Western and especially U.S. economic and military presence in the Caucasus, it was not about to start a war to demonstrate its discontent. One positive sign was that in 2007 Moscow withdrew from the two military bases it was still occupying in Georgia proper, outside the secessionist regions.

TURNING POINT

However, things started to change with Georgia's military occupation of the Kodori Gorge in southeastern Abkhazia in May 2006. The Abkhaz saw this as a violation of the terms of the peace that had been in force since 1994 and cut back on their already minimal willingness to negotiate with Tbilisi. Then came the U.S. decision to recognize Kosovo as a sovereign state earlier this year. Then-President Vladimir Putin said that this might affect Russian policy toward the breakaway regions in the former Soviet Union, and in April he upgraded relations with Abkhazia (while stopping short of diplomatic recognition). So perhaps Saakashvili felt that the chances for a peaceful compromise with the secessionists were receding.

One relevant detail that has passed virtually unnoticed is that on 5 August there was an explosion on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline in eastern Turkey, for which the Kurdish Workers' Party claimed credit. The pipeline, which carries 800,000 barrels of Caspian crude to the Mediterranean each day, or about 1 percent of world exports, will be out of operation for several weeks. The attack, just two days before the outbreak of fighting in Georgia, is presumably a coincidence. But it underlines the risks of using the Caucasus as a transit corridor for European entry, one of the main rationales for the U.S. engagement in Georgia. Curiously, it has had little media attention in the United States.

Western viewers have been ill-served by media coverage of the Ossetian war, in part because of problems of access. Most American reporting has slipped into a familiar narrative of Russian aggression – a return to the Cold War, an empire on the march, etc. (By Sunday, the third day of fighting, the Georgian war had already been ousted as the lead story on CNN – by the death of soul musician Isaac Hayes). European media coverage of the conflict has been more balanced, pointing out that each side shares responsibility for escalating the violence. Still, nearly all the Western news coverage has been coming from Georgian territory – there were no reports or even video from inside South Ossetia on Western screens for the first few days, although Russia did have TV crews in the region.

American diplomats were soon speculating that Russia's goal in pushing its attack beyond Ossetia is to prevent Georgia from joining NATO or even to depose Saakashvili. Certainly, Moscow would be happy to see either of those results. But there are simpler explanations for its aggression.

First, there is the military logic – it wants to destroy the bases, in Gori and Senaki, from which its troops were attacked. Second, as Medvedev stated on the first day of the war, it wants to punish those responsible for attacking Russian troops and citizens. Russia's credibility as a regional power would have been in tatters if it had allowed itself to be kicked out of Ossetia by a surprise attack. For any Russian leader, this is not even a close call, yet this point for some reason is not being made in Western commentary. Was Russia overreacting to the death of 10 of its soldiers? Recall that Israel launched a monthlong invasion of Lebanon in July 2006 after three of its soldiers were killed and two captured by Hezbollah.

One casualty of the conflict seems to be Medvedev himself. He was slow to issue a public statement on the first day of fighting, and when it came it was legalistic in tone, calling for the gathering of evidence to punish those responsible. In contrast Putin was highly visible and clearly in charge. He flew back from Beijing and showed up in Vladikavkaz, Russia, on the afternoon of 9 August, meeting generals and refugees and fuming about "genocide." The notion of a Medvedev "thaw," a possible liberal counter-offensive against the powerful *siloviki*, looks increasingly hollow.

The implications of all this for U.S.-Russian relations are dire. Russia is taking the Georgian action – and American reaction – as proof that Washington does not want Moscow as a partner. It is now much more likely that Russia will move ahead to formally annex Abkhazia and South Ossetia, irrespective of the international reaction, along the lines of the Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus. On 9 August Putin said, "It is difficult to imagine how, after all that happened and is still going on, one can persuade South Ossetia to become part of the Georgian state."

He went on to state, according to Vesti TV, that "Russia has been playing a positive, stabilizing role in this part of the world, in the Caucasus as a whole, for centuries. It has been a guarantor of security, cooperation, and progress in this region. This is how it was in the past and this is how it is going to be in future. Let nobody doubt this."