

Georgian and Ukrainian Conflicts: The Limitations of NATO

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THIS ESSAY IS BEING WRITTEN at a time of unusual opportunity for the world community. President Barack Obama has been sworn in as the 44th president of the United States on a platform of “change you can believe in.” This administration is signaling that it may place on hold plans to install an anti-missile defense system in two former Warsaw Pact countries—Poland and the Czech Republic. Russia is responding by signaling that it will shelve plans to place missiles in its Kaliningrad exclave, the former Prussian/German region once known as Königsberg, situated between Poland and Lithuania.¹

It is time to right a relationship that has gone woefully off track. Differences over Russia’s domestic policies must not obscure the fact that confrontation between Russia and the United States is not in the strategic interests of either party. Moreover, U.S. policy toward Russia is somewhat hypocritical. China is far less democratic than Russia, yet that has not kept the United States from cultivating a generally cooperative relationship with it. The United States exercises a great deal of prudence in dealing with Chinese sensibilities about areas on its periphery, such as Tibet and Taiwan. However, until now, the United States has shown no such caution in addressing Russian concerns about intrusions into its periphery, notably in the Caucasus and Ukraine. Why the double standard? And what conceivable strategic benefit can we derive by humiliating what is, after all, still the only other major nuclear power?

Far from marginalizing Russia by aggressively wrapping NATO around its borders, we should be drawing it into a natural partnership with the European Union. Russia is already a member of the Council of Europe, a larger body encompassing the entire European continent with the exception of the neo-Soviet enclave of Belarus. It has ratified the European Convention on Human Rights and subjected itself to the compulsory jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights in Strasbourg. The

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European Union depends on Russia for natural gas. There is plenty of room for constructive engagement that could gradually Europeanize the Russian Federation and offer incalculable strategic advantages to the European Union and the United States alike, while supporting democratic reform and human rights within Russia.

We need to recognize that NATO has outlived its usefulness, unless it extends full membership to the Russian Federation. Since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, NATO has been an organization in search of a clear purpose. It has played a useful role countering ethnic abuses in the former Yugoslavia. It is now involved in an effort to deny Islamic terrorists a safe haven in Afghanistan, an effort that has bogged down as the mission has widened into *de facto* support of a corrupt and unpopular government. But an even greater danger is that, in spite of the disappearance of the Soviet threat to Western Europe, NATO continues to be on autopilot as it fills the vacuum by expanding relentlessly toward the Russian border. Former Soviet republics like Georgia and Ukraine are, at best, of modest strategic importance to the United States and the European Union. They also have serious internal problems and leaders with pronounced animosities toward Russia.

Extending membership to Georgia and Ukraine without extending it to Russia needlessly involves us in those internal and regional quarrels and sends a clear message of threat and exclusion to Moscow. We should not be surprised that the Kremlin responds to such actions by resurrecting a defensive military nationalism. We have only to consider our concerns about the former Soviet presence in Cuba to understand what the Russians are feeling.

Why this bipartisan blindness in Washington to what should be fairly obvious strategic truths? Inaccurate perceptions about the internal politics of Georgia and Ukraine, and about ethnic conflicts held over from Tsarist and Soviet Russia, have played a role. So have overly facile characterizations of Russia as the primary aggressor and bully in regional conflicts, and Georgia and Ukraine as shining exemplars of moderation, democracy, and respect for human rights.

THE GEORGIAN FAIRYTALE

Let us first consider Georgia. When Russian forces poured into Georgia last summer in response to the Georgian invasion of South Ossetia, the bipartisan consensus in the United States was that a brutal and authoritarian bully was overpowering a tiny pro-U.S. democracy that was merely trying to secure its territorial integrity. This became a fairytale with a clear hero, a clear villain, and a not-so-happy ending. But the fairytale bears little resemblance to reality.

In the first place, there has never been any territorial integrity for the State of

Georgia as it presently appears on official maps. Its international boundaries are accidents resulting from previous administrative boundaries within the Soviet Union and Tsarist Russia. Neither the region of Abkhazia nor South Ossetia has ever been effectively incorporated into an independent Georgia. Ethnic differences, combined with local resentment of treatment by the majority ethnic Georgians, have made such consolidation unattainable.

In December 1990, shortly before declaring independence from the Soviet Union, Georgia's nationalist president Zviad Gamsakhurdia abolished the South Ossetian Oblast (autonomous region) that had previously existed there.² In February 1992, the Georgian government ended autonomy for the Abkhazian Oblast. Inhabitants of both regions responded with armed revolts against the Georgian government, regaining autonomy through *de facto* secessions.

That South Ossetia subsequently turned to Moscow for support is hardly surprising, given that North Ossetia is in the Russian Federation.

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Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia were ruled from Moscow and St. Petersburg from 1801 onward, with some measure of autonomy. Georgia's only other recent period of independence was a brief interlude of chaos after the 1917 Russian Revolution, as Red and White armies fought a civil war that was ultimately won by the Bolsheviks with support from the South Ossetians.³ So, even during this tumultuous period, the Georgians never established control over Abkhazia or South Ossetia. It is no wonder, then, that the common Russian refrain calls for the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. According to Russian political analyst Vyacheslav Nikonov:

Abkhazians and Ossetians lived in their territories for many centuries. They acceded to Russia earlier than Georgia. They only belong to Georgia because Joseph Stalin, himself a Georgian, wanted it that way. When the Soviet Union collapsed and Georgia sought independence, both Abkhazia and South Ossetia should have become autonomous according to legally authorized referenda. Instead, Georgia suppressed sovereignty and started a war in which thousands died.⁴

The second element of the fairytale concerns Georgian democracy. In part, this perception arises because Georgian President Mikheil Saak'ashvili is a strong supporter of the United States, and his U.S. education and fluency in English have helped him garner good press and excellent relations with Democrats and Republicans alike in Washington. But Saak'ashvili's democratic credentials are no better than those of Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. Both regimes have a checkered record of observing human rights, and both have repressed peaceful political opposition. Here is how the *New York Times* described his government's repression of the independent media and nonviolent

protestors in November 2007:

The cameras at Georgia's main opposition broadcaster, Imedi, kept rolling on 7 November, when masked riot police officers with machine guns burst into the studio. They smashed equipment, ordered employees and television guests to lie on the floor and confiscated their cellphones. A news anchor remained on-screen throughout, describing the mayhem. Then all went black.⁵

The pretext for the raid—which silenced the channel—was a government claim that Imedi was fomenting unrest when it broadcast a statement by one of its founders, Badri Patarkatsishvili, promising to topple the government of President Mikheil Saak'ashvili. Earlier that day, riot police officers lashed out with clubs and fired rubber bullets at unarmed antigovernment protesters. A nine-day state of emergency followed. According to Georgia's independent human rights ombudsman, Sozar Subari, who is appointed by the parliament:

That Georgia is on the road to democracy and has a free press is the main myth... that the West has believed in. We have some of the best freedom-of-expression laws in the world, but in practice, the government is so afraid of criticism that it has felt compelled to raid media offices and to intimidate journalists and bash their equipment.⁶

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The third element of the fairytale was an image of resurgent Russian expansionism, a brutal throwback to the invasions of Hungary and Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union. There are three fatal weaknesses to this argument.

First, Georgia initiated the conflict by invading South Ossetia. The temptation proved too much for President Saak'ashvili to ignore. The breakaway region's capital, Tskhinvali, is located in a valley on the Georgian border that is ringed by Georgian-held villages at higher elevations. It promised to be a quick and easy military campaign and it would have been had the Russians not intervened. According to Human Rights Watch:

After months of escalating tensions between Russia and Georgia and following skirmishes between Georgian and South Ossetian forces, on 7 August 2008, Georgian forces launched an artillery assault on Tskhinvali, South Ossetia's capital, and outlying villages. Assaults by Georgian ground and air forces followed. Russia's military response began the next day, with the declared purpose of protecting Russian peacekeepers stationed in South Ossetia and residents who had become Russian citizens in recent years. Beginning on 8 August, Russian ground forces from the 58th Army crossed into South Ossetia and Russian artillery and aircraft hit targets in South Ossetia and undisputed Georgian territory.⁷

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President Saak'ashvili's claim that Georgian forces responded only in self-defense has since been contradicted by independent observers from Poland, Finland, and Belarus posted in the region by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).⁸

Second, the U.S.-trained and armed Georgian forces were responsible for serious human rights violations in South Ossetia, just as were Russian forces and their South Ossetian militia allies. According to Human Rights Watch:

In a number of instances Georgian forces used indiscriminate and disproportionate force in artillery assaults on South Ossetia, and in some cases used disproportionate force in their ground assault. The majority of these instances derived from Georgia's use of multiple rocket launching systems, which cannot distinguish between civilian and military objects, in areas populated by civilians. Many civilians were killed or wounded...Cluster munitions were used by Russian and Georgian forces, causing civilian deaths and putting more civilians at risk by leaving behind unstable "minefields" of unexploded bomblets.⁹

And although Russian claims of civilian casualties were greatly exaggerated, Amnesty International stated:

Eyewitness reports, the nature of the munitions used and the evidence of scattered destruction in densely populated civilian areas strongly suggest that Georgian forces committed indiscriminate attacks in its assault on Tskhinvali on the night of 7 August, causing deaths and injuries among South Ossetian civilians and considerable damage to civilian objects.¹⁰

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Third, Russia had said all along that its counter-invasion of Georgia was intended to punish the Georgian government for its invasion of South Ossetia, not to overturn it and install a puppet regime. Granted, Russia took its time to withdraw, but it did eventually withdraw from undisputed Georgian territory by 10 October. Its only insistence has been that Georgia respect the right of South Ossetians and Abkhazians to self-determination.

THE UKRAINIAN FAIRYTALE

Unlike the Georgian fairytale, the Ukrainian one is at least built on a core of truth. Someone tried to kill Viktor Yushchenko in a particularly brutal way after he decided to run for president in 2004. Laboratory tests conducted in Vienna found levels of dioxin in his blood more than a thousand times above normal and suffered grotesque disfiguration to his face.¹¹ The villains cannot be known with certainty, but the prime suspects are ethnic Russian opponents in Ukraine or their allies in the Kremlin. Despite

this heinous crime, Yushchenko went on to lead a peaceful movement that overcame electoral fraud in the much-heralded “Orange Revolution.” Yushchenko has been president ever since—but that is where the real fairytale ends. Ukrainians have not “lived happily ever after.” And that is because in other respects, the Ukrainian predicament is not all that dissimilar from the Georgian one.

To begin with, the present boundaries of the Ukraine do not correspond with ethnic boundaries. Western Ukraine is predominantly ethnic Ukrainian. Eastern Ukraine, including the Crimea, is predominantly ethnic Russian.

Like Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the Crimea was administered as an autonomous region within the Soviet Union. The Crimean Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic was originally part of Russia, but it was transferred to Ukraine by Nikita Khrushchev in 1954 as a “gift,” celebrating three centuries of Russian-Ukrainian unity. At the time, there was no thought of any future dissolution of the Soviet Union, so the allocation between “Soviet Socialist Republics” seemed a trivial matter given that all such entities were then run from Moscow. Yet, the then-unthinkable came to pass as the Soviet Union came unglued in 1991. Though the new Russian parliament denounced the 1954 transfer as “an illegal act” of the Communist Party, Crimea did in fact get transferred to the newly formed Ukrainian Republic.¹²

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Though the Ukraine has a more open and pluralistic democracy than Georgia, the truth about the country’s major political parties is that they are rooted in ethnicity. President Yushchenko’s Our Ukraine has its political base in western Ukraine; Viktor Yanukovich’s Party of Regions has its base in the ethnic Russian east. The former wants to bring the Ukraine into NATO; the latter is implacably opposed. In the Crimea, opposition politicians go so far as to threaten to break away from the Ukraine if it joins NATO.¹³

Making matters worse, the coalition that engendered the “Orange Revolution” has since splintered. There are many reasons for the split, including personal rivalries and signs of corruption in the Yushchenko administration. Another reason is that not all ethnic Ukrainians are hostile to Russia. As noted by a British observer:

The history of the relationship between Russia and Ukraine is at least as tangled and interwoven, culturally, politically and religiously, as that between England and Scotland. You only have to take a closer look at what Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a hero of the west, said about Ukraine to realise that our zero-sum calculations do not stack up. He called for a slavic revival based on Russian orthodoxy. Solzhenitsyn fought both the Soviet Union and Ukrainian independence—and what’s interesting about Solzhenitsyn is that he has Ukrainian parentage.¹⁴

Another source of division has been Yushchenko’s imprudent effort to drive a divided nation firmly into alliance with other former Soviet territories and client states

in open confrontation with Russia. Besides applying for membership in NATO, Yushchenko sided with Georgia in its war with Russia and quarreled with Russia over natural gas pricing, triggering disruptions in the supply of gas to the European Union.

Prime Minister Yulia Tymoshenko, his former Orange Revolution ally, has opposed these actions as irresponsible. While Yushchenko flew to Tbilisi to stand by Georgian President Saak'ashvili days after the latter invaded South Ossetia, Tymoshenko declined to take sides. Other opposition legislators have complained that Yushchenko covertly supplied Georgia with weapons before and after the war and sold tanks and anti-aircraft systems at discounted prices. According to the *New York Times*:

The opposition lawmakers...say the government secretly sent the arms, bypassing disclosure rules in order to avoid antagonizing Russia. They also say that some of the proceeds of the sales have gone not to the Treasury, but to people in Mr. Yushchenko's circle, even as Ukraine's military is in dire need of funding.

In 2007, Ukraine sold Georgia 74 T-72 tanks, some armored combat vehicles, a BUK M1 surface-to-air missile system, [and] two 2S7 self-propelled artillery guns, among other weapons, according to the United Nations Register of Conventional Arms.¹⁵

Whereas the country is deeply split over joining NATO, there is no such division over expanding ties with the European Union. Both sides can appreciate the advantages of linkage with an economic bloc that has brought prosperity to previously poor and marginal European countries, including Spain and Ireland. In an op-ed published in the *Washington Post*, Viktor Yanukovich wrote:

With the European Union, we are working on an action plan of reforms under the auspices of the European Neighborhood Policy, which we hope will lead to the beginning of negotiations on an EU-Ukraine free-trade agreement...As our relations with NATO have been a source of some confusion, let me be clear...when an invitation is extended, we will hold a referendum in which the Ukrainian people can make their choice. Whatever happens in this regard, however, there should be no doubting our nation's European direction.¹⁶

ADVANTAGES OF RUSSIA'S INCORPORATION INTO NATO

Russia inflicted serious punishment on Georgia. In the words of human rights ombudsman Sozar Subari:

What is the future for Saak'ashvili? He started the war, he lost the war, he lost the territories...If there is no change, he will leave Georgia as the president who lost everything.¹⁷

Unfortunately, President Saak'ashvili appears to have learned nothing from the experience. According to the International Crisis Group:

The government has vowed to rebuild and strengthen its military capabilities to repel any future Russian attack. Saak'ashvili's government has evidently not started questioning its militarisation strategy, begun in 2004, even though the August 2008 developments clearly showed Georgia's inability to repulse a Russian advance even after four years of exponential military budget increases and training programs.¹⁸

Under President Saak'ashvili, the Georgian defense budget grew from \$30 million in 2003 to more than \$750 million in 2008. The United States under President George W. Bush assisted the military buildup in large measure because Saak'ashvili offered to commit Georgian troops to the unpopular U.S. war in Iraq.¹⁹

Saak'ashvili persists in saying he intends to use his military buildup to plant the Georgian flag on the two rebellious regions. "It will stay the same," he stated right after the country's decisive defeat, "now as ever."²⁰

In this context, bipartisan support in Washington for Georgian membership in NATO is highly irresponsible. Under Article 5 of the treaty that established NATO, an attack on any member country is considered an attack on all NATO members. U.S. military experts have shown a much better grasp of the strategic significance of this fact than have U.S. politicians. Concerning expansion of NATO toward the Russian frontier, retired U.S. Air Force four-star General Charles Wald, who was deputy commander of U.S. forces in Europe during the period in question, explains: "The attitude was, the more the merrier. NATO didn't really look at the Article 5 part of it."²¹

In other words, NATO membership for Georgia could potentially entangle the United States in an unwanted military confrontation with the world's second greatest nuclear power, all because the reckless leader of a country of negligible strategic importance is determined to impose rule by force over two regions that have never previously been governed from Tbilisi and that have valid reasons to fear such rule.

Russia, on the other hand, is of key strategic significance to both the United States and the European Union. Much of Europe depends on Russian natural gas to keep its population heated in winter. For better or worse, Russia continues to maintain a nuclear arsenal second only to the United States.

Russian support in Central Asia is vital to NATO efforts to confront the threat of Islamist extremism in Afghanistan and Pakistan. We will also need the Kremlin's support to address global warming. Recent studies have emphasized that anticipated climate changes resulting from unchecked emissions of greenhouse gasses will have dire effects on national security. It takes no genius to recognize that having Russia as a strategic partner is of incomparably greater value than turning it into an adversary.

Yet, the potential costs of continuing to exclude or marginalize Russia are daunting. We are now in the midst of the worst global economic crisis since the Great Depression. Have we forgotten the lesson of that debacle? At the conclusion of the First World War, Germany was humiliated by the Treaty of Versailles, which left a once-proud country defenseless and saddled with onerous economic reparations. But it was the ensuing global depression that triggered the rise to power of a lunatic fringe that promised to avenge the humiliation. The outcome was global war on a scale never before seen.

Following the defeat of Germany and Japan in the Second World War, the United States wisely applied lessons learned from the failure to build lasting peace after the First World War. It responded generously with the Marshall Plan and other arrangements that quickly rebuilt the economies of the defeated powers and converted them into modern democracies. And it guaranteed West Germany's security by incorporating it into NATO.

That lesson was forgotten after the dissolution of the Soviet Union and end of the Cold War. Perhaps because the Soviet Union was not defeated militarily, and because the Russian Federation inherited its mantle, Washington has been less than gracious toward Moscow.

Rather than engaging Russia as a new European ally in joint security arrangements, the United States has tightened the NATO noose around its frontier as though the Cold War had never ended. Russians are as sensitive to this as Germans were to the humiliation of Versailles.

Rather than offering serious economic assistance, the United States simply told Russia to embrace "capitalism," which in practice meant an extreme form of crony capitalism based on natural resource extraction and rampant corruption. Moscow today is a blend of New York in the worst days of robber baron capitalism and Chicago in the era of Al Capone.

FOR A EUROPEAN UNION AND A NATO THAT ENCOMPASSES ALL OF EUROPE

The change of administration in Washington offers a golden opportunity to correct both of these policy mistakes. One is to recognize that a NATO without Russia no longer makes any sense. Unless Russia is invited to join the North Atlantic alliance, the former Soviet dominions and client states that have been allowed to join will continue to visualize NATO as a bulwark against Russia. Article 5 of the NATO treaty makes that sheer folly.

Russia is also in need of economic assistance. The United States has limited options here at a time when it is investing massively in itself to fend off economic chaos. Though similarly challenged, the European Union is in a better position to offer meaningful

help. It can do this by forging closer economic ties as a prelude toward possible Russian membership in the European Union. As far-fetched as that may sound at present, it is arguably less so than Turkish membership. Most Russians are Europeans, unlike most Turks. Only a tiny portion of Turkey is on the European side of the Bosphorus, whereas all of the Russian Federation other than the sparsely populated wilds of Siberia lies within the European land mass. Part of what is frightening to Europeans is that admission of Turkey would make it the largest nation in the European Union. Russian membership could help assuage such fears, since Russia is considerably larger than Turkey.

Ukraine, Belarus, Georgia, and the other Caucasus countries should likewise be offered the prospect of eventual EU membership. In all cases—Russia included—such membership must be conditioned on pluralistic democracy, respect for human rights, and firm measures to combat corruption.

The rudiments of such an arrangement are already in place. With the exception of Belarus, all of these countries are already members of the Council of Europe. All except Belarus have ratified the European Convention on Human Rights and consented to the compulsory jurisdiction of the European Court of Human Rights. That means all have agreed to the fundamental political principles that underlie modern European democracy. All previous accessions to the European Union originated with membership in the Council of Europe.

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In the longer term, Europe and North America, the two regional partners in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, are headed for relative decline as China, India, Brazil, and other regions gain economic and strategic weight. Russia is facing the same demographic challenges as the rest of Europe. The only way for Europe and its North American partners to continue to maintain global influence is if they unite. Russia can offer its wealth of natural resources and its considerable military clout to this partnership; the European Union can offer Russia a more diversified economic base with guaranteed markets. The United States can offer Russia membership in NATO, thereby putting to rest Russian fears of encirclement by a hostile alliance. Both of these steps will enable Russia to reassign funds from military to civilian pursuits, and resume its oft-postponed evolution into a European style democracy. And that, after all, would be the best of all outcomes for the Caucasus, Belarus, and the Ukraine. 

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