

A Message from Moscow: Russian Power and the Conflict with Georgia

Written by Lincoln Mitchell

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LINCOLN MITCHELL, AUG 13 2008

The ongoing conflict in the South Caucasus is far more than just another example of ethnic strife in the region, Russian aggression or the last stages of the unraveling of the Soviet Union. Wrapped up in this conflict are many of the major issues which have defined international politics in that part of the world for a decade and which will likely continue to define those politics for at least another decade. These include the struggle for influence between Russia and the US, energy, democracy and democracy promotion, sovereignty of small countries and resolving frozen conflicts. While the whole world may be watching the Beijing Olympics and American audiences are waiting to see who Obama and McCain will choose as their running mates, and whether or not John Edwards really did father a love child, perhaps we should be paying a little more attention to Georgia, Russia and South Ossetia.

To understand this conflict, perhaps war is a better term, as a struggle over South Ossetia is a big mistake. This is a conflict between Russia and Georgia. More accurately it is a one-sided war between Russia and Georgia with Russia dominating Georgian airspace, bombing that country as it likes and sending its army deep into Georgian territory. In doing this, Russia is achieving a number of important goals. First, it will likely weaken, if not altogether destroy, the current Georgian state and its government. Second, it will send a very clear message to western powers, particularly the US, that Russia is back and is the major force in that part of the world. Third, other small countries around the Soviet Union will see both the potential cost of standing up to Russia and the willingness or ability of the west to support its friends in the face of this.

Since the early days of Saakashvili's government when the new Georgian president made it clear that he saw Georgia's future as linked to that of Europe and the US, tensions between Russia and Georgia have increased. It should also be noted, that President Saakashvili, emboldened by the easy return of Ajara, a breakaway region in southwestern Georgia, to Georgian sovereignty in 2004, elevated his rhetoric and actions with regards to the frozen conflicts. However, the strife between Georgia and Russia was never entirely, or even primarily, about Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It was about Georgia.

Georgia's aggressively pro-west orientation, support for the US on foreign policy and efforts to build a state independent of Russian influence created discomfort for Russia. This discomfort was bolstered by concerns of Russia being encircled by pro-western, or even NATO, countries, economic and energy considerations, and Saakashvili's bravado and personal style which seemed designed to infuriate Vladimir Putin. This, of course, coincided with Russia's booming economy and return to a leading role on the world stage as well as its growing suspicions of the US and the west and Eurasia. These circumstances put Georgia and Russia on a collision course.

The result of this collision is that the social and physical infrastructure has been set back in Georgia. South Ossetia and Abkhazia seem even less likely to be restored to Georgia than previously and Georgians have received a strong reminder about both the costs of running afoul of their northern neighbor and the real ability and willingness of the west, particularly the US, to help them.

While Russia has successfully weakened and destabilized Georgia, this is only a secondary goal. Russia accomplished something far more important this week. It sent two very clear messages to many of the countries of

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its “near abroad.” The people of countries like Poland, Ukraine and the Baltic states have watched this reassertion of Russian power very closely. They have received a reminder from Russia that it is back and will begin to play a larger role in many of these countries. This is not viewed as a welcome development by the Eastern Europeans.

The second, and more troubling, piece of this message which Russia has sent to its near abroad is that the western powers including NATO, the US and the EU are either unwilling or unable to do anything about this. Georgia, more than almost any other country in the region, linked its security to its close relationship to the US, but while the US was Georgia’s closest ally, the reverse was never true. Nonetheless, one of the lessons other countries in the region are taking away from this conflict is yet another reminder of the limits of American power.

This conflict is one more demonstration that the post-Cold War era, where the US was the world’s hyperpower, has ended. This conflict also dashes, for those who had not yet figured this out, one of the key assumptions of the post-Cold War era, that Russia is an essentially cooperative partner with few aspirations different from those of the west more generally. Determining what the future relationship between Russia and the west can be is one of the major longer term challenges raised by this conflict, but to do that we must also begin to more seriously consider Russia’s way of seeing things and their interests in the region. We do not have to agree with these views, but it will be impossible for the west to act constructively in the region without doing this.

Western, and particularly US, policy towards the Eurasia region has not so much challenged Russia’s position but refused to recognize it. Supporting fledgling democracies, expanding the protective umbrella of NATO to post-Communist countries, even expanding the borders of the EU, all seem, to western most eyes, like benevolent goals aimed at uplifting and strengthening countries ranging from Lithuania to Ukraine and, yes, to Georgia. Yet these goals were too often accompanied by an almost naïve attitude that nobody could disagree with the goals or methods. For Russia all of these efforts were viewed as efforts to encircle and threaten their humbled country. In the last decade Russia has begun to feel significantly less humbled, but no less threatened.

Last week, Georgia became the first country to pay the price for this. Making sure it is the last will require a cooperative effort of Europe and the US that, while remaining strong in the face of Russian aggression, recognizes that for better, or more likely for worse, Russia again has a big seat at the Eurasian, and European, table.

Lincoln Mitchell is the *Arnold A. Saltzman Assistant Professor in the Practice of International Politics at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs. He has worked on political development throughout the former Soviet Union and written extensively on Georgia. He is author of the forthcoming book, ‘Uncertain Democracy: U.S. Foreign Policy and Georgia’s Rose Revolution’.*