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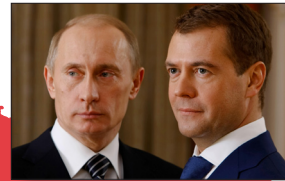


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A Realistic Policy Agenda for the Obama Administration

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CHAPTER 4

The Caucasus and the Obama Administration's Foreign Policy

Svante E. Cornell, Ph.D.

Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008 was a watershed event for several reasons. Foremost, it constituted a direct challenge to the very norms upon which European security is built, because it suggested that military aggression by one member of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the Council of Europe against another member could become a reality. The clearly premeditated character of Russia's invasion made matters worse.

Much media attention has focused on the Georgian leadership's decision to intervene militarily on August 7 against South Ossetian separatists, but there is little question that this was a response—possibly ill-conceived—to the growing military provocations by Russian-controlled South Ossetian proxies and the mounting Russian mobilization of troops and armor both on Georgia's borders and inside South Ossetia. Substantial evidence indicates that Moscow had been planning for a military adventure in Georgia for months if not years, and the final decision was likely made in spring 2008. The invasion's premeditated nature is also borne out by Moscow's rapid escalation to full-scale war, especially the entirely unprovoked opening of a second front in Abkhazia and deployment of more than 4,000 troops by sea within 48 hours of the beginning of hostilities.

Russia's invasion of Georgia fulfilled a broader purpose: to ensure the restoration of an exclusive Russian sphere of influence, specifically in the South Caucasus and more broadly in the former Soviet states. This entails most serious implications for U.S. national security interests and compels the Obama Administration to increase the attention given to the Caucasus in its foreign policy formulation. This is no longer only about Georgia or the South Caucasus, but about American credibility and the limits to Russian aggressive foreign policies.

Moscow's war goals went far beyond South Ossetia and Abkhazia and appear to have included undermining the democratically elected Georgian government—and possibly “regime change.” Russian official spokesmen said as much. Both U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner have alluded to Moscow's goal of overthrowing the democratically elected Georgian government. French official sources even pointed to the Russian leadership's determination to physically eliminate Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. This was prevented mainly by French diplomacy; President George W. Bush's strong statements on August 12; and the heads of state of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine, who traveled to Tbilisi to show solidarity with Georgia.

Moscow's declared foreign policy objective is to divide Europe into spheres of influence, with all former Soviet states reserved for itself as a “zone of privileged influence,” irrespective of the wishes and aspirations of their peoples and leaders. Beyond that, after the Georgia war, Russia began to vociferously demand a revision of security arrangements in Europe, effectively calling for the disbanding of NATO.

Regional Implications

The regional implications of the war are already being felt. Georgia's statehood has been called into question. For a long time, Russia has systematically violated Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Russia may have dealt it a mortal blow by effectively annexing Abkhazia and South Ossetia under the cover of recognizing of their independence. From the vantage point of other former Soviet states, Russia was able to invade and dismember Georgia with little cost being attached to it by the West. Across Eurasia, the assumptions underlying the delicate balance guiding foreign policies of states from Moldova to Tajikistan are being revised, as demonstrated by the decision of the president of Kyrgyzstan to close the U.S.-operated Manas Air Base in Bishkek and to deploy the Collective Security Treaty Organization's Rapid Reaction Force there.

Governments in the region have been driven to several conclusions.

- Russia is both willing and able to use outright military force to accomplish its foreign policy objectives;
- No one, particularly not the West, is willing or able to prevent such behavior;
- The West is therefore not a reliable partner in the issue that matters most to post-Soviet states: independence, security, and sovereignty; and
- Initiating democratic reforms in Russia's backyard is very dangerous.

Indeed, a consensus is emerging among Caucasus watchers that one reason Russia targeted Georgia was its impressive move toward democracy and a pro-American orientation. The Kremlin sought to roll back the democratic revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine because democratic governments are much more difficult to control and manipulate than authoritarian ones and, more important, because it fears that democratic sentiments could spread to Russia from its neighbors, endangering the power of its increasingly insulated and corrupt ruling elite.

The most exposed countries in the aftermath of the Georgia war are perhaps Ukraine and Azerbaijan. Ukraine shares many of Georgia's attributes: democratic reforms and a pro-Western leadership seeking NATO membership. Ukraine is therefore likely to face growing Russian pressure, although that may not mean use of military force. Indeed, Russia used force in Georgia partly because all other options had failed to influence Tbilisi.

Given the divided political spectrum in Ukraine, Moscow has many more levers to use there than it has in Georgia. Russia can be expected to meddle more aggressively in Ukrainian internal affairs, such as interfering in domestic political rivalries and stirring up pro-Russian sentiments in the Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

Azerbaijan has oriented its foreign policy toward the West and is dependent upon transit routes through Georgia for its income from oil and gas. While Baku supported Georgia logistically and in other practical ways during the conflict, the Azerbaijani leadership has kept a very low political profile. Clearly, no one in Baku expects to receive support from the West if it becomes Moscow's next target. Baku is already hedging its bets by increasing oil transits through Russia and Iran, sending a clear message to the West that it is waiting for concrete measures to shore up regional security.

The fallout of the war threatens the West's main achievement in the region during the past decade: the viability of the east-west energy and transportation corridor. While Russia did not conclusively destroy the corridor with its network of pipelines, roads, and railways, it demonstrated its ability to do so at any time by bombing the main east-west bridge across Georgian territory at Kaspı and by leaving behind a mine on the main railroad export route, which blew up a train carrying oil from Azerbaijan to the Black Sea coast. The message to investors and Central Asian governments pondering a western export route was clear: Moscow can hit the transportation infrastructure at will and with impunity.

Implications for U.S. Interests

All of these developments carry momentous implications for American interests. Since the collapse of the USSR, Washington has made the independence, sovereignty, and democratic development of the Soviet successor states a cornerstone of its foreign policy. Russia has now directly challenged all of these goals, demanding a sphere of priv-

ileged influence that implicitly denies these countries meaningful sovereignty while also making true democracy impossible.

However, the implications for U.S. interests go far beyond the South Caucasus. Indeed, no country in the former Soviet Union has received more bipartisan U.S. support than Georgia has. Washington drew up successive and publicly stated red lines for Russian designs on Georgia—red lines that Moscow's tanks sped right across without incurring any tangible cost. This is all the more tragic because this was a preventable war, made possible in part by the Bush Administration's lack of attention to the South Caucasus during its last six months in office. The Charter of U.S.–Georgia Strategic Cooperation therefore becomes a vessel that the Obama Administration will need to fill.

With Russia overtly threatening to retaliate for Kosovo in Georgia and vowing to prevent Georgian NATO membership by all means available, the proverbial writing was on the wall. For months, Georgian leaders warned of Russia's intention to wage war. Yet Washington, mired in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, did not act decisively, stopping like its European partners at declarative measures. A more forceful reaction might have averted this war. Instead, Moscow was allowed to get away with its designs.

What the Administration Should Do

To address the resulting serious consequences for U.S. interests, several measures are in order, some of which are already being considered or being implemented. Specifically, the Obama Administration should:

- **Follow through on U.S. commitments to support Georgia's economy** and gradually rebuild its military forces.
- **Support Membership Action Plans (MAPs) for Georgia and Ukraine at NATO's ministerial meetings.** If European countries such as Germany continue to refuse to grant a MAP to Georgia, the U.S. should use the Strategic Partnership Charter and Partnership for Peace to expand reform activities and training programs with the Georgian and Ukrainian militaries, explicitly stating that this is not an alternative to, but a temporary measure ahead of, NATO membership.
- **Continue to express strong U.S. support for Georgia's territorial integrity,** focusing on attaching costs to Russian annexation policies. Impose targeted sanctions against Russian businesses investing in the two territories without Georgian approval and limit entry visas to South Ossetian and Abkhazian officials.
- **Launch a renewed strategic dialogue with Azerbaijan,** raising this to a higher level and rebuilding trust and support in Baku for its Western foreign policy orientation.
- **Bring about a resolution to the Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh.** This will require appointing a senior diplomat as special U.S. negotiator, reporting directly to the President and the Secretary of State.
- **Rekindle the strategic dialogue with Ankara on the South Caucasus.** This was in place in the early 2000s but languished following the Iraq war and the pursuit of more anti-American policies by the ruling AK Party. Turkey launched its own set of initiatives in August 2008 that include Russia, but not the West, and that keep the U.S. out of the Caucasus. Washington must seek to engage Turkey to ensure that Turkish and American policies in the Caucasus are complementary rather than contradictory.
- **Shore up the energy and transportation corridor through Georgia** to make future projects like the Nabucco gas pipeline a reality. Using lessons learned from supporting the successful Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan Main Export Oil Pipeline of the early 2000s, Washington should cooperate with its European allies in developing diplomatic and security support for the Nabucco pipeline project.

Conclusion

In Russia, the South Caucasus, Eastern Europe, and beyond, the war in Georgia is correctly perceived to be as much directed against the United States as against Georgia. As a result, America's regional and international prestige has taken a significant hit, leading to America's credibility as an ally being questioned not only in the immediate region, but as far away as Israel and Japan. The Obama Administration needs to reverse this dangerous trend.