

The Five-Day War

Managing Moscow After the Georgia Crisis

Charles King

ON AUGUST 8, as world leaders gathered in Beijing to watch the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, Russian tanks rolled across the border into Georgia. The night before, Georgian forces had responded to attacks by secessionists in South Ossetia, an ethnic enclave in northern Georgia, by pummeling civilian areas in the region's capital, Tskhinvali, and seeking to retake the territory by force. Moscow, which had supported the province's secessionist government for more than a decade, retaliated with a full-scale invasion, sending aircraft and armored columns into South Ossetia and targeting key military and transport centers inside Georgia proper. Russia also beefed up its military presence in Abkhazia, another secessionist province, in the northwestern corner of the country. Russian troops had been present in both enclaves as peacekeepers, deployed with Georgia's consent 15 years earlier. When the Georgian attack on South Ossetia killed Russian soldiers and threatened the fragile status quo, Moscow intervened with lightning speed. At first glance, the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008 seemed little more than the stuff of adventure-book fantasy: a reawakened empire going to battle against an old viceroyalty over a mountainous principality of negligible strategic value to either side. But it has had momentous consequences.

The five-day war killed hundreds, left thousands of refugees in temporary shelters, and brought relations between Russia and the

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United States to their lowest point since the dark days of the Cold War. For some of Russia's neighbors, such as Poland and the Baltic states, the war symbolized the return of the old NATO—a traditional alliance providing security guarantees in order to deter external aggression rather than a postmodern club promoting democracy and good governance. For Georgia, the Russian tanks that scarred the lush countryside were an affront to all that had been achieved since the Rose Revolution of 2003, including the creation of passably democratic institutions and the implementation of an unwaveringly pro-U.S. foreign policy. For Russia, the war was a firm rejoinder to a reckless Georgian leadership and a chance to stand up to U.S. influence in Moscow's backyard.

Western journalists were quick to compare the conflict to Leonid Brezhnev's crushing of the Prague Spring or Hitler's invasion of the Sudetenland. But if there is a historical analogy, it is not 1968, much less 1938. An older and more typically Russian pattern is at work. Russia spent the early part of the nineteenth century collaborating with Austria, the United Kingdom, and other allies against Napoleon. In time, however, the Russian tsars came to see the great powers as self-interested and manipulative, and busy either dismantling solid countries or propping up decrepit ones at their whim. Russia eventually traded its partnership with Europe for a wary cynicism, an introverted nationalism, and a belief in raw power as the hallmark of international politics.

Ultimately, it was conflict in another forgotten corner of Eurasia—the Crimean Peninsula—that marked Russia's slide away from Europe and into its own petulant seclusion. During the Crimean War of 1853–56, Russia launched a swift attack on the Ottoman Empire, styling itself as the protector of embattled Orthodox Christians in the Ottoman lands. France and the United Kingdom rushed to the Ottoman sultan's aid and forced the Russian tsar to accept a humiliating peace. Over the past two centuries, this pattern of hopeful cooperation followed by disenchanted withdrawal has repeated itself without fail after every major confrontation between Russia and the West, including the Cold War.

The difference today is that there are plenty of other countries, from China and Venezuela to Iran and Syria, that share Russia's view of the global order. And there are others, such as India and Turkey,

that at least understand it. Russia is not alone in questioning the consistency of the United States' responses to territorial conflicts around the world or the evenhandedness with which the West doles out labels such as "democratic," "terrorist," or "rogue state." For future historians, the South Ossetian crisis will mark a time when Russia came to disregard existing international institutions and began, however haltingly, to fashion its own.

SOSSETIANISTS

SOUTH OSSETIA is about the size of Rhode Island, with fewer than 70,000 inhabitants. During the Soviet era, it enjoyed autonomous status within the Georgian republic. As Georgia distanced itself from Moscow and reclaimed its independence in 1991, South Ossetian leaders sought to achieve their region's own independence from Tbilisi.

In 1991 and early 1992, the Georgian military launched an offensive to stamp out the South Ossetian secessionist movement. The ragtag Georgian army was beaten back by a combination of local fighters, irregulars from the Russian Federation, and stranded ex-Soviet soldiers who found themselves stuck in the middle of someone else's civil war and chose to fight on behalf of the secessionists. In 1993, Georgia went to war again to preserve its territorial integrity—this time seeking to prevent the Abkhazians in the northwest from following the Ossetian example. That conflict also ended in defeat for Tbilisi. As a result, both provinces have remained functionally separate from Georgia for about the past 15 years, with their own parliaments, economies, educational systems, and armies—as well as a powerful narrative of valiant struggle against Georgian tyranny. (In 2004, local fighters once again rebuffed a Georgian attempt to reconquer South Ossetia.)

Almost all the conflicts that raged across the former Soviet Union in the 1990s resembled those in Georgia: clashes over borders and identities inside newly created states. The territorial struggles over the enclaves of Nagorno-Karabakh (in Azerbaijan), Transnistria (in Moldova), and Chechnya, along with the civil war among regional factions in Tajikistan, all centered on basic questions of where to draw the boundaries of new states and which groups—ethnic, territorial, or political—should be dominant within them.



But each war also had an international dimension. In 1992 and 1993, former Soviet military units fell under Russian command, and local military commanders took matters into their own hands, ordering troops to leave their barracks in Georgia and Moldova and support the secessionists. When the fighting stopped, Russian troops remained in place as peacekeepers under the terms of cease-fires negotiated by the warring parties. Since then, Russia has helped cement the *de facto* independence of places such as Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria. The Russian security services operate freely within these enclaves, and Moscow has awarded Russian citizenship to many of their inhabitants. For more than a decade, international negotiators tried to hammer out agreements on reintegration, but interest in these so-called frozen conflicts remained minimal. The territorial woes of post-Soviet Eurasia did not raise eyebrows, except among a small set of midlevel policy specialists inside government and in academia. The region's unrecognized republics were places the world could conveniently ignore so long as no one was being killed to defeat or defend them.

The war in August changed all this. U.S. and European leaders immediately condemned Moscow for flouting established borders. Tired Cold War metaphors—of containing the bear before the next domino fell—reappeared with startling rapidity. The Western press painted President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin as leaders of a rogue government scheming to roll back democracy

and monopolize oil and gas networks across Eurasia. But Russia's intervention was really an expression of its longer-term commitment to maintaining the influence Moscow had secured throughout the Caucasus in the early 1990s and protecting the region's unrecognized regimes. Russia's previous interventions in its post-Soviet neighborhood were grass-roots affairs; local military commanders stepped in between warring parties and put a swift halt to the fighting. This time, however, Russia's military engagement evolved into something very different: an attempt to bypass established channels of conflict resolution and unilaterally change the boundaries of another UN member state.

Russia made this goal clear by formally recognizing the two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on August 26. But it is now playing a dangerous game. Moscow's efforts to secure unambiguous support for its Georgian gambit, especially at a summit of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization in late August, have borne little fruit. An independent Abkhazia and South Ossetia will remain a laughable proposition if Moscow, Managua, and Minsk are the only foreign capitals that acknowledge their existence, as they are now. And in the long run, Russia's precipitous recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia could backfire. If the two provinces gain even a modicum of true independence from Moscow, their mere existence will set a powerful precedent for regions within Russia itself. If South Ossetia can be independent, why not Russia's own North Ossetia, whose inhabitants are connected by ties of ethnicity and history to the majority population in South Ossetia? If the mountaineers of Abkhazia are entitled to their own country, why not their ethnic cousins, the Circassians, who inhabit the fertile plains just to the north? In taking a sizable bite out of Georgia, Russia may find that it has handed a gift to independence-minded groups on its own slope of the Caucasus mountain range. Through its wars in Chechnya, Russia has twice demonstrated that it has zero tolerance for secession north of the mountains, but it has now fueled, rather than foiled, territorial change in the south.

FIVE DAYS THAT SHOOK THE WORLD

AFTER THE guns of August 2008 fell silent, it was clear that Abkhazia and South Ossetia would never return to full Georgian control. The two enclaves are still protected by Russian soldiers, who have demonstrated

their ability and willingness to send the U.S.-trained Georgian army running. The enclaves' inhabitants have no desire to rejoin a country they all but seceded from more than a decade ago, one that they have long perceived as an aggressor that can only be deterred by Russian security guarantees. Given that Georgia has tried to retake South Ossetia by force on three occasions—in 1991–92, 2004, and 2008—that is not an unreasonable position. Creative solutions that might once have been possible, such as establishing shared sovereignty between Georgia and Russia (similar to the arrangement in Andorra, which counts the French president and a Spanish bishop as its heads of state), setting up an international protectorate over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or granting them “free state” status, will now be difficult to achieve. The Abkhazians and the South Ossetians have obtained what they wanted all along—international recognition—and they will be loath to give up that status. In ordering his ill-prepared army into an ill-planned *reconquista*, Saakashvili guaranteed that the Georgian flag would never again fly over nearly a fifth of the territory his country still claims as its own.

Ultimately, it is not the dismemberment of Georgia that should worry Western leaders the most. After all, the international system has managed to absorb a bevy of new states from the old communist lands, from the well governed and aspirationally European to the Mafia-led and barely functional. Abkhazia and South Ossetia—together home to fewer than 200,000 people—may take the politics of microstatehood to an absurd extreme. But some special status for these enclaves is not a ridiculous proposition, especially after the independence of Kosovo. Indeed, the West's sanctimonious rhetoric about the inviolability of borders rings hollow when one considers that Kosovo has not even been recognized by all of the EU or NATO countries.

The true significance of the latest crisis in the Caucasus is that Russia has embarked on a new era of muscular intervention, showing little faith in multilateral institutions, such as the UN Security Council or the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, in which it exerts considerable influence. This distrust reveals something important about

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Russian leaders' view of global politics in general: Russian leaders believe that the existing multilateral institutions are unsubtle fronts for promoting the naked interests of the United States and its major European allies. An emboldened and mistrustful Russia has made the future of NATO uncertain and left the United States and its allies divided over Moscow's role in the world. If anything, the August war laid bare the United States' inability to deter friends from behaving like fools and revealed Russia's proclivity to see hard power as the true currency of international relations.

PROPAGANDA WARS

BY NOT bothering to seek international support and then making no apologies for its unilateral attack on Georgia, Moscow distinguished this war from previous cases in which outside powers have meddled in the Soviet Union's old sphere of influence. NATO's 1999 intervention in Kosovo was far more violent than Russia's foray into Georgia. Seventy-eight days of aerial bombing destroyed every major bridge on Serbia's stretch of the Danube River, disabled the national electrical grid, and gutted buildings in downtown Belgrade (including, by mistake, the Chinese embassy). Yet as destructive as it was, the Kosovo operation was undertaken by a coalition of Western governments. It was preceded by weeks of intense talks aimed at forestalling violence. And it was followed by a UN peacekeeping mission—with Russian participation—and a broad-based effort to build an effective and democratic government on the ground. Kosovo managed to garner recognition from nearly 50 UN member states within six months of declaring its independence last February.

Moscow's adventure in the Caucasus was completely different. Russia ordered a military operation against a neighboring state without first securing international support or even developing a public relations strategy. In the ensuing war, Georgia dominated on the PR front. Within hours of the Russian intervention, the Georgian government began sending hourly e-mail updates to foreign journalists. The English-speaking, Columbia University-educated Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, appeared live on CNN. In subsequent interviews and speeches, he hit every major talking point meaningful to Western audiences, including claims of ethnic cleansing and genocide—and the bizarre allegation that Russia was plotting to start forest fires.

Meanwhile, his government stage-managed rallies featuring EU flags and called for Europe to rescue the embattled democracy.

By contrast, Russia's public relations effort was feeble. Images of hapless Ossetian refugees clogged Russian television screens, but Moscow made few attempts (beyond awkward press briefings by a uniformed general and a benefit concert in the bombed-out ruins of Tskhinvali) to impress its version of events on the international media. Soon, however, the real story of the five-day war began to seem more complicated than earlier Western reports had alleged. Russia implemented a cease-fire agreement brokered by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, and within a month of the intervention, most Russian troops had withdrawn to positions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Some of Georgia's assertions—especially the claim that the Russian attack had preceded Georgia's shelling of civilians in South Ossetia—were shown to be highly questionable. And European countries that had initially joined the United States in promising sanctions against Russia welcomed Moscow's willingness to defuse a situation that might damage the EU-Russian relationship.

Even as many Americans and Europeans remained skeptical of Russian accounts of the war, the intervention in Georgia was wildly popular in Russia. According to an opinion poll conducted by the respected Moscow-based Levada Center, almost 80 percent of the Russian respondents approved of it. Over half blamed Georgia for initiating the conflict and identified the United States' desire for influence in the Caucasus and the greater Black Sea region as the root cause. Naturally, the Abkhazians and the South Ossetians welcomed Russian soldiers as a shield against Georgian aggression. In the North Caucasus—a Russian region that has seen its share of secessionists and radical political movements, most notably in Chechnya—the war was viewed as an effort to rescue native Caucasian brethren from Georgian overlordship. Internet forums organized by North Caucasian diasporas, including Chechens abroad, hailed the creation of an independent Abkhaz homeland. Ironically, Chechen fighters even joined the

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Russian troops in their effort to rebuff the Georgian advance on Chechnya's fellow mountain republic of South Ossetia; for the Chechens, hatred of Georgia trumped hatred of Russia. And in Ukraine, whose president, Viktor Yushchenko, has emerged as an ardent supporter of Georgia, the public is divided. According to a poll conducted by the state-run National Institute for Strategic Studies, in Kiev, half of the respondents said that Ukraine should remain neutral and the rest were equally divided between support for Georgia and support for Russia. In short, a military operation that the West denounced as an act of aggression was seen in Russia and beyond as laudable, proportionate, and humanitarian.

These views are not simply the product of Kremlin-led propaganda efforts. They reflect deeply held beliefs about the United States' role in the Black Sea region and about basic concepts such as self-determination and democracy. The views of Russians, Ukrainians, and others concerning global affairs reflect the realities they see on the ground. When the United States unequivocally supports a Georgian government that seeks to bomb its own citizens into submission, it is easy for people to become cynical about U.S. motivations and recognize how malleable the concept of democracy can be.

Declarations bemoaning the triumph of autocratic imperialism are therefore misplaced. The world has seen these sorts of invasions before, and the consequences have not always been dire. After all, when Turkey invaded Cyprus in 1974 for reasons similar to those Russia has cited in regard to Georgia, few people feared the return of Ottoman hegemony around the Mediterranean. Turkey intervened on the island to protect an ethnic Turkish minority threatened with repression by Greek nationalists and to prevent the island's absorption by Greece. Russia's initial moves in Georgia followed a similar logic of protecting minorities and securing the advantageous position Russia had carved out in the Caucasus over the last 15 years. Today, the fact that Turkey has official diplomatic relations with the unrecognized Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus has not prevented the Turkish Cypriots from cooperating with their Greek counterparts—most recently by launching historic talks on creating a united government for the island. Russian leaders have certainly behaved in ways that are stubborn and coarse, but they have also acted pragmatically and predictably.

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PUTIN'S MARCH TO THE SEA?

THE CHALLENGE facing the next U.S. president will be not simply to resolve obscure territorial disputes in a faraway sliver of the Caucasus; he must also manage Russia's emerging role as a powerful and alluring alternative to the West. Russian leaders have learned to wield the language of stability, humanitarianism, and prosperity—even as Russian journalists die in police custody and corrupt officials siphon off the country's substantial wealth. If the rift between Russia and the West widens, it will not produce a repeat of the Cold War—a half century during which Moscow lay at the epicenter of a coercive and overburdened imperium. Instead, it will create a new and more delicate rivalry over the ability of each political system to explain its own inconsistencies to its citizens and the wider world. Whether to support or deny self-determination, whether to praise or condemn military invasion, and whether to make or break countries are choices faced by all great powers—and the resulting decisions are rarely made according to principle. In the future, the real contest will be over which powers are best able to spin their flaws and speak convincingly to an increasingly savvy world citizenry that is as skeptical about the United States' messianic democratizing as it is about Russia's nationalist posturing.

Unfortunately, Western thinking on Russia has too often substituted analogy for analysis. If today's Russia is akin to Hitler's Germany, the argument goes, the West should avoid appeasement and prevent any potential future Russian aggression against Ukraine or any other Russian neighbor. But what the West has failed to grasp is that many of the region's inhabitants view the war of August 2008 as a justified intervention rather than a brazen attempt to resurrect a malevolent empire. In the weeks following the Russian-Georgian conflict, concerned U.S. and European officials held emergency meetings to consider a host of policy responses, from suspending Russia's relationship with the EU to boycotting the 2014 Winter Olympics in the Russian Black Sea resort of Sochi, a stone's throw from Abkhazia. "We are convinced that it is in Russia's own interest not to isolate itself from Europe," read the final communiqué of a summit of EU leaders held in September. Certainly, Russia's actions have distanced the country from Western institutions. But the deeper worry is that the Kremlin and average Russians can now imagine a world in which they do not have to care. 🌐