

A failure of strategy

No winners in Georgian conflict

THE DESCENT INTO war of long-standing disputes in Georgia represented a failure of strategy on the part of almost every participant in the crisis. Only the South Ossetians saw their cause definitively advanced, as they took a step towards eventual reunification with North Ossetia. All other parties appeared to be worse off after the brief conflict, especially Georgia and its would-be patron, the United States.

Moscow might dispute this assertion, since it could claim to a domestic audience that it had reasserted its rights in a region in which Russia felt strong entitlement. However, its recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia left it largely isolated, since it was a move followed formally only by Nicaragua.

The war has created a new strategic situation. By sending forces over its borders for the first time since the 1979–89 Soviet–Afghan War and forcibly redefining the situation in Georgia’s disputed territories, Moscow has aroused concern among other former Soviet bloc members about its future intentions. That is true even though it took military action in response to Georgia’s move on South Ossetia.

Most countries were dismayed by Russia’s willingness to take unilateral action with almost no international support, to keep troops in Georgia even after agreeing to withdraw them, to declare the two territories to be independent and to shrug at the (highly unlikely) possibility of a new Cold War.

Its boldness undermined the confidence of foreign investors, and left both Western and Asian governments groping for options as they considered how best to approach Russia in the future. The G8 group of leading industrialised nations, which had widened to admit Russia in recent years, regrouped as the G7 to issue a statement condemning Moscow’s actions.

American policy exposed

The events of August 2008 were a substantial setback to US policy in the Caucasus. The ‘Rose Revolution’, the Georgian popular uprising in 2003, had played perfectly into President George W. Bush’s rhetoric about promoting democracy and freedom. Bush called Georgia a ‘beacon of liberty’ when he

visited Tbilisi in 2005 and promised that ‘you’ve got a solid friend in America’. American military trainers had been in Georgia since 2002, and the country was a sizeable contributor to the US-led coalition in Iraq.

Despite the unresolved conflicts within Georgian territory, Bush demanded of NATO allies that they set Tbilisi on the path to membership. European countries refused to admit it to the formal membership process at the Bucharest summit in April, but Bush did manage to have inserted into the final communiqué an assurance that Georgia would join NATO.

However, America’s decision to take Georgia under its wing was exposed in August as a hollow approach that – as in its occupation of Iraq – had failed to take into account the ground realities. In a region torn for centuries by ethnic disputes, Washington was unable to stop Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili from taking action that was bound to infuriate Russia. Its attempts to dissuade him, based on the evidence available, were belated and lacked clout.

It should have been clear to Saakashvili that American support would not extend to helping his small country’s forces defeat Russia on the battlefield. Later, Bush sought to encourage Russia to observe the ceasefire agreement by beginning a military programme of provision of humanitarian aid. Even this, however, underlined the lack of American control of the situation, when

a US vessel carrying aid diverted at the last moment from the Russian-occupied port of Poti to Georgian-controlled Batumi, to avoid a confrontation.

The promise of eventual NATO membership to Georgia had added to Moscow’s grievances. Russia and the West had gone through a rosy period when the European Union signed a partnership and cooperation agreement with Moscow in 1997. US President Bush said on meeting then-President Vladimir Putin in 2001 that he found the Russian ‘straightforward and trustworthy’ and that he ‘was able to get a sense of his soul’. However, the relationship had deteriorated long before the current crisis.

The expansion of NATO and the EU to include former Soviet bloc countries, US plans to position new missile-defence assets near Russia’s borders and Kosovo’s declaration of independence all enabled Putin to foment among his people a sense that there was an American-led conspiracy to encroach on Russia’s sphere of influence. He had dramatically launched a verbal counter-attack in a speech in Munich in February 2007. The hopes of the US and Europe that they could engage post-communist Russia in a strategic partnership based on shared interests had thus already fallen flat before the discord of 2008.

The most important question in the wake of the August crisis was what would be the future balance in Russian strategy between nationalistic



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chauvinism and the common interests that, in fact, it still had with the West.

The depth of Russian anger at Georgia's move on South Ossetia should not be underestimated. Moscow has said it will establish permanent bases in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. With the Kremlin likely to keep up efforts to unseat a humiliated Georgian government, Georgia faces a turbulent future following Saakashvili's adventurism.

What advantage Saakashvili expected to gain from a military encounter is hard to fathom, but the result is that Georgia has definitively lost control of the two disputed territories and has seen ethnic Georgians driven out of them. Its hopes of American support in the event of a confrontation proved groundless. What military power it had was, in effect, eliminated for some time to come.

Meanwhile, of the two newly 'independent' republics, Abkhazia has swapped a nominal master, Georgia, for a real one, Russia, and will have a very hard time asserting the independence that it truly wanted. This is especially so with Russia eyeing its ports for the Black Sea fleet.

South Ossetians saw their capital devastated, but at least advanced towards their goal of reunification with North Ossetia under Russia's umbrella.

The Georgian prime minister, Lado Gurgenedze, acknowledged that his country was at a pivotal point. 'It's up to Europe, as much as to Georgia itself, to determine if it will emerge from this crisis as an even more European, young liberal democracy with a successful economy which recovers quickly – or whether Georgia emerges as something decidedly different, far less compatible with European standards and values,' he told the *Financial Times*.

Cautious Europe

For its part, Europe played a crucial role in securing a ceasefire, with the French president and current holder of the rotating EU presidency, Nicolas Sarkozy shuttling between the two capitals. But at a subsequent summit on 1 September, EU leaders could agree only on a condemnatory statement on Russia, a donor's conference for Georgia and freezing of talks on an EU–Russian partnership. They stopped well short of any sanctions against Moscow, which praised their common sense.

Those European countries that had supported the US in promoting NATO membership for Georgia found their approach just as invalidated as Washington's, as there was no chance

of their providing military support to Tbilisi in the eventual crisis. Europe, and most importantly the German 'grand coalition', was divided on whether to take a softer or harder line with Moscow.

This division seemed bound to inhibit any more decisive European approach for the foreseeable future, and has been perhaps mostly one of nuance, given that Europe as a whole depends on Russian energy resources and has no desire to embark on a new Cold War-like confrontation. One possibility that could be advanced for the future, helping to answer Gurgenedze's point, would be to set Georgia more firmly on the long road to EU membership, which is now seen even in Tbilisi as a distant prospect.

Russia isolated

The questions over Russia's future international relations are those that loom largest following the conflict. Even though it responded to a Georgian military move, its sparing observance of the ceasefire agreement and repeated use of defiant language, daring the world to stand up to it, has been the dominant feature of this small war.

It has not yet found support among many of the capitals that it might have expected. The failure of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation to support it was a major setback. China, with its own problems curbing ethnic separatism, was careful to distance itself at an early stage. Moscow was already alienated from the West, but could ill afford to worsen its relations with the East as well. Even Serbia, which has had close ties to Moscow, was alarmed. It neither criticised nor supported Russia's recognition of the two territories' independence but said it had warned that Kosovo's 'illegal act', in declaring independence from Serbia, could set a precedent.

By any standards, the absence of international support for Russia represented a stark diplomatic failure. While this may be acceptable for a Russian government full of the bravado of the moment, with President Dmitry Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin seeking to outgun each other in the toughness of their language, it would be a growing embarrassment for Moscow in the longer term.

There is a risk, however, that the momentum of NATO enlargement policy will divide the West. Despite the fact that 20% of Georgia's territory is lost, the US will argue for continuing the path towards eventual membership. It will do the same for Ukraine, even though that country's divided leadership is at best

ambivalent about, and the majority of its population firmly opposed to, NATO membership.

Europeans have a strong case to argue that it is in NATO's strategic interest to pause its enlargement policy. While Russia has no veto on membership, a perceived threat is equally no automatic ticket to entry. Europe will want to invite the US to think strategically, not nostalgically, about the weight it wishes to attach to NATO in its regional policy.

Given that the West lacks obvious means to influence Russian behaviour, its best option may be simply to wait out the situation.

Shared interests

This approach seemed implicit in the outcome of the EU summit on 1 September, although it was harder to swallow for the Bush administration. A Russian government heavily dependent on energy exports for revenue has a strong incentive to maintain a dialogue with its Western partners. It wants to expand energy giant Gazprom's already extensive global interests and needs to develop more oil and gas capacity.

A possibly hopeful sign in this area was the compromise reached on 4 September by the British oil company BP in a dispute with its Russian partners in the BP–TNK joint venture. This was an agreement welcomed by the Russian president's economic aide, Arkady Dvorkovich, who said: 'We are confident this will serve as an important message to foreign companies investing in the Russian economy.'

Russia's economy has benefited substantially from foreign capital and expertise, and financial markets have been meting out their own punishment to Russian investments since the Georgian crisis. Among other shared interests with the West, Moscow wants to restrain Iranian ambitions to develop nuclear weapons and has voted for UN sanctions against Tehran.

That these shared interests will continue to play a part in Russia's foreign relations seems logical. However, logic has not ruled in the Georgian crisis; there has only been a brutal reminder that large countries still have spheres of influence over small neighbours.

The failures of strategy that occurred have resulted in a mutual loss of confidence and a multiple loss of face. Even so, the war is far more likely simply to establish a new status quo in part of the complex Caucasus region than to be a step towards a larger East–West confrontation. □ IISS