

"There are two dates that have changed the world in recent years: Sept. 11, 2001, and Aug. 8, 2008,"

Dmitri O. Rogozin, Russian Representative to NATO

Georgia's military response to cross border attacks from Russian supported South Ossetia separatists over August 7th-8th sufficiently satiated Russia's desire to set ablaze the uneasy Russia-Georgian relationship that has been smoldering since Georgia's dash for independence in 1991. Russia's invasion of Georgia is a watershed event and the most significant rupture in its relationship with the West since 1991. It marks the end of the post Cold War era based on the assumption that the Russian Federation is a working partner versus a potential adversary. It is time for Russia's apologists to lay their rationalizations for Russian exceptionalism aside. We are entering into uncharted territory.

The Invasion

Russia's invasion of Georgian territory to 'protect its peacekeepers, to ensure the safety of Russian residents in the regions or to quell Putin's charge of 'genocide' in South Ossetia can be described as a 19th century territorial land-grab albeit one well timed and predicated on a well-thought out Kremlin strategy. Retired Col. Christopher Langton, an analyst at London's International Institute for Strategic Studies, called the Russian attack a "classic Soviet-style invasion" featuring tanks, artillery, armored personnel carriers and aerial assaults. In a display of 21st century military tactics, the campaign also included cyber-warfare that hacked into Georgian government computer systems." ¹ According to the much respected *Moscow Times*, "theories are swirling about how Russia managed to set 2,000 tanks and 20,000 servicemen in motion in just 48 hours and why, on the eve of the war, the South Ossetian government sent hundreds of children across the border to Russia and 48 Russian journalists were camped out in a Tskhinvali hotel."

[2](#)

On its most visceral level the invasion was what James Sherr coined as "a perfect application of what Russian military scientists call 'reflexive control': the defeat of an adversary through his own efforts." ³ In an interview with NBC News Anchor Brian Williams on September 23 Georgian President Saakashvili admitted that Georgia wasn't entirely blameless in the conflict. He stated that, "of course there were mistakes made on all sides but you don't blame the victim for an aggression."

In short, it wasn't a matter of if but when Russia could claim that Georgia, a country of some 4.5 million, had overstepped its bounds by striking back at Georgian separatists in South Ossetia (whom the Russian Federation generously extended Russian citizenship and passports in

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2003). This happened despite the fact that South Ossetia remains a part of Georgia. The same can be said of Georgia's break-away republic of Abkhazia. Russia's decision to unilaterally acknowledge the independence of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia only further estranges the West from a Russia that it once hoped to be a democratizing power.

Others have described the invasion as *tactic* as an exercise in 'razvedka boyem' which translates as "intelligence-gathering by battle" i.e. you attack a passive opponent in some way either so as to get a clear response by means of which he can be evaluated, or to force the opponent's hand when he himself might be undecided as to a course of action (a state of affairs which means that 'ordinary' intelligence gathering will be ineffective). On this point, it is clear that Russia was not out to measure Georgia's military might but Western resolve in responding to the crisis in a meaningful way.

Most tellingly, the invasion can be interpreted as an application of former President Lenoid Brezhnev's doctrine of limited sovereignty used to justify the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in August 1968 or as a justification of a Soviet view of the USSR'S invasion of Hungary in 1956. The Brezhnev doctrine insisted that capitalist forces, hostile to socialism, were a threat not only to the country concerned but to all socialist countries. In 2008 the Medvedev doctrine is focused on crushing the development of independent states which have the audacity to deviate from Moscow's extraterritorial objective of controlling its former Soviet space. Democracy and independence in former Soviet republics are an anathema to Russian nationalists who seek to resurrect a Soviet empire which itself was one glued together by fear, threat, intimidation and the brutal exercise of power.

It seems many in the military community knew that invasion was possible and ostensibly was planned at least 18 months in advance, according to one undisclosed Western military source. Anticipated or not, the magnitude of the Russian response did come as a surprise. After all, for years now the summer season has brought with it over-the-border skirmishes between members of the Georgian military and separatists in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgia's President Mikhail Saakashvili has never hidden his intention to reintegrate, in one fashion or another, these separatist regions into the Georgian state. And in fact multiple Russian governments have maintained 'peace-keepers' in both regions that succeeded neither in peace nor in moving the peace-process forward towards a resolution of these (now hot) formerly frozen conflicts.

Why Invade?

Russia's invasion of Georgia is driven by a composite of foreign policy objectives. The mere fact that they chose to mount a military invasion is testament to the fact that the soft power tactics (eg. corruption, financial support for foreign media sources to mute criticism of Russian actions either at home or abroad, the employment of public relations' firms in Brussels, Washington and Berlin to promote the country's peculiar view of the world, and the employment of former heads of state and government aka Gerhard Shroeder to represent Russian interests abroad) thus far

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employed for effectively undermining the national sovereignty and self-determination of countries such as Georgia and the Ukraine have failed.

Russia's present and immediate goal is the reintegration of these now independent states under the Kremlin's tutelage. It is also a blatant warning to others, eg. Moldova, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan that Moscow's tolerance for wandering too far from cooperation with the Kremlin on foreign policy, trade and energy issues is short. Most particularly in Georgia the objective is to unseat Georgian President Mikhail Shaakashvili and to oversee a new Georgian government more to its liking. On September 1st Russian Foreign Minister acknowledged this when he warned the West against supporting Georgia's leadership and called for an arms embargo against Georgia until a new government was in place. [4](#)

The invasion is also a shot across the bow for that other pestering former Soviet republic, Ukraine, that was also audacious enough to stage its own color revolution. Relations between Moscow and Kiev are strained at best, but the message is clear to the government of Viktor Yushchenko: we've done it in South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and next can be Crimea (a Russian speaking region of Ukraine). Yushchenko has said as much when he coldly warned, "Any nation could be next." [5](#)

Second, Russia's European power is fundamentally energy based versus an expression of its military might. The country has roughly a third the population of the EU and its GDP 1/15th the size of its democratic neighbor. Destabilizing Georgia casts the stability of the entire South Caucasus region in doubt and therefore undermines investor confidence that the Caspian corridor is a reliable region for energy transit for Caspian and East Caspian oil and gas. Major gas pipelines that deliver hydrocarbons to the European market while simultaneously obviating Russian territory are a direct threat to Gazprom's monopolization of the European gas market. The oil market is slightly different and Russia has been successfully developing its mid and downstream asset base across CEE for years. Any escalation in global oil prices benefits these firms directly and in turn financially enriches Kremlin insiders who have a highly personal interest in increasing their own financial portfolios of liquid assets parked in banks from New York, to London and Basel. Finally, it should be noted that the higher the oil price the more the Russian government receives in the exorbitant taxes it places on Russian oil exports.

So why invade now?

The present global security landscape is highly befitting new Russian adventurism. Washington is bogged down in Iraq, undergoing an intensive build-up to the Presidential elections in November, and has been hamstrung by its own naiveté regarding Russian foreign policy intentions over the last eight years. NATO forces are committed in Afghanistan and are having a

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hard time of fighting that war with effectively two feet and one hand tied behind its back by European citizens and their governments unwilling to commit sufficient numbers of troops and equipment to successfully finish the mission there. The EU as a political force has no foreign policy voice and their member states have been sliced and diced by a carefully executed Russian foreign policy based on bilateralism that predictably works to Russia's advantage. Not to rehash but to reflect on realities within the European security environment, European governments have consistently been building down expensive land force capacities in favor of much more mobile, rapid reaction capabilities.

Russia has suspended its participation in the CFE Treaty ratification process and has balked at removing its troops from Moldova and Georgia under its terms. Further it is highly cognizant that the Europeans are both unwilling and unlikely to commit to standing by a small and young democracy like Georgia's or even worse to be able to agree that Georgia is part of the European family of nations and is worth fighting for. Russia is no peer military power for either the United States or NATO but it is an overwhelming power vis-à-vis the Republic of Georgia. Maximum advantage is at play here.

Second, Russia has become enriched and empowered by globally high oil prices and the revenue derived there from. It has been highly successful in ring-fencing Western Europe's ability to directly access natural gas from sources that directly obviate Russian territory. ⁶ It has significantly undermined the energy supply security of Poland, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia through its planned Nord Stream pipeline project. It orchestrated a first strike against the vitally important, but floundering Nabucco pipeline project, by co-opting Bulgarian fears, Greek interests, and Romanian aspirations for becoming a transit state for Russian hydrocarbons through the yet to be realized South Stream and Burgas-Alexandropolis pipeline projects. And it is busy in working with Algeria's Sonatech and Italy's ENI in Libya to gain a piece of the action if not control over the flow of alternative oil and gas from North Africa to the European continent. Under no circumstance should commercial or Western European state interests capitulate to Russia's physical posturing in Georgia and do away with Nabucco. Europe needs Nabucco now more than ever and it is equally importantly to move in concert with the U.S. government to make a Trans Caspian pipeline a reality.

With oil and gas prices high and destined to go higher, with Europe's deepening dependence on Russian hydrocarbons and inability to mount a common foreign energy policy, and most importantly with a NATO in constant transition lacking in Cold War era consensus that Russia does pose an external threat to Alliance interests Russia correctly assessed its advantageous position prior to August 8. Germany and France haven't helped either when they denied Georgia its Membership Action Plan at the Bucharest Summit in April 2008. Further Russia has scored an apparent success in striking fear in some NATO Member States that offering a MAP to Georgia is equivalent to setting the stage for future conflict with the Russian Federation.

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Reality couldn't be further from the truth. If Georgia, and as yet to be determined by an undecided Ukraine, were full NATO Members on August 8th Russia would have seriously thought twice about its invasion of Georgian territory. This was underscored by U.S. Undersecretary of State Matt Bryza on August 23rd when he was quoted by Russia's Ekho Mosky as stating, "Russia has shown exactly why Georgia needs to be in NATO ... Russia did not lift a finger against the Baltic States once they entered NATO. It would not lift a finger against Ukraine if Ukraine were in NATO. The same goes for Georgia." [7](#)

Implications

The most obvious implication of Russia's invasion of Georgia and its unilateral recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is self-imposed political isolation from the international community. Western nations largely abstained from ostracizing Russia during its difficult transition. Even Putin's backtracking on issues ranging from human rights to limiting a free and unfettered press largely occurred with impunity. The fact is that Russia has inflicted upon itself the notion that it is (again) a pariah state. The entire issue of whether it seeks to be charitably viewed as a modern progressive state is even in question. In view of this removing Russia from the G-8 group of nations or preventing its WTO membership may therefore have limited utility in altering Russian behavior.

Second, the Russian government and unfortunately the Russian people appear to have bought into the self-delusion that it can continue developing without significant interaction with the global community. Under Putin, for the past thirty-six months Western oil companies, ranging from Shell in Sakhalin and BP in Eastern Siberia, have been largely disenfranchised. Western investment desperately needed by Russia's oil and gas complex is largely viewed as predatory and unwelcome. If the future of Russian stability and prosperity is a function of the performance of its hydrocarbons industries then the future, at present, is not a bright one. Already Russian oil output was down the first two quarters of 2008 and growth in the gas sector is sputtering.

The Russian economy since the collapse of its financial market over 1997-1998 has demonstrated a remarkable growth trajectory but one that could be easily be slowed or ultimately reversed by self- asphyxiation through a prolonged lapse of foreign capital and portfolio investment. Within days of the invasion the Russian Central Bank had to intercede to prop up the devaluating ruble. Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin said on Aug. 17 that investors pulled \$7 billion out of the country between Aug. 8-11. BNP Paribas SA, France's largest bank, estimates as much as \$25 billion in capital has left Russia since the start of the Georgia crisis. [8](#) Given the specter of a prolonged disruption in its economic relationship with the EU alone, it is hard to imagine how the Russian economy could financially bear the brunt of its political foibles for an extended period of time.

Response

What Russia requires, to help itself and the world around it, is for nations and their political leadership to begin to talk to Russia the same way they speak to the rest of the world: blunt and to the point. This would help tremendously in sobering up Putin and Medvedev to the reality that the Russian state is considered neither a friend nor a working partner based on its present behavior in Georgia. Opportunities have been missed in the past to confront Russia's view of the world and in particular the role of the U.S. in it. In 2007 at the Munich Conference on Security, then President Putin quoted U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt when he stated that, "When peace has been broken anywhere, the peace of all countries everywhere is in danger." What prevents democracies from revisiting this same high standard in light of Russia's incursion in Georgia?

On a sober, rational basis the West needs to continue to engage Russia the same way Russia engages other states: on a vector like basis. Russia pursues its foreign policy by delineating in its relationship with foreign nations first and foremost what it wants and then decides how it can engage to get it. Practically speaking a tactical response requires bolstering and intensifying U.S. & EU engagement with countries on Europe's periphery: Georgia, Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Intensify the dialogue on energy security. Commit to strengthening their national independence and economic security and accelerate where possible their membership in NATO based on the will and desire of national populations.

Finally, cooperative engagement with Russia must be conducted on a reciprocal basis. One of the most important areas for cooperation, particularly for European states, is in the area of energy. If Russia wants access to Western energy markets then it must provide equal access for foreign investment and ownership in its domestic market. If Russia wants peace in the South Caucasus then it must remove its troops from Georgia and abide by all points in the Sarkozy agreement it signed to end hostilities there. And if Russia wants none of the above, then it should realize it is entering into a skirmish it cannot win and a battle it cannot sustain. NATO, the OSCE, the European Union and the United States have it right this time: No land, no war, no puppet Georgian regime to satisfy Russian interests. This is a free world and we intend on keeping it this way. That is the message.

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¹ Montgomery, David : Russian military stronger, but still far from Cold War peak, McClatchy Newspaper, 12 August 2008

² Von Twickel, Nicholas: Theories Swirl About War's Beginning, Moscow Times, 28 August

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³ Sherr, James: A Regional Offensive, The Sunday Telegraph, 10 August 2008

⁴ Russia warns against Georgian support, Associated Press, 1 September 2008

⁵ Harding, Luke: Russia: Any country could be next, warns Ukranian President, The Guardian, 28 August 2008

⁶ The one exception to this is the South Caucasus Pipeline which delivers Azeri gas from Baku to Erzum in Turkey

⁷ Akin, Melissa: Russia Invasion of Georgia Speeds NATO Membership," The Star Online, 23 August 2008

⁸ Nicholson, Alex: Russian International Reserves Rise to \$581.5 Billion, Bloomberg, 28 August 2008