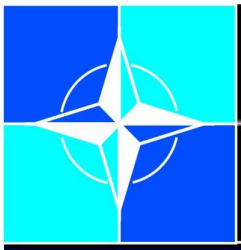

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The Russo-Georgian Conflict

Immediate Report

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The conflict in the South Caucasus involving the separatist states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and Georgia and Russia remains heavily shrouded in the fog of war. Reliable details remain very sketchy and there is a major propaganda effort on all sides directly involved and from a number of indirectly involved parties. Furthermore, events are, of course, ongoing and evolving. Notwithstanding this, a number of relatively basic points and broader observations can be made at this stage.

1) Russia's action in South Ossetia meets key objectives in Moscow's military and security thinking.[1]
    a. Regional conflict and instability along Russia's borders: By demonstrating Tbilisi's inability to assert its hold over South Ossetia and, in effect, Abkhazia, Moscow is likely to feel that these conflicts are too all intents and purposes resolved.
    b. NATO enlargement and the threat posed by the West: Moscow is likely to consider that the conflict and outcome seriously prejudices Georgia's chances of joining NATO. In the wider picture, this stalling of enlargement underscores Moscow's ongoing efforts to foment and highlight transatlantic dilemmas and disagreements and undermine the alliance's efforts to achieve consensus and thus operate effectively.

2) An 'ideal' result for Moscow of its military action beyond the direct impact on Georgia is to send a number of international signals.
    a. The overall point the Moscow wishes to underscore is that Russia is back as a 'full' player – the dominant regional player with a global purview, no longer just in terms of energy supplies and Russia's version of 'soft' power, but now also as an actor with serious military capability. It has just successfully tested its reforming armed forces and defeated a western-trained and equipped – and, importantly, what it perceives to be a *western priority backed* force.
    b. Regarding the regional unresolved conflicts specifically, this seems likely to send signals to Azerbaijan about any attempt to resolve Nagorno-Karabakh by force without Russian consent. This action is also a signal to the Central Asian region in which there are a number of festering inter- and intra- state problems.
    c. More broadly, it enhances the signals already being emitted to other former soviet states that Russia will not tolerate provocative pro-Western/anti-Russian/centrifugal (away from Russia) political tendencies in the Eurasian continent. Ukraine is obviously a primary example. Russian experts highlight that Ukrainian membership is something that Moscow deeply opposes and that Russia would react in the first place by instigating popular instability and irredentism in the border regions of Ukraine (particularly, of course, Eastern and Southern Ukraine/Crimea). It may also be a coded signal to Azerbaijan about further enhancing its relations with the West (it is election year in Azerbaijan); and even former Soviet states in Central Asia that have relations with both the West and China.
    d. It suggests that the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzerum (BTE) oil and gas pipelines, viewed by so many in the West as a sustainable *alternative* to Russian supply routes, are highly vulnerable to instability in the region and, thus, Russian influence indeed pressure: Russian jets flying over the BTC hardly enhance the idea of diversification. The conflict may also undermine significantly the basis of the Nabucco pipeline project. Broadly, while European reliance on (and therefore vulnerability to) Russian energy supply is often overplayed amongst European political circles,[2] Moscow is

[1] This thinking is outlined in Concepts and Doctrines published in 2000. According to 'timely leaks' to the Russian press, a new conceptualization of security and military threats may be released in September this year in which similar points are emphasized – particularly the threat to Russia posed by the West.

[2] Of course Russia is an important source of European energy, and does indeed pose potential problems. Nonetheless, the great influence Russia holds in the European discussions about energy

becoming ever more aware of its ability to influence European political and energy debates through mere suggestion as much as capability or desire.

3) There are a number of contradictions in Moscow's arguments and following Russia's deployment of armed force, there is a strong tendency in the West to overlook Russia's ongoing weaknesses.
    a. The position of the UN as the sole authority able to sanction force is frequently reiterated in Russian official statements: Moscow argues that the Kosovo campaign was an illegal use of force since it was unsanctioned by the UN. Yet Moscow's activities in South Ossetia and Georgia were not sanctioned by the UN. Moscow argues for the dominance of international law in international affairs, yet this campaign shows that it is increasingly happy to use force to resolve its problems. Many of Moscow's arguments can be traced back to the Kosovo conflict in 1999. It is instructive that over the last couple of months Moscow has used language very similar to that which NATO used with regard to Kosovo in 1999 about the urgent need to use force to prevent large-scale bloodshed in ethnic cleansing of a minority, for instance.[3]
    b. Conceptually, Moscow argues that state sovereignty is the dominant principle in international affairs: this thinking underlines Moscow's development of "Sovereign Democracy". Yet Russian military action in South Ossetia seems to have turned Moscow's policy upside down: Moscow seems to be using a version of what it believes to be a 'western style solution' to the conflict in using force to break the integrity of state sovereignty to rescue the sovereignty of the individual and prevent genocide and 'ethnic cleansing':[4] this poses interesting questions about Moscow's stance on the Kosovo conflict, Kosovo's independence and even, perhaps, Chechnya.
    c. The real extent of Russia's military capability, particularly in terms of power projection, remains unclear. While Russian forces seem to have competently executed their plans, their wider and deeper capability remains open to question: how much of their military capacity was deployed and how effectively? Moscow is both re-equipping and reforming its military and is clearly making some progress. However, while the results of this campaign should not be ignored, there is a long way to go before this has a substantial impact across the breadth of the Russian armed forces.

4) The conflict reiterates the differing world views and lengthening list frustrations between Moscow and the West.
    a. Moscow is likely to interpret the current events as showing that the existing European security architecture is now unable to meet current and evolving security needs in the region and to justify the calls Moscow made in June and July for a re-think of the European architecture. Notwithstanding the varying degrees of support from Moscow's diplomacy amongst some European capitals, as organisations, NATO, the EU and the OSCE are highly likely to disagree strongly, at least rhetorically, probably to the extent of rejecting Moscow's proposals out of hand – thereby emphasising the gap. At the NATO Foreign Ministers meeting on 19 August, the Alliance announced that there could be no continuation of 'business as usual' while Russian troops are

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security is often over-inflated. This is in considerable measure the fault of Europeans themselves who remain unable to reach any substantial form of consensus let alone coherent energy strategy.

[3] The parallels with Kosovo by Moscow have been frequent and applied to the military campaign: for instance Moscow justifies bombing targets in Georgia with comparison to NATO bombing of Belgrade. Moscow has also drawn parallels with the war in Bosnia, comparing Russia's "effective action" to the ineffective inaction of the European peacekeepers at Srebrenica.

[4] At the time of writing, evidence of 'genocide' and 'ethnic cleansing' conducted by Georgia in South Ossetia remains very patchy and heavily Russian-influenced. Moscow initially claimed that thousands of South Ossetians had been killed by Georgian troops, often in a cold-blooded manner. Currently this seems a significant exaggeration. Moscow also claimed that Georgian forces were 'finishing off' wounded Russian peacekeepers and troops.

in Georgia (subsequently Russia concurred suspending its military cooperation with the alliance on 21 August). This means that there is a good chance that the NRC scheduled to take place on 24 September at which Ambassador Rogozin was due to present Moscow's proposals for the new architecture, is likely to be postponed. It is important to note that Moscow believes its case has not been heard – let alone fairly – by the transatlantic community: To the West, the proposals may seem dead in the water; to Moscow, they may well appear to be more necessary than ever.[5]

b. Moscow is likely to see NATO as a paper tiger unable either to provide real support to its partners or to respond to conflict in the wider Euro-Atlantic partnership area, including one involving Russia – which Moscow believes is NATO's primary task. This is therefore likely to strengthen its claims that NATO is no longer relevant and should be disbanded. It is also likely to try to project actively this image to new and potential member states. This produces a certain duality – NATO is seen as a primary threat to Russian interests and even Russia itself – and yet is an organisation that is withering on the vine and unable to fulfil its key tasks.

c. Moscow is also likely to seek to stall discussion about transformation in the alliance. In the short term, Russian actions seem likely to stimulate a renewed (negative) focus on Russia in the alliance, including among many members the idea of continuing enlargement and the need to safeguard against a threatening Russia.[6] Moscow's actions may therefore have the result of enhancing the collective organisation it seeks to undermine. In any case, NATO has not backed away from its Bucharest declaration and has stated that Georgian membership remains on the table.[7] The conflict also seems likely to influence the shape of NATO's thematic agenda in other ways, particularly enhancing the 'Russia twist' on issues such as energy and cyber security. However, in so doing, the conflict also underscores the arguments of those who oppose further NATO enlargement, for instance, or a role for NATO in energy security. Such disagreement in a consensus-based organisation may therefore equally serve to paralyse to a degree decision-making in the alliance.

d. Given the loud condemnation of Russian actions in the West (often without acknowledging Georgia's important role in the conflict by trying to reclaim South Ossetia by force and against the will of the population), Moscow is also likely to criticise the West yet more strongly for double standards in its dealings with Russia. Moscow, in its eyes, as noted above, is using Western terminology and methods to justify its own actions – and if this is rejected by the west will be evidence of the West's hypocrisy. What is good for Kosovo, Moscow argues, is also good for South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Currently, Russia seeks the extradition of President Saakashvili to the international court at The Hague on charges of genocide and ethnic cleansing. Russia advocates therefore the need for regime change in Georgia in all but name. It is likely to use every means at its disposal to influence activities there, from the slowest possible withdrawal of its troops, to the financial and political support of Georgian opposition political forces and so on.

[5] How Moscow seeks to use the French-sponsored ceasefire agreement in this respect will be important: given the terms of the ceasefire, Moscow may well parade it as a successful Russo-EU agreement on conflict resolution through the application of a common viewpoint and hail it as a precedent and model and indicative of the kind of agreement that is necessary in the future under the bracket of a "greater Europe". This will be particularly relevant with regard to the unresolved conflict in Transnistria and may have ramifications for the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

[6] This episode will be conceived to be in line with other indications of Russian assertiveness, such as Russian strategic aviation and naval missions, cyber attacks on Estonia, the use of energy to pressure neighbours and other clients, and so on.

[7] Should Georgia become a more engaged partner or even member, it is of course unlikely to be a dove or even quiet on Russia issues.

The Georgians are not at all naïve in using propaganda themselves, and will also seek to use every means possible both to denigrate Russian action and to attract support, particularly of course from the US but also the broader Transatlantic community. In this way, Saakashvili has reciprocated with similar counter-charges against Moscow of genocide and ethnic cleansing, popular rallies and statements of intention to withdraw from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – which would alter the basis for any Russian presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.[8]

Concluding points and questions

Why was the West (particularly NATO) so apparently surprised by the conflict? While it is easy to benefit from hindsight, it appears that the Russians were ready for this – and the escalating nature of tensions between Russia and Georgia should have been sufficient to make the conflict if not predictable then readily anticipatable. Russian forces have been preparing and practising moving though the terrain in the region since 2006/2007. Conceptually, Moscow's arguments about such a move have become only clearer since what it sees as Kosovo's 'self-proclaimed independence' in February. Since April, Moscow has taken a more coherent stance on enhancing its relations with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In April, Russia was blamed by the UN monitoring mission in Georgia for shooting down a Georgian UAV. In May, Moscow unilaterally deployed an additional 400 railroad troops and engineers in Abkhazia.[9] In July, Moscow admitted that Russian military aircraft violated Georgian airspace. These are just a number of indications of escalation of tension. It is also worth considering the nature of Russian military preparations, which included both a build up of combat-ready formations and also the re-equipment (and replacement of worn out combat and technical equipment) of the relevant forces. There also appears to have been a significant build up of Russian armour.[10]

Given this timeline, it is worth noting that although the Bucharest summit declaration may have influenced Russian policy. If this is possible, Moscow's policy is perhaps yet more influenced by the two stages of the Kosovo precedent – NATO's campaign and Kosovo's independence.

Second, important questions remain about Georgia's actions – and the support they may or may not have been given. Moscow has strongly advanced its view that the USA played a leading role in at least giving President Saakashvili a "green light" if not actually spurring him on. Alongside the role of the US in training and equipping Georgia, among other things Moscow claims that Condoleeza Rice's visit to Tbilisi earlier this year was an important stage in allowing Tbilisi to even consider such an operation (Moscow believes that Georgia would not have acted against a US red light) and then subsequently, the US flew Georgian troops in from Iraq to help in the fighting after the Russian counterattack.[11] Be that as it may, questions about the intelligence available to Tbilisi about Russian troop preparations, and Russia's readiness to use significant force against Georgia and how far they would go into Georgia remain prominent,[12] as do questions about why Georgia's military faded away quite so

[8] It is not inconceivable that there may even be an assassination attempt on President Saakashvili. There is precedent in the region of the use of (attempted) assassinations of senior figures for political purposes. This would be highly destabilising and deeply murky; and even a set up/faked assassination attempt could not be ruled out.

[9] Experts on the Russian military note that the deployment of Soviet railway troops was synonymous with the opening of a new front, and the deployment of railway troops directly preceded Russian intervention in Chechnya in 1999.

[10] For a very useful account and analysis of the build-up of tension between Russia and Georgia, see Blandy, C.W. *Georgia and Russia: A Further Deterioration in Relations*. ARAG Paper 08/22. Swindon: Defence Academy of the UK, July 2008. http://www.da.mod.uk/colleges/arag/document-listings/caucasus/

[11] At the time of writing, with NATO-Russia relations under strain, an unnamed and un-associated Russian security source stated that Georgia had made its preparations a year before its attack, seeking to coordinate its move with NATO's naval presence in the Black Sea. Colonel General Nagovitsyn, Deputy Chief of the Russian General Staff, also publicly questioned the role of NATO's ships in the Black Sea.

[12] Given the evolving tension between Russia and Georgia over the last few years, it would seem naïve to assume that Russia would simply eject Georgian forces from South Ossetia and then stop at the

quickly. Casualty figures and the extent of material losses are of course one indication of the conflict. However, they do not take into account the nature of the Georgian collapse which is may reflect serious shortcomings in discipline, training and deployment.[13] The evolution of the military situation suggests that Tbilisi miscalculated seriously – unless its key hope was to drag the West directly into a conflict with Russia.

At least four – somewhat basic – strategic points stand out for attention for the West.

1) Local conflict and poor governance within the Caucasus region. This is reflected not just in the eruption of this conflict – the small area is riven with three (now one?) unresolved conflicts. Moreover, there is considerable instability in the (Russian) North Caucasus. This is not only the case in Chechnya, which is far from being stable and effectively governed, but in other Russian regions, such as Dagestan. Instability is highlighted both by high levels of organised crime throughout the region and by specifics, including local bomb attacks. This unstable and complex area is at the nexus of the different world views of Russia and the West.
2) The notion that the Caucasus is a realistic alternative for Europe's energy security should be re-considered. Clearly, the risk of conflict affecting the pipeline network is high: BP temporarily closed the Baku-Supsa pipeline during the conflict and the BTC is temporarily out of action due to a fire on the pipeline in Turkey (the PKK claimed responsibility for attacking it). A resumption of hostilities between Azerbaijan and Armenia – eminently possible given numerous violent clashes recently – would have a similar, if not greater impact on the pipelines. Furthermore, Russia's recent actions show that it retains – and seeks to enhance – considerable influence over the pipeline and at least two of the key states in the BTC/BTE. At best, these pipelines reflect supplementary energy security solutions – by no means do they represent significant diversification away from Russia.
3) The implications of the conflict for Russia's status in international affairs. By supporting the *de facto* independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and demonstrating both the inability of the West to act effectively to assist those who seek its help and also western hypocrisy, Russia seems to be attempting to emphasise and enhance its claims to be a valid international pole, with just as much right to make decisions on key international affairs and issues as the West – regardless of what the West thinks. What the implications are of this at local (e.g. the unresolved conflict over Moldova/Transnistria),[14] operational (e.g. Eastern and Southern Europe/Caspian/Central Asia regions) and strategic levels should be considered in depth. The implications of the conflict for both the CIS and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) should be examined carefully.
4) Russia must be taken seriously – and engaged seriously as one of the transatlantic community's international priorities. This cry has been made on and off for the last few years, but it becomes ever more pertinent. Russia is not "returning to the Soviet Union" – this claim is incompatible with the accusations by many of the same people who accuse it of rampant state *capitalism*. Russia is emerging as a newly independent player making (and learning from) mistakes, moving towards (but not yet at) conceptual and strategic coherence. Serious consideration means an increasing degree of sophistication in thinking about Russia; engagement does not mean 'like', nor does it mean 'give in to Russian demands', nor does it mean 'ineffective tea drinking': it means clear, effective, sophisticated thinking about where Russia's evolution is, what is seeks to achieve and how this may best be addressed.
    a. It is an oversimplification of Russia's leadership to assert that Prime Minister Putin is "the one calling the shots". President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin are both heavily engaged leading the decision-making process. This is a team, not a pair of competing individuals. Of course Prime Minister Putin has

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border. Again, hindsight is useful, but it would have been reasonable to expect that Russia would have taken any opportunity to make an example of Georgia and punish it militarily.

[13] And, in this case, deployment: training for assisting US/NATO forces elsewhere or in counterinsurgency is one thing, appropriate training for the conflict that emerged in South Ossetia with a heavily armed and battle-ready opponent is another.

[14] This conflict should now come into much greater focus for the transatlantic community. It is one over which Russia and the EU have disagreed, it also borders on Ukraine.

been prominent – he is the Prime Minister, a key office, leading the Russian government. But President Medvedev has also been highly prominent in the Russian media, giving the executive instructions and orders.[15] Indeed, Medvedev had little option but to drive this military action through: he could not have afforded to allow a small state on Russia's border to kill Russian peacekeepers and rebuff Russia within his first hundred days as President.[16] He has used this moment to assert his authority also. Understanding this has important implications for our understanding of Russia: Russian policy is unlikely to change under Medvedev – he is part of and contributes to the broad consensus in the Russian governing elite.

b. We should not lose sight of the fact that Russia's problems are multiple and evolving – economic, demographic and infrastructure problems are all serious and indeed worsening. Russia's military, too, suffers many shortcomings. This gives Russian power and influence a rather one-dimensional and limited aspect; even though superficially it looks strong, there are many ongoing weaknesses and tensions. Moreover, sophisticated thought should be also given to the extent of Russia's evolving ability to formulate and implement coherent policy.

[15] Russian media appearances of both have been heavily staged – including the discussions between President and Prime Minister: these were clearly worked out in private between (friendly) colleagues beforehand.

[16] It is worth making a brief related comment on Russia's "disproportionate" use of force. Russia could hardly have done other than use dominant force: there is no chance that the new Russian president would have risked anything that might have resembled a Georgian military victory. Equally, they counter assert that such use of force has relevant precedent in the operations conducted by Western coalitions. To Russian ears, President Bush's calls for restraint sound extremely hollow.