

Dealing with a Resurgent Russia

A Policy Briefing For The Fraser Institute, By Derek Fraser

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Remarks

There are three conclusions that can be drawn from the Georgian Conflict:

- The first is that the instability of the former Soviet Union lies at the origin of the Georgian Conflict and will likely give rise to other outbreaks of unrest affecting our interests.
- The second is that the immediate cause of the war was Russian efforts to reassert dominance over Georgia.
- The final conclusion is that the Western response should make it clear to Russia that there is an economic price to pay for such aggressive behaviour. At the same time we should respond to Russia on European security.

First Conclusion

The Continuing Instability of the former Soviet Union

Let us now turn to the first conclusion, that the instability of the former Soviet Union lies at the origin of the Georgian Conflict and will likely give rise to further outbreaks of unrest. Unfortunately, we must note that many of the conditions needed for stability in this vast area have not been achieved:

- The former Soviet states are mostly neither democratic nor well established.
- Their relations with each other, but especially with Russia, are unsettled.
- In part for this reason, Russia's relations with the outside world are uneasy.

Internal Instability

Under Putin, Russia has pursued an increasingly authoritarian course. The Russian government is characterized by weak institutions, a self-selected leadership, the requirement for an external enemy, and possibly the need for prosperity so as to maintain popular support.

The stability of Ukraine, the most democratic country of the group, is threatened by a partially dysfunctional constitution, the lack of democratic culture, and the danger of Russian interference.

Georgia's relatively democratic system is menaced by the recent defeat and recurrent Russian attempts at destabilization.

Most of the other former Soviet states are either semi-authoritarian or complete dictatorships, suppressing various degrees of popular discontent and fearing civil unrest. We have lately seen the Rose Revolution in Georgia in November 2003, the Orange Revolution in Ukraine from November 2004 to January 2005, the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in March 2005 and an uprising in Uzbekistan in May of the same year. There are likely to be further upsets.

Unsettled Relations between the Republics

Relations between the former Soviet republics are unsettled. Russia is making increasing efforts to dominate the other states. Russians have found the loss of the other republics and especially that of its two Slavic brethren, Belarus and Ukraine, hard to accept.

Closely tied with this imperial nostalgia is the age-old instinct of the Russians to expand their boundaries outwards so as to protect the Russian heartland.ⁱ Since the advent to power of Putin, who once described the breakup of the Soviet Union as the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century, Russia's pressure on the other republics to accept its dominance has increased. Its efforts have further intensified after the Coloured Revolutions, and the admission of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to NATO in 2004. Russians have tried to force the republics into a common market and a security organization, with institutions controlled by Moscow. Russia has preferred coercing authoritarian governments, to persuading democracies.

The existence of large minorities has furnished an additional source of tensions. With Russian support, several of these minorities have revolted. In the nineties, Transdnistria, inhabited by Ukrainians and Russians, broke away from Moldova, Nagorno-Karabakh, inhabited by Armenians, from Azerbaijan, and South Ossetia and Abkhazia from Georgia.

Russia has its own minority problems. In the northern Caucasus, Russia fought two wars to suppress Chechen independence. During these wars, Russia accused Georgia of helping the Chechen rebels. While the Chechens are for the moment quiet, Russia is facing unrest in the neighbouring republics of Ingushetia and Dagestan.

In addition, Russia is concerned at the loss of cultural rights, and, in some cases, political status for its minorities in the other republics. Minority issues are one of the reasons for tensions with both Ukraine and the Baltic Republics.

Russia will not quickly accept the reality of the independence of the other states nor will the minority problems easily be solved. We can therefore expect further trouble.

Uneasy Relations with the Outside World

The instability in the region has largely contributed to Russia's uneasy relations with the outside world. Russia has become increasingly bitter since it was rebuffed in its quest for membership in the EU and NATO, while the two organizations have expanded eastward into the Soviet Union's old sphere of influence. Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic became members of NATO in 1998. The remainder of Central Europe, much of the Balkans, and the three Baltic states, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, joined in 2004. According to Gorbachev, "The Americans promised that NATO wouldn't move beyond the boundaries of Germany after the Cold War, but now half of central and eastern Europe are members, so what happened to their promises? It shows they cannot be trusted."ⁱⁱ

Russian disillusionment increased with the Kosovo conflict in 1999, which showed, in Russian eyes, that NATO was not a purely defensive organization, but was prepared to wage aggressive war without the authorization of the UN Security Council. The Kosovo conflict also demonstrated to them that the West, in attacking Russia's friend, Serbia, was prepared to ignore serious Russian interests. The US also overrode Russian interests when it withdrew from the Anti-Ballistic Missile (IBM) Treaty in 2001 to pursue its plan to develop missile defence. The American plan to install missile defence systems in Poland and the Czech Republic, over strong Russian objections, has been interpreted by the Russians as an attempt at encirclement.

The Russians saw the Coloured Revolutions that shook Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan, from 2003 to 2005, as the product of Western coups intended to weaken Russia. The Russians were concerned not merely at the strategic implications of these Revolutions, but also with the danger that the contagion might spread even to Russia.

In addition, the steady increase in the price of oil seems to have given President Putin in 2005 the incentive to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy.ⁱⁱⁱ

Western countries, for their part, have become disillusioned with Russia as it has grown more authoritarian at home and domineering abroad. From the Western point of view, the eastward expansion of NATO and the EU occurred in response to the requests of the formerly Communist states for security and prosperity. The West had responded out of a desire to democratize and stabilize the areas bordering on Western Europe. It had hoped eventually to achieve the same goals in Russia.

Russia's relations with the Chinese are also uneasy. While Russia has turned to China as its opposition to the West has grown, this alliance has limited prospects. The connections between the two are bad, and the trade is minimal. More importantly, Russia fears the eventual loss of some of its eastern territories to China as that country grows stronger. The break-up of the Soviet Union has left a Russia with half the population and industrial strength of the former Soviet Union facing a dynamic China with a population 15 times as large and an economy three times the size. Less than 27 million Russians live in Siberia and the Far Eastern Federal District, which lie to the north of a country with a population of a billion and a third. Alone in Manchuria, which borders the Far Eastern Federal District, there are 107 million people. The chaos following the break-up of the Soviet Union has left the economy of the Far Eastern Federal District stagnant and the population of 6.7 million declining. As the Russians leave, the Chinese seep across the border, at, according to the Russians, Chinese instigation. An indication of Russian concern can be found in an interview given last September by Anatoly Utkin, the Director of the Centre for International Studies of the Institute for USA and Canada. In this interview, Utkin states that between the USA and China, Russia will choose as ally the country that guarantees the safety of Russian Siberia and Far East.^{iv}

Russia also faces a potential rivalry with the Chinese over oil and gas in Central Asia. The infrastructure linking China to the Central Asian states is better than that joining Russia to them. There are likely limits, therefore, to the extent to which the Russians can work with the Chinese or alienate the West.

Foreign Islamist movements posed a serious threat to Russia in the Chechnya conflicts until they were diverted by the war in Iraq. This danger may return.

Second Conclusion

A Conflict Principally Caused by Russian Efforts to Dominate

The second conclusion we can draw from Georgian Conflict is that its immediate cause is to be found in Russian efforts to reassert dominance over Georgia. Russia apparently considers that it needs to control the southern Caucasus in order to buttress its hold on the northern Caucasus. As it has in other secessionist regions, Moscow has exploited the separation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to pressure and destabilize Georgia. In this policy, the Russians have been singularly aided by the short-sightedly bellicose and chauvinist attitudes of the Georgians. South Ossetia and Abkhazia revolted from 1992 to 94, when the Georgian president sought to take away their autonomy. Without Russian military support for their revolts,^v they would likely not have succeeded. Before the revolts, Abkhazis constituted only 13% of the population, of Abkhazia, while Georgians were 52%.^{vi}

After the cease-fires, Russia furnished progressively more economic, administrative and military help to the rebellious regions. In the end, ministers in the de facto governments, and officers in their armed forces were Russians. The Russians also moved in regular troops, besides their peacekeepers, issued passports to most residents, and allowed them to vote in Russian elections. Neither the Abkhazis nor the Ossetians are of Russian origin or culture.

Hostile acts never totally ceased after the cease fires. Georgia staged incursions into the two territories. Russia launched bombing raids, principally connected with the war in Chechnya, against Georgia.

In 2004, it became clear to the Georgians that the West was moving to recognize the independence of Kosovo. The Georgians felt that they had to reabsorb the two rebellious regions into Georgia before this happened. They tried to conquer South Ossetia.^{vii} They occupied districts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia where they set up alternative governments.^{viii}

In the same year, 2004, according to Andrei Illarionov, who, until the end of 2005, was an economic adviser to President Putin, Russia began to prepare for an invasion of Georgia so as to get rid of President Saakashvili. Russia took its decision in reaction to the Rose Revolution that had brought Saakashvili to power at the end of 2003, and Saakashvili's announcement of his intention of taking Georgia into NATO. Russia also intended the invasion to be part of a more general attack on the West and the West's democratic, free market and security ideas for the post-Soviet space.^{ix}

Putin ordered Russian energy companies to blockade Georgia. When this failed, Russian special services blew up the pipelines and electrical power lines linking the countries. Then there was an attempted assassination of the Georgian leader of the opposition. When the Georgians expelled Russian spies, the Russians responded with an economic blockade. The Russians strengthened their forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and Russian diplomats spoke openly of an invasion of Georgia in September 2008.^x

According to Sergey Markedonov, the Head of the Interethnic Relations Department of the Institute of Political and Military Analysis in Moscow, Russia took the decision in February 2008 to "reinvigorate" the conflicts, by upsetting the status quo through, among other things, recognizing the independence of the two territories.^{xi}

After the NATO Bucharest Summit, this past April, had recognized the right of Ukraine and Georgia eventually to join NATO, Putin, in his meetings with President Bush, is reported to have warned that, if NATO accorded the countries a Membership Action Plan (MAP), at the NATO summit this December, Russia might respond by instigating the partition of Ukraine and recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Putin told Bush that Ukraine was “not a real nation,” that much of its territory had been “given away” by Russia. Ukraine would “cease to exist as a state” if it joined NATO. In that case, Putin hinted, Russia would encourage the secession of the Crimea and the eastern regions of Ukraine.^{xii} The Russian Chief of the General Staff then warned that Russia would take military as well as other types of measures against Georgia and Ukraine if these countries moved toward NATO membership.^{xiii}

There then followed in the second half of July Russian military manoeuvres just north of the Georgian border, putting troops into position, the repair by the Russian Army of the railway linking Abkhazia with Russia, and the transport of Russian troops and equipment into the two territories. The Russians allegedly shot down Georgian drones, carried out over-flights, dropped bombs, and launched cyber-attacks against Georgian official websites.^{xiv xv} They rejected German efforts to mediate differences over Abkhazia. By the beginning of August, there were a rising number of exchanges of fire between the Georgians and South Ossetians.

Among the troops that the Russians brought into Abkhazia and South Ossetia were Chechens. At the beginning of July, Kavkaz Centre, a Chechen internet news agency, reported that Moscow intended to launch operations against Georgia in late August or early September.^{xvi} The Georgians counted on the Russians escalating tensions in the early fall.^{xvii}

The precise circumstances that led the mercurial Saakashvili to launch the attack on Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, on 7 August remain disputed. The Georgians admit that they had underestimated the strength of the Russian forces, a figure that the Russians had carefully concealed.^{xviii} A more mature and prudent leader with more realistic goals would have held back.

James Sherr, the head of the Russia and Eurasia Programme at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, has observed, “The commanders of the Russian forces and their political masters...hoped that he (Saakashvili) would behave exactly as he behaved. The episode is a perfect application of what Russian military scientists call ‘reflexive control’: the defeat of an adversary through his own efforts.”^{xix}

Third Conclusion **Dissuading and Re-engaging Russia**

The final conclusion we may draw from the Georgian conflict is that the Western response should make it clear to Russia there is an economic price to pay for such aggressive behaviour. At the same time, we should respond to Russia on European security.

Russian Goals in the War

Among Russia’s war aims were:

- to block Georgian, and Ukrainian entry into NATO,

- to overthrow President Saakashvili and to discourage the appearance of other democratic governments in the former Soviet Union,
- to destroy the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan pipeline which has broken the Russian monopoly on transporting Caspian and Central Asian oil to the West
- to bring Georgia, Ukraine, and other former Soviet Republics to reconsider their pro-Western policies by demonstrating that the West can not protect them,
- to obtain acceptance by the West of a Russian sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union,
- to force the West to pay greater heed to Russia’s voice whenever major European and global issues are discussed,
- to bolster the current Russian leaderships hold on power.^{xx}

Political and military experts surveyed in latter August by the Russian analytical weekly *Kommersant-Vest* also declared that one aim of the war was to show that Russia was “now just like the United States” and could “independently and without agreement of the international community” use military force outside its borders.^{xxi}

The Balance of Forces and Interests

In pursuit of its goals, Russia struck at a favourable moment, since the United States is tied up militarily in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Moreover, the West European countries are dependent on Russia for 42 % of their gas and Russia has shown a willingness to cut off supplies as a means of political pressure.

In addition, the West needs Russian cooperation in prosecuting the war in Afghanistan, and in handling Iran and North Korea.

Both sides, however, have an interest in cooperating on terrorism, and non-proliferation. Both have also an interest in closer economic ties, and in the gradual inclusion of Russia in Western economic institutions.

On the other hand, Russia is vulnerable to Western financial and economic pressure. The basis of Russia’s muscular foreign policy, its energy power, has been weakened. Hydrocarbons amount to 60% of its exports. Since July the price of energy has halved.

Furthermore, foreign investment, and economic growth have all languished under Putin, with rates below those in the other ex-Soviet republics.^{xxii} As of a year ago, not a single manufacturing sector, apart from gas, had exceeded the production levels of Soviet times.^{xxiii} Russia is also falling behind in technology.

This state of affairs has left Russia especially dependent on Western goods and technology. In fact, since the invasion, both President Medvedev and Prime Minister Putin have seemed nervous about the impact of bad relations with the West on economic cooperation, and technology exchanges.^{xxiv}

Russian companies are also dependent on Western capital. Foreign banks are estimated to fund 70% of Russian debt.^{xxv} Russian banks and companies now owe about \$450 billion abroad, of which \$50 billion is due by year’s end.^{xxvi}

This double dependence makes the Russian economy unusually vulnerable. On the day of the outbreak of war with Georgia, the stock market plunged 6.5% or \$500 billion. During the week of the war, the capital outflow reached \$16 billion.^{xxvii}

The world financial crisis and Russian policies discriminating against foreign investors have also taken their toll. Since May, the stock exchange has fallen by 78%. Foreign banks are no longer lending to Russian borrowers.^{xxviii} Because of the crisis of confidence, inter-bank lending is frozen, leading the Central Bank Chairman Sergei Ignatiev in mid-October to predict that 40 to 50 banks might go under. Others fear that more than 200 banks may collapse.^{xxix}

The total currency reserves available to the Kremlin, the International Capital Reserve, the National Wealth Fund, and the Russian Retirement Fund, have dropped \$150 billion since the invasion, to \$600 billion.^{xxx} They are likely to fall further. In the final week in October, the weekly losses reached \$31 billion.^{xxxi} In addition, the Kremlin plans to spend about \$400 billion to pay off Russia's foreign debts. Alexander Shokhin, President the president of Russian Union of Industrialists and Entrepreneurs, has stated that, at the present rate of expenditures, the nation's currency reserves could be exhausted in two years.^{xxxii}

Some observers are warning that if the financial crisis spreads to the real economy, the results could be politically destabilizing.^{xxxiii}

Russia's difficult economic situation puts it, for the moment, at least, in the position of a *demandeur* in any economic negotiations with the West. It will be little inclined, and probably now cannot afford, to threaten the EU with cuts in gas delivery so as to achieve its political ends. The crisis will have instead strengthened Russia's interest in further economic co-operation with the West, including negotiating a renewed partnership agreement with the EU, and in joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Western Goals

The first Western goal must be to dissuade Russia from pursuing its conflict with Georgia or considering taking on other ex-Soviet republics, especially Ukraine. There is a danger. Russia did not achieve all its objectives in Georgia. It has long had Ukraine in its sights. Relations just now are especially tense, because of Ukraine's campaign to join NATO, its support for Georgia in the war, and its refusal to renew the lease on the Russian naval base on Sevastopol in the Crimea when it expires in 2017.

It is important, for this reason, to be tough in economic negotiations. It should be made clear that any further Russian adventures will carry even heavier costs. To proceed as if nothing had happened, will be taken by the Russians as a tacit acceptance of their war with Georgia. The EU Commission has, over the objections of Poland and Lithuania, decided to resume talks with Russia on a Partnership Agreement, in the belief that the overall relationship with Moscow is too important to be left adrift. David Merkel, the US Assistant Secretary of State, has stated, "Russia's actions have put in jeopardy its membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO), its accession to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and others."^{xxxiv}

We should also reject any idea of a Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe. Because of Europe's history, European security cannot be preserved unless the same rules are applied everywhere on the continent. It was Germany's territorial claims on its eastern borders that led to the Second World War. Russia's claim to overlordship over Eastern Europe at the end of that War led to the Cold War.

It would be folly, however, to pursue the expansion of NATO under the present circumstances. NATO is incapable of defending either Georgia or Ukraine, and, in any case, does not have the political will to do so. An indefinite postponement of any consideration of a Membership Action Plan (MAP) for either Georgia or Ukraine may be one of the best things we can do to support their security.

Instead, the West should continue to offer economic support to the countries under threat, especially Georgia and Ukraine. The EU could offer more financial aid, more open trade deals, and hold out to them the prospect of eventual membership.

A dissuasive strategy by the West will likely only succeed if we take greater account of Russian concerns, especially the Russian complaint that their security concerns are being ignored. Otherwise, if we do not, we risk a spiral of increasing tensions.

The United States might either make missile defence a cooperative project with Russia or consider abandoning its attempt to install systems in the Czech Republic and Poland. President-elect Obama's spokesman has, in fact, stated that Obama has not yet made up his mind on the issue.^{xxxv} President Sarkozy of France, in his capacity of President of the European Union, suggested on 14 November, during a meeting between the EU and Russia, that the United States should think again about its intention to install the missile defence installations.

The issue has the capacity to prevent progress on other issues. President Medvedev had announced in his speech to the Duma on 5 November that, if Washington proceeded with its plan, Russia would respond by stationing short-range missiles in its exclave of Kaliningrad, which lies between Lithuania and Poland. At his meeting with President Sarkozy, however, the Russian President declared that all countries should refrain from unilateral steps before European security discussions next summer.

Sergei Rogov, the director of the Institute of the U.S. and Canada, has, however, declared that the Russians would only renew the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START-1), which expires in December 2009, if the Americans abandoned their plan for the missile defence installations.^{xxxvi} It is important to prevent this treaty from being caught in the back-draft of the Georgian crisis. Without START-1 and its mutual verification and on-site inspection régimes, strategic arms control will end. START-1 has cut by 50% the number of deployed weapons in American and Russian arsenals. The Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty of 2002 depends on START for its implementation.^{xxxvii} In October, the two sides had agreed to resume talks on renewing START-1 in mid-November.

Initiatives such as these would also make it easier to maintain existing co-operation with the Russians on Iran, Afghanistan, and North Korea, terrorism, and the storage of nuclear materials.

We might respond in some fashion to the Russian proposal for a European Security Treaty. The initiative is, however, a tricky one. As set out by President Medvedev in his speech at the World Policy Conference in Evian on 8 October, the Treaty would contain five principles:

1. A confirmation of the basic principles of security and international relations, including fulfilment of international obligations, respect for sovereignty, territorial integrity, and political independence and other principles set out in the UN Charter.

2. Non-use of force or the threat of force, and possibly approaches to the prevention and peaceful settlement of disputes
3. Guarantees of symmetrical security, including no promotion of security at the cost of others;
4. No exclusive right to maintain peace and security in Europe.
5. Basic parameters of arms control, and cooperation against trafficking, proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and terrorism.^{xxxviii xxxix}

One of the purposes of these principles is to prevent the further expansion of NATO. For the rest, they are mostly covered by other treaties, including the Helsinki Accords of 1975, which form the basis of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), an organization decried by some Russians as a relic of the Cold War, and the Conventional Forces in Europe Treaty (CFE), whose application Russia had suspended in July 2007, because the West refused to ratify amendments to the Treaty until Russia had honoured its Commitments, made in Istanbul in 1999, among other things, to withdraw its troops from Moldova and to obtain Georgian permission for their continuing presence there.^{xl}

What is left out of the Russian proposal is interesting. It does not cover some of the principles of the Helsinki Accords:

- inviolability of frontiers,
- non-intervention in internal affairs,
- respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and
- equal rights and self-determination of peoples.

Russia regularly violates these principles in its domestic policy and in its treatment of the other former Soviet states.

Proceeding on the basis of the Russian proposal, would have the effect of devaluing both the OCSE and the CFE.

Such a devaluation would be consonant with the five principles of Russian foreign policy that President Medvedev set out on 31 August. They notably include the right to give “special attention” to particular regions in which Russia has “privileged interests.” In other words, Russia intends to assert a right to a sphere of influence, apparently in the former Soviet Union.^{xli xlii}

Russia’s goal is also apparent in the proceed Union of Europe between Russia and the EU that is to be set up on the basis of the Treaty. The Union would deny a direct voice to both North America and the other former Soviet republics. The Union would constitute a single energy complex, which could prevent Europe from diversifying its sources of energy. The Treaty would provide for the co-ordination, presumably on the basis of equality between the two parties, of policy in the military, political, and strategic fields. One of the important reasons for excluding Russia from NATO and the EU has been that membership would give Russia the right of veto. This appears to be what Russia is seeking in the proposed Union.

The Union would be “supplemented” by NATO and Russia’s Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Co-operation Organization, which includes Central Asia and China.^{xliii} Thus, Canada and the United States would be denied a direct voice in the co-ordination of policy, while the other former Soviet states would have a voice only if they were members of one of Russia’s security and regional organizations.

Instead of proceeding on the basis of the Russian initiative to modernize European security, we might propose modernizing the CFE. This treaty limits the forces that can be maintained in Europe. Among other things, the Treaty is supposed to prevent the massing of Russian forces on its borders, such as we saw in the invasion of Georgia.^{xliv}

We might also consider putting more life into the OSCE. During the EU's meeting with Russia on 14 November, President Sarkozy suggested that the OSCE might hold talks next summer on a new European security architecture.

If we wish to overcome the present tensions with Russia, we must make it clear that there is a price to pay for aggressive behaviour. At the same time, we must devise a new security architecture for Europe, and draw Russia once again out of its shell by involving it further in dialogue and international institutions. We must, however, insist on maintaining the principles that have guided us in bringing an end to the Cold War, notably those of democracy and human rights, the sovereign equality of all states, including the right to control their own destiny and to have non-interference in their internal affairs. To avoid further break-downs in the relationship, we must also be prepared for a greater long-term engagement with Russia and the other countries of the former Soviet Union.

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