Russia resurgent? Moscow's campaign to 'coerce Georgia to peace'

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Few doubt the strategic significance of the 2008 Russian military campaign in Georgia. The Russian leadership has described 8 August, the day Georgian forces began their operation against Tskhinvali in the disputed region of South Ossetia and Russian forces poured south across the Russian border into this Georgian territory, as 'Russia's 9/11'.[1] Many western analysts would agree that some kind of watershed has been crossed, but would see it rather as one that divides periods in post-Cold War relations between Russia and the West. Western states have been aghast at the expansion of Russia's initial supposedly 'defensive' military foray in South Ossetia into a wider occupation of numerous regions of the Georgian state and at the Kremlin's open repudiation of Georgia's territorial integrity. The speed and scale of the Russian offensive in the name of 'coercing Georgia to peace',[2] the largest Russian military incursion into a foreign state since the collapse of Soviet power, have also prompted fundamental questions about the motivations and objectives of the Russian leadership.

The strong support Georgia received for its sovereignty and territorial integrity during this crisis from western states, for all their initial concerns about Georgia's assault on Tskhinvali, reflects a robust commitment to Georgian statehood. However, it also seems to reflect an undercurrent of alarm that the example of what effectively became a Russian occupation of strategic areas of Georgia, if not repudiated in the strongest of terms and reversed, might become a precedent and encourage more uninvited Russian military perambulations around post-Soviet states. It could even prefigure the kind of brinkmanship and coercive diplomacy on the borders of new NATO states that would risk triggering a much wider confrontation.

Two quite contrary narratives are in circulation. Russia claims that its operation and subsequent security measures in Georgia have been *sui generis* and essentially retaliatory—an ad hoc, exceptional, though large-scale, response to a Georgian attack in South Ossetia. Critics of Moscow's offensive argue, on the contrary, that

[1] Speech to members of the Valdai Club, 12 Sept. 2008, http://www.kremlin.ru/text/speeches/2008/09/12/1644.

[2] 'Russia in difficult battles is now conducting a peace coercion operation', Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin, 10 Aug. 2008; President Medvedev used the same term in an award ceremony for Russian servicemen who took part in the operation, 18 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru.

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Russia's ostensible commitment to protect 'Russian citizens', a core justification of the intervention in Georgia, has principally served as a means of coercion and a device to expedite military intervention in that country for other strategic purposes. In the case of the latter interpretation, the question arises whether there is a new determination in the Kremlin to use military power in a more open-ended way as an instrument of policy to enforce compliance by neighbour states and assert Russian 'regional superpower' status, as Russia considers befits its rising status and influence in the global system.

Against the background of such concerns, this article explores the initial determinants, rationale, conduct and objectives of the Russian military campaign in Georgia. The intention is not to assess Georgian policy, nor by failing to do so to present Georgian policy in South Ossetia as faultless. Nor are actual or potential international policy responses to the Russian campaign the object of this analysis. But the article is written on the assumption that such policy responses must reflect a measured evaluation of Russian motivations during this crisis.

Georgia, South Ossetia and Russia: confrontation and co-existence

The antecedents to the 2008 crisis date back at least as far as the bitter small conflict between Tbilisi and local authorities in South Ossetia in 1991–2 that followed the declaration by the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast in 1990 of independence from Tbilisi.[3] The Georgians claim that the Russians helped and supplied the Ossetians in various ways during this conflict, and the South Ossetians certainly received assistance from their ethnic kin across the border in North Ossetia, which lies within the Russian Federation. In June 1992 the chairman of the Russian Supreme Soviet claimed that the killing of civilians in South Ossetia could compel Russia to consider a request by the South Ossetians to join the Russian Federation. This option, and the South Ossetian conviction that their human rights would not be secure under rule from Tbilisi, remained background factors over the following decade and a half.

A ceasefire mediated by Russia in June 1992 (the Sochi Agreement) initiated a peacekeeping operation, involving a Joint Control Commission and joint Russian–Ossetian–Georgian patrols. In fact, this served to freeze the conflict in a frame that maintained the de facto separation of South Ossetia from the rest of Georgia. Tskhinvali was controlled by the separatists, but villages in the conflict zone remained split between those inhabited and controlled by the Georgians and those inhabited and controlled by the Ossetians. Georgia never viewed the Russian peacekeepers as impartial and in later years even believed they were shielding South Ossetian militias involved in attacks on Georgian villages.[4] However, from mid-1992 to mid-2004 the situation in South Ossetia was remarkably peaceful. It existed as a

[3] As the conflict began before the collapse of the USSR, it was significant that South Ossetia was not actually under the control of the new Georgian state for a single day thereafter.

[4] For the detailed composition of the Russian peacekeepers, see John Mackinlay and Evgenii Sharov, 'Russian peacekeeping operations in Georgia', in John Mackinlay and Peter Cross, eds, *Regional peacekeeping: the paradox of Russian peacekeeping* (Tokyo: United Nations University Press, 2003), pp. 63–87.

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shady backwater and cross-border activities between the territory controlled by the South Ossetians and that held by Tbilisi continued, even if they involved smuggling and crime. Tensions increased as President Saakashvili, who was elected in 2004, committed his presidency to restore his country's lost territories.

Russia forged a symbiotic relationship with South Ossetia. Moscow distributed Russian passports to a large proportion of South Ossetians. A Russian citizen and resident of Moscow (of South Ossetian origin), Eduard Kokoity, was elected president of South Ossetia in 2001. During Putin's period as Russian president Moscow steadily built up the presence of its security personnel in the South Ossetian administration, and Russian recognition of Georgian territorial integrity seemed to be expressed narrowly in the sense of not voicing territorial claims on Georgia (had it done so it would have been unable to maintain its claim as a 'peacekeeper'). Overall, Tbilisi believed Russia to be pursuing a process of de facto absorption of South Ossetia (and also the region of Abkhazia, through parallel processes) into Russia. A major step in this direction was a Russian presidential decree in April 2008 which established direct official Russian relations with the South Ossetian and Abkhaz authorities.

All this occurred against the background of serious crises in Russian–Georgian relations, which seemed to intensify as Georgia deepened its security relationship with NATO and the United States. For example, in 2006, after Tbilisi had arrested four Russian military intelligence officers in Georgia for espionage, Moscow closed all air, sea and land transport links with Georgia and deployed an armoured force in instant readiness to move into South Ossetia in the event of military hostilities. At that time Russia and Georgia seemed to be preparing for armed conflict, while separatists in Ossetia and Abkhazia were apparently ready to provide a pretext for this.[5]

In July and August 2008 the situation in South Ossetia deteriorated sharply. Georgian positions and settlements in South Ossetia were targeted by Ossetian separatist militias. Serious clashes occurred between the two sides in the week before 8 August. Georgia viewed Russia as involved by proxy. Hundreds of 'volunteers' arrived in South Ossetia and were integrated into the South Ossetian Interior Ministry forces—apparently South Ossetians who had been serving in police and militarized formations in North Ossetia. Georgia accused Russia of direct complicity in allowing such 'mercenaries', and their military hardware, through the Roki tunnel (connecting South Ossetia with North Ossetia), while Russia claimed that the movement of Georgian troops and heavy armour to the conflict zone betrayed preparations for war.[6]

On 8 August 2008 controlled confrontation spilled over into outright conflict between Georgian and South Ossetian forces, which rapidly escalated into open combat between Georgian and Russian troops. The Russian and Georgian

[5] Pavel Felgenhauer, 'Russia and Georgia still teetering on brink of war', Jamestown Foundation, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, vol. 4, issue 184, 4 Oct. 2007.

[6] Statement by Russian Foreign Ministry, 3 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru. Interfax news agency, Moscow, 7 Aug. 2008, BBC Summary of World Broadcasts Former Soviet Union, available from http://www.bbc.monitoringonline.com (henceforth BBC), Mon Alert FS1 MCU 070808 hb/ym.

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descriptions of these events differ widely and are highly politicized. What seems beyond doubt is that from late on 7 August to mid-morning of 8 August a Georgian artillery and ground force attack on Tskhinvali resulted in Georgian control of most of the city and several ethnic Ossetian villages. Georgia sought to impede the advance of Russian armoured columns from the strategic Roki tunnel, but Russian forces engaged the Georgians in and around Tskhinvali. After some three days of combat Georgian troops were fully withdrawn from South Ossetia.

Retaliation or pre-planned offensive? Russian forces invade South Ossetia

Any assessment of Russian motivations and objectives at the outset of this conflict has to take account of the timing and form of the Russian military incursion into South Ossetia. Moscow insists that this was defensive and retaliatory, in response to Georgia's 'treacherous, massive attack on Tshkinvali' and on the locally deployed Russian peacekeeping contingent. This precipitated a conflict, it is claimed, which was neither desired nor provoked by Russia.[7] If this version is confirmed then many states would be inclined to accept that a forceful Russian military response, at least into South Ossetia, was shocking but perhaps unavoidable, even if Russia's legal case for intervention could still be questioned. But Russia cannot expect such understanding if it transpires that the Georgian seizure of Tshkinvali was triggered by Russian military movements across Georgia's internationally recognized border or by good evidence of a premeditated large-scale Russian invasion of Georgia. In those circumstances most states would view Russia's offensive not only as an open exercise of *realpolitik*, but as a challenge to international order.

One core dispute concerns whether the timing of the Georgian assault on Tshkinvali was triggered by Russian troop movements. Tbilisi claims that, faced with a military buildup among South Ossetian forces and unacceptable provocation against Georgian villages, it began its assault soon after—but only after—Russia had begun to move heavy armour through the Roki tunnel onto Georgian territory. In other words, Georgia's hand was forced to head off a Russian intervention, even if Tbilisi admits it seriously miscalculated how far that intervention would go within the South Ossetian conflict zone, let alone more widely, and was militarily unprepared for this.[8] This claim of an initial Russian violation of Georgian territory was received rather sceptically by most western states at first, and has still not been conclusively corroborated. Moscow's insistence that its forces did not cross the Georgian border until Russian peacekeepers in Tskhinvali were in severe jeopardy has gained quite wide acceptance internationally. The Georgian claim has, however, been strengthened by the release of telephone intercepts (lost for a month in the chaos of combat) indicating that at least part of a Russian armoured

[7] Statement by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, 8 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru. For the Russian government's timeline of events leading to its intervention, see 'Events in the zone of the Georgian–South Ossetian conflict on the eve of and immediately after the Georgian aggression', www.washingtontimes.com, 19 Aug. 2008.

[8] As described by Georgian Deputy Defence Minister Batu Kutelia, 'Tbilisi admits it miscalculated Russian reaction', *Financial Times*, 22 Aug. 2008, p. 7.

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regiment had crossed into South Ossetia by late on 7 August.[9] But even if Georgia struck Tskhinvali before such Russian forces crossed its border, Tbilisi could have acted (arguably, seriously and rashly overreacting in the kind of force employed) out of a belief that it faced an imminent and premeditated Russian offensive. In this scenario, by attacking Tskhinvali Georgia could have walked effectively into a trap, if Moscow was seeking a catalyst to justify a major offensive into Georgia.

It is probable that both Georgia and Russia had contingency plans for military operations in South Ossetia.[10] Equally, if Georgia was assessing options for seizing Tskhinvali, then Russian military intelligence could have obtained advance knowledge of this and placed key Russian units in combat readiness. An influential Russian military journal has asserted 'with absolute confidence' that Russian military intelligence knew the missions and forces assigned by Georgia for the seizure of South Ossetia, and that Russia's North Caucasus Military Command had 'painstakingly prepared' the deployment of an advance party of Russian forces through the Roki tunnel for this scenario.[11] This could be exaggerating the competence of Russian intelligence in the crisis to make the case that Russia was simply responding to moves on the Georgian side. However, regardless of how well-informed Russian contingency measures were, how credible is President Saakashvili's accusation that Russia had been seeking *pretexts* and South Ossetian militias staging *provocations* so that Russian troops massed on Georgian borders could enter Georgia, and that in this sense 'this is an operation that was planned and prepared a long time ago'?[12]

One cannot extrapolate Russian strategic intentions simply from Russian force dispositions. But these deployments do offer quite strong evidence that the Russian invasion of South Ossetia and then deeper into Georgia was indeed planned and even expected rather than spontaneous and improvised. Saakashvili seems convincing in his assertion that by August Russia had established the infrastructure and logistical support for an invasion by a large contingent of Russian troops, though Saakashvili claims he expected a smaller offensive than actually took place and one in Abkhazia rather than South Ossetia.[13]

Certainly the swiftness with which large Russian contingents were deployed after 8 August into South Ossetia and beyond was remarkable. An elite paratrooper battalion and smaller special forces unit spearheaded the Russian invasion, and these were followed immediately by the deployment of the equivalent of a motor-rifle

[9] 'Georgia offers fresh evidence on war's start', *New York Times*, 16 Sept. 2008. This is in flat contradiction to the claim made by Prime Minister Putin that Russian troops took control of the Roki tunnel only in the afternoon of 8 August and that the real deployment took place the next day: 'Three hours with Vladimir Putin', *Russia Profile*, 12 Sept. 2008, http://www.russiaprofile.org. It does not seem likely that any Russian armour entering Georgia on 7 August could have been part of a regular rotation of the Russian peacekeeping contingent located in South Ossetia.

[10] However, it seems that Georgia did not conduct any exercises pitting its military forces against the Russian 58th Army as the potential adversary and therefore had no plans on how to block the Roki tunnel: Jamestown Foundation, Koba Liklikadze, 'Lessons and losses of Georgia's five-day war with Russia', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 5: 185, 26 Sept. 2008.

[11] Ilya Kedrov, 'War in the background of the Caucasus mountain range', *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kuryer*, 31 Aug. 2008.

[12] Statement at National Security Council session, 9 Aug. 2008; Rustavi-2 TV, Tbilisi, 9 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon Alert TCU 100808 fm/ec.

[13] Interview in Tbilisi, 28 Aug. 2008; Report in *L'Express*, 1 Sept. 2008, BBC Mon TCU 070908 ea.

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division of the 58th Army with tanks and heavy self-propelled artillery pieces.[14] Along with the rapid deployment of a Black Sea naval task force, this suggests the operation of an integrated combat plan, which had assembled and earmarked troops some from beyond the North Caucasus Military District and had large reinforcements ready to follow the initial incursion.[15] Elements of the 76th Air Assault Division based in the Leningrad Military District were quickly airlifted into Tskhinvali.

A key factor for the timing and success of any 'Georgia plan' of the Russian general staff was military readiness. This seems to have been greatly assisted by Russia's 'Caucasus 2008' military exercises, held at the end of July 2008. These exercises included the rehearsal of operations in the Roki district and the delivery of assistance to Russian peacekeepers stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.[16] Although the exercises formally concluded on 2 August, it seems that the forces remained concentrated and in high combat readiness.[17] But the exact timing of the intervention during August–September may not have been of Moscow's choosing, if for example South Ossetian forces were impatient to instigate a conflict in July–August to give Russia a pretext for intervention and could not be effectively controlled, despite the presence of Russian security officials in Tshkinvali.

Moreover, there is the possibility, as Saakashvili suggests, that the focus of Russian planning for a significant military campaign in Georgia was Abkhazia, but that Russia had to shift the first phase of combat to the more difficult terrain of South Ossetia as clashes erupted there and local events created a more compelling justification for carrying out a major offensive against Georgia.[18] Abkhazia is far more strategically and politically significant to Moscow than South Ossetia. One obvious scenario would have been Russian prompting for an operation by Abkhaz formations against the Kodori Gorge, precariously held by Georgia, which would have forced a response by Georgian troops. This would have given Russia a reason to accuse Georgia of using banned troops and arms in the security zone in the region and, in order to assist Russian peacekeepers, to send in units of the Russian 58th Army—as were sent instead into South Ossetia.[19]

[14] Richard Giragosian, 'Georgian planning flaws led to campaign failure', *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 15 Aug. 2008. Felix Chong, 'Russia resurgent: an initial look at Russian military performance in Georgia', Foreign Policy Research Institute, E-notes, 13 Aug. 2008, www.fpri.org.

[15] This would be true even if Saakashvili's claim that Russia 'brought 80,000 servicemen and mercenaries' and 'about 3,000 armoured vehicles' to Georgia in late August is grossly exaggerated: speech by Saakashvili on Channel 1 TV, Tbilisi, 24 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon Alert TCU 250808 vz/nk.

[16] Aleksandr Khrolenko and Fedor Bondarenko, 'These are our mountains', *Krasnaya zvezda*, 30 July 2008. Georgia protested at statements by Colonel-General Sergei Makarov, the commander of Russia's North Caucasus Military District, that his troops would practise such exercises: *Georgian Times*, 28 July 2008; RIA Novosti 16 July 2008, http://en.rian.ru/world. The exercises involved 8,000 troops, 700 combat vehicles and elements of the Black Sea fleet.

[17] Kedrov, 'War in the background of the Caucasus mountain range'.

[18] This argument was turned on its head by Russia's NATO envoy Dmitri Rogozin, who claimed that it was Saakashvili who planned to start military action against Abkhazia, but that the Abkhaz fortified regions turned out to be unassailable to the Georgian army and so it targeted South Ossetia which is more accessible territorially: RIA Novosti news agency, Moscow, 8 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol yy.

[19] This scenario of course remains speculative. But for an argument that Russia intended to use it to start a war some weeks later than 8 Aug. 2008, once Russian leaders had returned from vacation and foreign travels, see Boris Sokolov, 'Did Saakashvili lose?', *Gazeta*, www.gzt.ru, 19 Aug. 2008.

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An important piece of evidence consistent with this scenario is the mission conducted by a battalion of Russian railroad troops during June–July 2008 to repair 54 kilometres of a strategic railway in Abkhazia, which enabled the rapid forward deployment of troops and armour to the future conflict zone. Days after the Russian invasion of Georgia, a senior US State Department official bluntly described the purpose of that Russian mission as 'to rebuild the railroad to allow ammunition and other military supplies to aid a Russian invasion'.[20] The speed and logistical efficiency with which large Russian contingents were sent by land and sea into Abkhazia in August 2008 and then entered western Georgia similarly fits the picture of a major operation carefully planned by the Russian general staff.

Russia's case for military intervention

Russia has offered various justifications for its military intervention in South Ossetia, including arguments based on international law used by western states for interventions in the Balkans and elsewhere. These justifications have been intended mainly for an international audience, since the Kremlin seems to have expected that a basic self-defence argument would be sufficient to win domestic backing and that this would enable it to disregard domestic legislation that requires a resolution of the Federation Council to authorize the use of armed forces outside Russia's borders. The rationale offered by Moscow for its first interstate post-Soviet war has major practical policy relevance, since a number of neighbour states are concerned that this is how Moscow may seek to validate future intrusions across its borders.

First, Moscow argued that its actions were driven by force protection and self-defence. There had been an imperative need, it insisted, to defend the Russian peacekeeping contingent under attack in Tskhinvali, some dozen of whom lost their lives, and effectively deter further attacks on these Russian servicemen. This echoed the case put by the United States in the past for force protection of peacekeepers. It offers grounds for Russian emergency assistance or evacuation of its peacekeepers from foreign soil, but not the scale of the Russian response, let alone the open-ended use of force. Despite this, Russia presented the 'illegal use of force' against its peacekeepers as an act against the Russian Federation itself, justifying self-defence under article 51 of the UN Charter.[21]

Second, Russia's President Medvedev offered the more specific legal defence that Georgia's assault on Tskhinvali was a 'gross violation of the mandates that the international community gave Russia in the peace process'.[22] The large-scale deployment of troops of Russia's 58th Army and other units to South Ossetia was described as a 'reinforced Russian peacekeeping contingent'. As Russia's offensive expanded, however, Moscow declared that 'Russia in difficult battles is now conducting a peace coercion operation', in which 'for troops to be able to operate

[20] US State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs, Matthew Bryza, in remarks on Georgian TV channel Rostavi-2, 11 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon Alert FS1 FsuPol gv.

[21] Russian letter to the UN Security Council, 13 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru.

[22] Statement on 8 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru; see also statement by Russia's envoy to the OSCE, Vladimir Voronkov, RIA Novosti news agency, Moscow, 8 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol yy.

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in a normal situation the enemy infrastructure directly supporting combat operations must … be neutralized'.[23] The use of such enforcement, which involved high-intensity combat and strikes deep in Georgia, in a peace operation is highly questionable. But irrespective of this, it is important to note that international agreements limited Russia's peacekeeping role in South Ossetia to monitoring the ceasefire, with no provision for peace enforcement.

A third argument, calculated to appeal to nationalist sentiment within Russia, was a simple but vociferous condemnation of Georgian 'aggression' in general in South Ossetia. But this offers no legal basis for Russia's 'peace coercion' offensive or other forms of combat against Georgia. International norms prohibiting the aggressive use of force regard aggression as conduct by one state against another. South Ossetia was not recognized as a state, even by Russia at the time of its intervention, although on a psychological level Russian leaders may have viewed the region as having become de facto 'our territory'.[24] Moscow was on firmer ground with the claim—aimed at both domestic and international audiences—that it acted in defence of its 'citizens' in the civilian population in South Ossetia. But this assertion of Russia's right to protect its citizens abroad by force, examined further below, is highly controversial.

Fourth, in an attempt to appeal to a higher normative agenda and conjure up emotive images of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans, Russian leaders have twinned Georgian aggression with 'genocide', a term introduced by Putin early in the crisis and reiterated by other Russian politicians.[25] Having raised the temperature with this very serious claim, Russian officials argued that their mission was intended first to prevent an unfolding humanitarian disaster and second to save those for whom Russia is responsible.[26] Moscow accused Georgia of violations of international humanitarian laws, again recycling the rationale for interventions in the Balkans in the 1990s.[27] Lavrov argued more specifically that the Russian constitution and Russian laws made it 'unavoidable for us to exercise responsibility to protect'.[28]

On the face of it this seems an affirmation of the Responsibility to Protect initiative (R2P) agreed by the UN General Assembly at the 2005 World Summit, with all that this implies for involvement in the domestic jurisdiction of states. It also suggests an extraordinary volte-face in the official Russian attitude to the idea of humanitarian intervention and Moscow's characterization of it as a western

[23] Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin, 10 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru.

[24] This is revealed in Putin's remarks: 'What did you want us to do? … when an aggressor comes into your territory, you need to punch him in the face—an aggressor needs to be punished'. Mgeeting with members of the Valdai Club, Sochi, as reported by Bridget Kendall, 11 Sept. 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/Fr/-/1/hi/world/europe/7611482.stm.

[25] This began after Prime Minister Putin reported from a visit to the North Caucasus that 'we are seeing elements of a kind of genocide against the Ossetian people': meeting between Medvedev and Putin, 10 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru. See also Medvedev's interview with the BBC, 26 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru, and comments by Mikhail Margelov, chairman of the Russian Federation Council's International Affairs Committee, 'Isolating Russia will not be possible', *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 27 Aug. 2008.

[26] Lavrov in press conference, 12 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru; Medvedev in meeting with leaders of parliamentary factions of the State Duma, 11 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru.

[27] Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, Interfax news agency, Moscow, 9 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol iz/sw.

[28] Interview for BBC, 9 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru. Lavrov invoked this principle again in addressing the 63rd Session of the UN General Assembly, 27 Sept. 2008, http://www.mid.ru.

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political instrument. However, closer scrutiny indicates that Russia was hardly driven by R2P imperatives. In examining this it becomes clear that Moscow has tried to merge broad humanitarian and more specific 'defence of Russian citizens' rationales

First, we need to consider the seriousness of the threats in South Ossetia and the proportionality of Russia's response. Despite Russian claims and considerable loss of life, there is no good evidence of mass atrocity crimes in the region or of a realistic risk of them (a precautionary criterion for R2P). A foundation of Russian claims, disseminated instantly through Russian state-controlled media, is that Georgia's attack on Tskhinvali in itself resulted in more than two thousand deaths, mostly Ossetians and a majority of them Russian citizens. But the way this highly sensitive figure of casualties was reached has not been explained and the figure itself seems to be considerably exaggerated.[29]

Moreover, Russian claims of genocide and ethnic cleansing by Georgia contrasts with undeniable evidence of the destruction of Georgian villages and the forced displacement of thousands of ethnic Georgians by South Ossetian militia, both in South Ossetia in the wake of the Russian military advance and, for a period, even deeper in Georgia. Indeed, the Ossetian leadership used the claims of genocide committed by Georgia to help justify their actions in driving the Georgian civilian population out of South Ossetia. Overall, despite the tragic loss of many lives, the scale of the Russian reaction was clearly disproportionate as a militarized humanitarian response, especially once Russian forces penetrated deeper into Georgia.

Second, there has been little to show that Russia has actually held serious humanitarian concerns in South Ossetia at any time in the post-Soviet period. Russian forces took no serious steps to impede the displacement of the Georgian population there during its campaign. Nor does humanitarianism seem to have motivated Russian policy in the wider region. The brutal assault launched by Putin on the city of Grozny in Chechnya within the Russian Federation in 1999, his overall uncompromising prosecution of that war and his disregard for its cost in terms of civilian lives lost in Chechnya (tens of thousands of Russian citizens were killed, many of them ethnic Russians) suggest little commitment to the principles of proportionality and discrimination in war or acceptance of the obligation to protect non-combatants.[30]

Third, the Russian intervention in South Ossetia was not really about the protection of *any* civilians, as would have been expected under the R2P concept, but about the protection of (Russian) nationals. In Lavrov's words. 'Russia will not allow the death of its compatriots to go unpunished … the life and dignity of

[29] By mid-September the investigations of South Ossetia's Prosecutor General confirmed 'more than 500 people' killed during Georgia's attack, while a previous Human Rights Watch interrogation of local doctors suggested (though it did not try to make a definitive claim) that 44 civilians died and fewer than 300 were wounded from military action in the Tskhinvali region. 'Russia keeps troops in Georgia', BBC News, Europe, 9 Sept. 2008. http://newsvote.bbc.co.uk; Kavkas-Press, Tbilisi, 14 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon TCU 140808 ra/nk. The cautious Human Rights Watch position on the issue is explained in 'Report on civilian casualties in South Ossetia', *Johnson's Russia List*, 2008, 175, 26 Sept. 2008, www.cdi.org/russia.johnson.

[30] I am grateful here for the succinct analysis by S. N. MacFarlane, 'The crisis in Georgia', Strategic Datalink 3, Aug. 2008, Canadian International Council, http://www.igloo.org/canadianinternational.

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our citizens, wherever they are, will be protected.'[31] Russia's NATO envoy was even blunter: 'the issue of using military force to protect our citizens is a matter of principle', albeit 'within the framework of the humanitarian aim of saving peoples'.[32] As observed by one of the architects of the R2P initiative, however, the defence of nationals 'has been the basis for all kinds of interventions in the past that were not humanitarian'.[33] Russian officials have blurred the distinction between the responsibility of a state to protect its population inside its borders, and the responsibilities a state maintains for populations *outside* its borders. R2P does not refer to an individual country taking direct action to protect its nationals located outside its borders; and anyway there is no legal authority for a R2P-based military intervention in the absence of UN Security Council approval.[34]

Russia's insistence on its right to defend by force its citizens outside its borders is open to manipulation. Even if we disregard the R2P criteria, a justification under the provision for self-defence in article 51 of the UN Charter would be received sceptically 'when a country first confers its citizenship on a large number of people outside its borders and then claims it is entitled to intervene coercively to protect them'.[35] This conflation of Russia's responsibilities within and outside its borders, examined further below, is directly linked to Moscow's effort to undermine Georgia's claim to inviolable territorial integrity. This is a longstanding theme in Russian–Georgian relations and arguably in Russian relations with many other post-Soviet states. But in this latest crisis Moscow has struggled to contain its consistent disparagement of Georgian territorial integrity in word and deed within the frame of international law.

By presenting the 'will of the people' in South Ossetia and Abkhazia as an overriding principle, Russia set itself on a course to recognition of the statehood of these regions. Medvedev initially hedged about their status, asserting that 'nobody is questioning the principle of territorial integrity' in international law, but that 'the question is one of a specific situation in a specific country'. But after Russia recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Lavrov appealed directly to the authority of UN documents stating that 'every state has the duty to refrain from any forcible action which deprives peoples of their right to self-determination and freedom and independence'.[36] Such privileging of the right to self-determination over territorial integrity, even as a special case, has been a source of friction, as noted below, between Russia and even close partner states in the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) region. It also flies in the face of Russian policy in Chechnya—an embarrassing parallel that Russian leaders have tried to obscure. Lavrov is unconvincing in claiming that the fundamental difference between the

[31] Statement at press conference, 8 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru.
[32] Interview with Dmitriy Rogozin on Zvezda TV, Moscow, 12 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 MCU 130808 im/js.
[33] Gareth Evans, former Australian foreign minister, cited in 'Russia's reversal: where next for humanitarian intervention?', *Financial Times*, 23–4 Aug. 2008, p. 9.
[34] Russia's R2P justification is carefully examined in International Crisis Group, *Russia vs Georgia: the fallout*, *Europe Report* 195, 22 Aug. 2008, pp. 28–9.
[35] *Russia vs Georgia*, p. 28.
[36] Lavrov, quoting the Declaration of Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1970, 26 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru.

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cases is that 'South Ossetia and Abkhazia were never used for terrorist attack on Georgia' as 'Chechnya was a springboard for such terrorist attacks [on Russia]'.[37]

The strong impression remains that Russia is picking and mixing its legal arguments. Of course, neo-realist scholars may point out that such behaviour is not uncommon to major powers whose commitment to and interpretation of sovereignty are interest-driven and that norms may be violated if interests are perceived to require this.[38] The controversy over the recognition of Kosovo will be considered below. But if it is accepted that interests can be advanced through compliance with international norms, then Moscow appears to be indicating an increasingly revisionist stance and a declining regard for the social benefits to be derived from complying with broadly held norms in the international community. This may reflect Moscow's view that this community is overly dominated by western states, some of which, it seems to have convinced itself, have hostile intentions towards Russia.

Intervention and occupation under the guise of peacekeeping

Russia chose to present its offensive in South Ossetia and beyond as a peace support operation with coercive enforcement: 'forcing Georgia to peace'. This was a deliberate attempt to link the Russian campaign to the (rather limited) international mandate held by the Russian peacekeeping contingent in South Ossetia, as well as to disguise for a time the scale, tempo and goals of its military operations. However, senior Russian officers and many politicians have tended to regard 'peace creation' operations (as the Russian term is best translated) as a forceful activity based on their experience in early 1990s CIS conflicts, rather than as the international practice of UN-mandated peacekeeping in the Balkans or elsewhere.[39] For this reason, despite the specific conditions of the early post-Soviet years, the Russian approach to its operations at that time in Moldova–Transdniester, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Tajikistan may offer some insight into Russia's campaign in Georgia.

Old and new in Russian peace enforcement

The first point to note is that the Russian Ministry of Defence, which had strong operational control over these previous examples of peace enforcement, viewed them largely 'as a means to promote Russian security interests and protect ethnic Russians, as well as to legitimize Russian troops' presence in certain of the former Soviet states'[40]—all goals that could now be present in the conflict with Georgia.

[37] Meeting with Russian media editors, ITAR-TASS news agency, Moscow, 19 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol sw.

[38] See e.g. Stephen D. Krasner, *Sovereignty: organised hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 3–9, 228–31.

[39] The usual term in the Russian debate on peacekeeping operations in the CIS, *mirotvorcheskie operatsii* ('peacemaking' or 'peace-creating' operations), corresponds to operations that are often characterized by a strong element of enforcement or even coercion. However, for semantic convenience I continue to use here the unsatisfactory term 'peacekeeping'.

[40] Neil Malcolm, Alex Pravda, Roy Allison and Margot Light, *Internal factors in Russian foreign policy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 271–2.

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Second, Russia showed a strong preference for unilateralism in undertaking the initial intervention; in military terms, the CIS was the structure that could provide some *ex post facto* legitimacy. Again this applies to Russia's operation in Georgia; Moscow sought approval from the Russia-dominated Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) only after the event.

Third, Russian insistence on providing equal status in post-conflict peacekeeping arrangements to the 'second' party brought Moscow rather close to recognizing secession. The operation as such then inevitably turned into one of 'securing the quasi-independence of a rebellious province'.[41] In brief, Russian-style peacekeeping acted to support the continuity of secessionist aspirations in Transdniester and the South Caucasus. Against this background, and in the light of Russia's symbiotic relationship with South Ossetia (noted above), it is not surprising that Moscow was ready to sustain separatism in the 2008 conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia.

But the parallels with the past should not be exaggerated. In this new crisis Russia entered the local conflict at its height and has been unequivocally a military participant supporting one side, the South Ossetian regime, so that there could be no pretence of developing a ceasefire that somehow mediated between the interests of the local parties in the conflict.[42] Instead, Moscow used military coercion to press for a once-and-for-all solution by supporting South Ossetian separation from the Georgian state and seeking to compel Georgian acceptance of this. Indeed, it seems that a determination to avoid the re-establishment of the frozen conflict format was built into Russian objectives.

This picture contrasts with any previous Russian 'peace creation' operation. The only partially valid comparison is with the Russian intervention in the Tajik civil war of 1993–7. From the outset Russian forces in Tajikistan were arguably a broad instrument of state policy, supporting core Russian security and geopolitical goals. Moreover, through the so-called collective peacekeeping forces they actively supported one side, the Tajik government.[43] However, a major difference between this episode and the campaign in Georgia is that in the latter Russia poses a challenge to the incumbent government.

Are there continuities, however, in the role that the Russian military assigns to military force in 'peace creation'? In the mid-1990s Russia developed military guidelines for CIS peacekeeping operations. But these had little impact. They failed to change the existing missions on CIS territory or the way Russia implemented them.[44] The guidelines proposed that peace support operations could take place only after the parties have agreed on a cease-fire. But in reality they failed to shift a

[41] Pavel Baev, *The Russian army in a time of troubles* (London: Sage, 1996), p. 137.

[42] The symbiosis between Russia and this regime is reflected in the appointment in mid-August 2008 of General Vasily Lunev to the position of commander of the Russian 58th Army. Lunev had been defence minister of the self-proclaimed republic of South Ossetia for six months in 2008.

[43] Lena Jonson, *The Tajik war: a challenge to Russian policy*, Discussion Paper 74 (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1998), pp. 12–17; Nicole Jackson, *Russian policy and the CIS: theories, debates and actions* (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 140170.

[44] Lena Jonson, *Keeping the peace in the CIS: the evolution of Russian policy*. Discussion Paper 81 (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1994), pp. 23–7.

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tendency in Russian strategic thinking to place 'peace operations' on a continuum with low-intensity conflicts. According to this Russian 'forces to prevent local conflicts' were assigned a war-fighting role, and the peacekeeping mission was integrated into the spectrum of conflict. In this sense so-called peacekeeping forces represented the first echelon of forces capable of responding to small-scale threats, to be supported by strong second-echelon forces if the need arises. However, many Russian officers had found it difficult to conceive of this distinction in practice once a conflict had escalated into an armed confrontation.[45] From the perspective of previous Russian military thought, therefore, Russia's description of the aim of the first phase of its operation as to 'force Georgia to peace' may not have seemed so bizarre to Russian general staff officers, if they considered an organic link to exist between their peacekeeping contingent in South Ossetia and 58th Army follow-on forces. Yet the reality was that Russia's half battalion of peacekeepers in South Ossetia had never previously exercized a war-fighting role.[46]

A thinly disguised occupation

From a political viewpoint Russia's peace operation discourse was used to support the specious claim that Georgian territory was not occupied but temporarily under the custody of troops operating under a limited and even internationally approved mandate. Moscow was ready even to reject the idea that there existed a Russian–Georgian conflict, arguing that Russia was not party to the conflict as it had simply 'reinforced' its peacekeeping contingent to realize the peacekeeping function assumed in the Sochi agreements of 1992.[47]

This claim appeared increasingly surreal. For most of the international community it was difficult to view Russian action except as a short but high-intensity combined arms operation, followed by territorial occupation. Aside from Russia's air campaign, which involved over 300 combat aircraft, and the blockade of the Georgian coast by vessels of the Russian Black Sea fleet, Russian troops were rapidly dispersed over swathes of Georgian territory far from the areas previously patrolled by Russian peacekeeping units. In brief, after taking Tskhinvali Russian troops entered undisputed Georgian territory to cut the main east–west road and railway west of Gori. As fighting commenced in South Ossetia, Russia rapidly transferred a 9,000-strong force of so-called 'reconnaissance and combat troops' to Abkhazia as a means of preventing 'Georgia's planned military invasion of Abkhazia'.[48] This

[45] See Maj.-Gen. Ivan Vorobyev, *Krasnaya zvezda*, 22 Feb. 1994, and in 'Mirotvorcheskie operatsii', *Voennaya mysl'*, no. 5 (1994), pp. 43–7. For the general debate among Russian officers, see also Dov Lynch, *Russian peacekeeping strategies in the CIS: the cases of Moldova, Georgia and Tajikistan* (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 96–104.

[46] Moreover, the contingent of Russian troops that had been specially trained for international peacekeeping deployments, the 2,000-strong 15th Motor Rifle Brigade stationed in the Samara region and set up in 2004, does not seem to have been involved in the operation. It had its first major exercise in September 2008 deep in Russia. Interfax-AVN website, Moscow, 20 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol yy.

[47] Interview with Vladimir Voronkov, acting Russian permanent representative to the OSCE, *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 20 Aug. 2008.

[48] Statement from the force's headquarters, ITAR-TASS news agency, Moscow, 11 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol vs. The chief of the general staff of the Abkhaz armed forces later presented the details of a supposed plan by Georgia to attack and seize all of Abkhazia after the full seizure of South Ossetia: Interfax news

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ostensible pre-emption of attack by Georgia actually provided encouragement for the de facto authorities in Abkhazia to recapture the Upper Kodori valley from Georgian control (the only area of Abkhazia that Tbilisi governed) in a lightning operation, which followed an artillery and aerial bombardment. Meanwhile Russian mechanized infantry had opened up a new front by passing through the UN security zone and invading undisputed Georgian territory from Abkhazia. Although there were no battles in western Georgia, the town of Zugdidi and the Georgian military base at Senaki were occupied, offering control of the main road and railway at a second location. The Black Sea port of Poti, Georgia's main commercial outlet to the outside world (some 150–200 kilometres from South Ossetia) was seized and had to halt operations.

Medvedev declared the end of the Russian offensive on 12 August. This was the day a six-point ceasefire accord was agreed between presidents Sarkozy and Medvedev and signed up to by Saakashvili, in a strenuous effort by the EU to confine the movements of Russian forces. However, the grip of the occupation tightened. The Russian military were given open-ended instructions to destroy Georgian 'pockets of resistance and other aggressive actions'. Lavrov meanwhile declared high-handedly that they would 'determine just which areas of Georgia must be demilitarised and placed under control'.[49] Russia referred to its right to take 'additional security measures' under the terms of the ceasefire and insisted it would itself interpret what this required.

On this basis, the Russian high command argued that the ceasefire entitled 'Russian peacekeepers' to 'control the situation in the [Georgian port] city of Poti and other settlements by patrolling' and that Russian units could take control of military bases and warehouses near the towns of Gori, Senaki and Poti in order to register and render secure weapons.[50] Moscow also claimed the ceasefire accord confirmed its role as peacekeeper, while in the same breath it insisted that the Georgian peacekeeping contingent could never return to South Ossetia.[51]

For Georgia, however, the most alarming aspect of Russia's 'additional security measures' was the formation of broad buffer zones, so-called 'security zones', unilaterally determined by Moscow.[52] One of these was supposedly located on the periphery of South Ossetia, but in practice seemed to encompass much of the central part of Georgia, including the only road that connects the eastern and western parts of the country. Another zone was putatively on the periphery of Abkhazia, but so wide as to include the strategic Senaki airfield and the entrances to the harbour of Poti. The Russian military even began to establish lines of

agency, Moscow, 22 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon TCU 220808 sa/nk.

[49] Meeting of Medvedev with Russia's defence minister and chief of general staff, 12 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru; Lavrov at press conference, 12 Aug. 2008, http://ww.mid.ru.

[50] Anatoliy Nogovitsyn, deputy chief of the Russian General Staff, Interfax news agency, Moscow, 23 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon Alert FS1 MCU 230808 hb/er; Interfax-AVN website, 14 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol ps/ab.

[51] Interview with Lavrov, 13 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru.

[52] This contrasted with President Sarkozy's view that the 'additional security measures' of the ceasefire permitted Russian forces only to enter a zone a few kilometres deep from the South Ossetian administrative border: AFP news agency, Paris, 16 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon EU1 EuroPol FS1 FsuPol kk.

permanent 'observation posts for the [Russian] peacekeeping contingent', an inner one on the South Ossetian administrative border and an outer one far beyond it.[53] Moscow only reluctantly agreed to abolish this outer line on the arrival of an EU observer mission in the 'security zone'.

Russia quickly found itself at odds with the EU interpretation of the 12 August ceasefire agreement. The EU insisted that Russia should withdraw all its units outside Georgia, leaving minimal forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and enable access by EU observers to those regions.[54] In tense EU–Russia negotiations in Moscow in September, Russian negotiators even tried unsuccessfully to remove the stipulation in the ceasefire that Russian troops must withdraw 'to the positions they held before the start of hostilities'.[55] Russia also initially tried to exclude EU observers even from the 'security zones', but then relented on the grounds that the presence of EU observers in these zones would serve as a guarantee of Georgian compliance with an accord on non-aggression.

In particular, Russian leaders showed they had no intention of allowing the ceasefire to ease their political control of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Moscow was adamant that EU observers would not be needed in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The ceasefire specified that 'international discussions' would be held on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia will need to show more flexibility than it did at the outset if these negotiations held in Geneva are to progress. Russia's initial position was that such discussions should be confined (except by 'mutual agreement') to two topics: ways to ensure security and stability in the region, and settling the issue of refugees and displaced persons.[56] The first of these seems quite open-ended, and gives Russia the latitude to raise all kinds of matters that form part of its wider security agenda—such as an arms embargo for Georgia. As for the second topic, Moscow observed that Georgian refugees might conceivably return to South Ossetia, but only subject to lengthy political negotiations and keeping in mind that Palestinian refugees had not yet returned. Pointedly, Russia insisted that 'international discussions' will exclude the key issue of the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia

It is probable that the Russian leadership decided at least by the time it sent its troops into Georgia to take the serious step of formally recognizing both disputed regions.[57] For Russia this means the irrevocable division of the Georgian state.

[53] 'Russia stringing posts around S. Ossetia', *Kommersant*, 21 Aug. 2008.

[54] For the Russian interpretation of how the ceasefire should be implemented, see commentary on 1 Sept. 2008, http://www.mid.ru.

[55] This attempt was overcome only when President Sarkozy, representing the EU, threatened to walk out of the negotiations: AFP news agency, Paris, 9 Sept. 2008, BBC Mon EU1 EuroPol FS1 FsuPol mjm. One way for Russia to reinforce its security presence without, it believes, technically breaching the terms of the ceasefire would be to bring into South Ossetia units of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, which do not belong to the army: 'Conflict', *Moskovskiy komsomolets*, 5 Sept. 2008.

[56] Statement of 8 Sept. 2008, http://www.mid.ru.

[57] Medvedev has stated that this decision 'arose after the outbreak of hostilities': meeting with members of the Valdai Club, 12 Sept. 2008, http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2008/09/12/1644. On the political

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However, the regional and international reverberations of this decision go much further.

For all the former Soviet states Russia has challenged, perhaps overturned, a basic international norm that accompanied the collapse of the multi-ethnic USSR—that the only territories that merited recognition would be those corresponding to first-level administrative subdivisions of the old Soviet state, that is, the Union republics. These became the new post-Soviet states. South Ossetia and Abkhazia formed lower-level subdivisions.

The same classification also applies to Kosovo, which was subordinate to Serbia within Yugoslavia, and the 'precedent' of the western recognition of Kosovo had been lambasted by Russian diplomats during 2007–2008. After recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia Moscow has shifted its line. The unconvincing argument offered now is that there are insufficient grounds to recognize Kosovo as a special case in legal terms, *casus sui generis*, but that such special circumstances (to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe and realize their people's self-determination) are sufficient to entitle recognition in the cases of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.[58] Western diplomats disagree with this analysis, and in an effort to distinguish the two cases also refer to the protracted process of international consultations undertaken to search for alternatives to recognition of Kosovo, consultations which Russia now blocks in the cases of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The Russian recognition of these regions, regardless of whether or not in practice it was encouraged by the Kosovo precedent, has serious consequences. First, since Moscow maintains that South Ossetia and Abkhazia are independent states and subjects of international law, it can renounce any role it might have as 'mediator' between the Georgian authorities and the breakaway republics and call on Tbilisi to talk directly to the South Ossetians and Abkhazians on issues such as refugee return or border issues. Since Georgia will not accept any arrangement that is tantamount to recognizing the republics as states, some other kind of formula for talks will need to be devised.

But at the same time Moscow remains the key background presence, and looming over any negotiation process is now a cloud of uncertainty about the possibility that these 'new states' will in the short or medium term take the further step of actually joining Russia. In 2001 Russia passed a law on the procedures for accepting new subjects of the Russian Federation, including even territories that do not have common borders with Russia. Politicians at the time were open about the fact that they had in mind regions such as South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Transdniester.

Initial discussion of this option seems to be focused on South Ossetia. A serious possibility is that South Ossetia will be united with North Ossetia, which would have the additional advantage of helping pre-empt any possible separatist tendencies in North Ossetia. South Ossetia joining Russia, a senior Russian parliamentarian

process towards recognition see Svetlana Gamova, 'Point of no-return', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 21 Aug. 2008. The date of recognition was 26 Aug. 2008.

[58] Medvedev interviewed by BBC Television, 26 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru.

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has commented tellingly, 'would be a pragmatic move which is based on legality and conforms to standards set in Russian law'.[59] The Moscow mayor considers that this 'has already taken place de facto', even if patience will be needed for the 'de jure process'.[60] While South Ossetia's 'foreign minister' describes the priority for the time being as legitimizing the republic's independence, the issue of joining Russia 'is to be considered in the future'.[61] A halfway house would be a decision on the part of South Ossetia or Abkhazia to join the loose and largely symbolic framework of the Russian–Belarus union, though presumably this could happen only if Belarus were to recognize the statehood of these republics first. Abkhazia suggests, rather optimistically, that this could be a way to gain access to international organizations.[62]

Yet despite all Russian lobbying, as of October 2008 no CIS state had been persuaded to give formal recognition to South Ossetia or Abkhazia. This reticence provides graphic evidence of Russia's international isolation on the issue and the risks that former Soviet republics associate with redrawing post-Soviet international borders, especially if the dominant regional power is driving the process and perhaps even expecting to acquire new territory as a result. The very structure that symbolizes their common heritage, the Commonwealth of Independent States, was based on recognition of borders (of the former Union republics' borders as state borders), and in this sense the CIS itself has been undermined by Russia's actions.[63]

All these states (except Armenia, which is a particular case because of attitudes to the Nagorno-Karabakh region) view separatist currents as a threat. They routinely condemn separatism in their foreign policy statements as well as in bodies like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Separatism is also anathema to the regional powers of China, Iran and Turkey, faced as they are by substate challenges. Finally, and not least, by revising borders in the South Caucasus Russia risks putting in jeopardy central state control of the North Caucasus region—where Russia has struggled for most of the period since 1994 to suppress and contain militant separatism in Chechnya as well as recent serious unrest in other republics such as Ingushetia.

Military and political objectives of the Russian campaign

Russia's incursion into Georgia was undoubtedly driven by a complex of motivations and goals, combining local, regional and broader geopolitical concerns. It is unlikely to have been the expression of some master plan, or even the product of calculated broad consultation, even if military planning of the operation itself took place in advance. Most likely the Kremlin expected to achieve only some of

[59] Vassily Likhachev, deputy chairman of Russia's Federation Council committee for international affairs, Ekho Moskvy news agency, Moscow, 29 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol iz.
[60] Statement by Yuriy Luzhkov, Interfax news agency, Moscow, 25 Sept. 2008, BBC Mon Alert FS1 FsuPol gv.
[61] Murat Dzhioyev, Interfax news agency, Moscow, 25 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon TCU 250808 sa/mdz.
[62] Statement by Sergey Shamba, Abkhazian 'foreign minister', Interfax news agency, 29 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon Alert FS1 MCU 290808 yk/hb.
[63] This further reduces the value of the CIS for Georgia. Some days after Russian troops entered Georgia, Tbilisi declared that it was to withdraw from the CIS.

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a range of desirable possible outcomes from decisive military action in Georgia and was ready to adapt or extend strategic plans and objectives as permitted by the development of conditions on the ground and the confused international reaction.[64] However, as noted above, it stretches credibility to argue that Moscow was simply focused on restoring the security of its peacekeeping contingent and 'citizens' in South Ossetia, although this was certainly viewed as a task to be done and important to the extent that it was necessary to reverse a perceived affront to Russia's international status.

New Russian protectorates

The analysis above confirms that, once Russian forces were in combat, the Kremlin had no intention of accepting the status quo ante in either South Ossetia or Abkhazia. Russian leaders claimed that too much South Ossetian blood had been spilt for the local regimes to trust any arrangements except those under full Russian control. This claim was the basis of Russian consolidation of the two unrecognized republics as military protectorates (which in some respects they had already become), and was consistent with a readiness to allow local militias to drive ethnic Georgians from South Ossetia and the Kodori valley and the plan to offer the republics formal recognition.

Of the two regions, Abkhazia is by far the more strategically and economically significant to Russia. Already in the 1990s Russian leaders observed that their strategic weight in the Black Sea depends on the presence of their troops on the Black Sea coast of the Caucasus.[65] This traditional military concern is likely to have been reinforced recently as Russia struggles to come to terms with the looming prospect of losing its naval base facilities at Sevastopol in the Crimea (by 2017 under current agreements with Ukraine, though Moscow has begun to contest this) and seeks other bases. Russia's calculated efforts to destroy or requisition Georgian military infrastructure and equipment during and after combat operations in Georgia is likely to have been driven at least partly by a determination to engineer a decisive shift in the local military balance away from Tbilisi to the Abkhaz authorities, if not also to the much weaker South Ossetian regime.[66]

The goal of establishing these protectorates was rapidly advanced by Russian recognition of their statehood. This removed the need to maintain Russian forces in a 'security zone' outside their borders, as Moscow can now arrange the permanent deployment of troops on their territory, in coordination with the local

[64] According to one source 'close to the presidential administration', Medvedev from the start of the campaign did not plan to go beyond the bounds of the peacekeeping mission in South Ossetia, but others close to Putin at a certain point 'began to talk to him about the "logic of war" and the unexpected appearance of the possibility to resolve "important geopolitical tasks"': Jamestown Foundation, Jonas Bernstein, 'Are Putin and Medvedev at odds over the Georgian campaign?', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 5: 156, 14 Aug. 2008.

[65] For an early explicit statement to this effect, see Defence Minister Pavel Grachev, as cited in BBC SWB FSU SU/1622 C1/6, 25 Feb. 1993.

[66] This goal of taking measures to decisively weaken Georgia's military potential was set out clearly after the phase of combat between Russian and Georgian forces had ended. See Col.-Gen. Anatoliy Nogovitsyn, deputy chief of the Russian General Staff, Interfax-AVN news agency, Moscow, 12 Aug. 2008.

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authorities, in whatever quantity it wishes through interstate legal treaties, backed up by treaties on friendship, cooperation and mutual assistance. Military bases are being established for 'as long as the possibility remains that there might be some outside intervention'.[67]

There will be contingents of about 3,800 troops (which Russia does not now need to describe as 'peacekeepers') each in South Ossetia (in the towns of Dzhava and Tskhinvali) and Abkhazia (on the coast on the outskirts of Gudauta and in Ochamchire). Russian politicians are eagerly considering the options for new deployments, especially naval facilities.[68] Inevitably they will be accompanied by the construction of military cantonments and will distort local economies, as happened with the former Russian base of Akhalkalaki in south Georgia. The territory of South Ossetia is so small that it will be strongly influenced by the Russian military presence. The Abkhaz leader also expects that the Abkhazia–Georgia 'state border' will be fortified.[69] As military protectorates, these regions overall will form staging grounds for the forward deployment of Russian forces well south of the strategic barrier of the Caucasus mountain range and will place Georgia in a state of heightened strategic and political vulnerability.[70]

Georgian strategic vulnerability

This vulnerability is probably one of the overarching goals of the Russian campaign in Georgia, since it increases policy options for the future. However, despite the measures taken for the temporary occupation of large parts of Georgia, Russia is unlikely to have had designs on regions of Georgia beyond South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Moscow would have understood the difficulty of assimilating territory settled by people who are hostile to Russia and the depth of international opprobrium any effort to do so would incur. However, Russian leaders were still intent on measures to weaken Georgia, justified by the argument that 'the aggressor' should be 'punished', despite the peace operations discourse we have examined.

Militarily this meant the destruction or seizure of Georgian army, air force and naval military equipment and infrastructure, and the targeting of all Georgian military facilities and bases, which Russia did its best to achieve.[71] After the end of direct combat Russia also deployed several SS-21 short-range ballistic missile

[67] Konstantin Kosachev, chairman of the Russian State Duma's International Affairs Committee, Interfax news agency, Moscow, 26 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol ia.

[68] Meeting of Medvedev with Russian Defence Minister Anatoliy Serdyukov, RIA Novosti news agency, Moscow, 9 Sept. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol kt. Konstantin Zatulin, chairman of the State Duma committee for CIS affairs, has suggested that the town of Gudauta could be used for the deployment of airborne troops and air force detachments, while Ochamchire could host a naval base and allow the relocation of Russian Black Sea fleet vessels from Sevastopol: RIA Novosti news agency, 29 Aug. 2008, http://en.rian.ru/analysis/20080829/116385526.. The port of Sukhumi could also offer good naval facilities.

[69] Sergey Bagapsh, RIA Novosti news agency, Moscow, 23 Sept. 2008, BBC Mon TCU 230908ra/jh.

[70] During Putin's time as president Georgia managed to negotiate the evacuation of Russian bases and facilities on Georgian soil at Akhalkalaki, Batumi and Vaziani, but these were viewed as strategically problematic in a crisis and the agreements to remove them preceded Moscow's new military assertiveness.

[71] Russia seized some 150 units of heavy armoured equipment from Georgian armed forces, including 65 tanks, as well as infantry fighting vehicles, artillery and anti-aircraft missile systems, much of it supplied to Georgia from Ukraine: ITAR-TASS news agency, 18 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 MCU 180808 js/im. Georgian claims that its forces preserved the great majority of their weaponry intact do not seem accurate.

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launchers and supply vehicles to positions in South Ossetia north of Tskhinvali, which placed much of Georgia, including Tbilisi, within their reach.[72] Finally, Russia has begun a campaign, through the 'international discussions' of the ceasefire agreement, to 'prevent heavy weapons being brought into the Caucasus'—an embargo aimed at Georgia.[73]

Politically, Russia hoped for gains from the steps it took in the immediate aftermath of fighting to divide Georgia and isolate parts of the country from each other. Russian leaders opted to control swaths of Georgian territory in the 'security zones', and to preside over a slow, deliberate advance of troops closer to Tbilisi, which was halted only under intense international pressure for a Russian pull-back. These measures were unnecessary from a military-operational perspective, but suggest that Moscow was exploring the possibility of encouraging a collapse of the Georgian government and gauging the depth of international reaction to any direct move on Tbilisi. They may also have indicated the reluctance of the Russian military, in the tradition of the march on Berlin or even Grozny, to halt operations 'halfway'.

If conquering Tbilisi was probably not an objective of the Russian political leadership, bringing down the Georgian government, and specifically toppling President Saakashvili, was a more likely goal and one that came more sharply into focus once Russian troops had free access to the approaches to the capital. Tbilisi could easily be isolated from most of the rest of Georgia, even blockaded (although in violation of the ceasefire requirement not to block traffic), and economic pressure might be expected to lead to a revolt against Saakashvili, the Russian leadership's (especially Putin's) *bête noire*. This coincided with Lavrov informing the US leadership that Saakashvili 'can no longer be our partner and it would be best if he left'. Lavrov dismissed 'the present Georgian leadership' as a '"special project" of the United States'.[74]

The problem for Moscow was that there was little sign of a Georgian revolt to unseat Saakashvili, and exerting economic pressure would take time; most Georgians rallied behind the leadership in the crisis, despite the obvious defeats suffered. Nor could Russia be sure that any replacement for Saakashvili would be much less nationalistic; pro-Russian Georgian politicians, or even ones more generally compliant towards Russian foreign policy, lack sufficient popular support. So Moscow had no mechanism through which to act on the undoubted temptation to start some kind of roll-back of the 2003 Rose Revolution, a desire which reflects Russia's wider hostility to the popular movements of 'colour revolutions' in CIS states. An extraordinary display of international leaders visiting Tbilisi to show solidarity also sharply raised the foreign policy stakes of any direct or underhand Russian action to bring down the Georgian government. This option was probably shelved if not abandoned at the point when Moscow finally resolved to allow EU monitors into the 'security zones' and to withdraw its own forces from those sectors.

[72] According to US officials: *International Herald Tribune*, 18 Aug. 2008.
[73] Statement by Lavrov, ITAR-TASS news agency, Moscow, 9 Sept. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol kt.
[74] Interviews on 12 and 14 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru.

Georgia's heightened strategic vulnerability is very likely not just a goal but an *instrument* for Russia in pursuit of specific higher-order security and energy policy objectives. These have been well discussed in western commentary and are only outlined here. First, Russia has sought by creating 'new facts on the ground' to diminish decisively the attractiveness for NATO states of offering Georgia a Membership Action Plan (MAP), with the closer relationship with NATO this brings, or indeed taking any other major steps towards Georgian accession to NATO—an outcome which the Bucharest NATO summit in April 2008 promised Georgia would happen at some time. Medvedev insists that had Georgia obtained a MAP by August 2008, he still would not have hesitated an instant as Russian commander-in-chief to take 'the same decision I just made' (though this does not answer the question whether Russian forces might have confined their operations to the South Ossetian administrative borders if Georgia had been offered a MAP).[75] Whether this claim is convincing or not, those European states sceptical before August 2008 about extending NATO membership to Georgia could be further unnerved by the risk of a direct military clash with Russia in the future over a territorial catalyst in Georgia. Likewise, the unresolved nature of Georgian claims to South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the militarization of these regions by Russia could polarize NATO views on offering Georgia the defence guarantee of article 5 of the NATO Charter.

Russian diplomacy has tried to prise open divisions between European NATO states, such as France, Italy and Germany, and Washington, by characterizing America as virtually a party to the war in Georgia, ready to support or even sponsor bellicose policies by Saakashvili as a 'personal project' in the South Caucasus regardless of the risks or cost in terms of relations with Russia. This argument made some impression in parts of Europe, but was undermined by the scope of Russian operations in Georgia and by obvious disinformation. For example, Russian military intelligence claimed that US instructors were directing and coordinating thousands of mercenaries from Ukraine, the Baltic states and regions of the Caucasus in military operations on the Georgian side.[76] Since the war Moscow has unconvincingly accused the United States of sending Georgia military supplies by sea and air under the guise of humanitarian aid and has called for an arms embargo against Georgia. Any US intentions to rearm Georgia are described by Russia as enhancing the risks of Georgian efforts to gain accession to NATO.

In this way Russia is also trying to make the case of Georgia appear to European NATO states as a touchstone for assessing the sobriety of US policy in broader plans for NATO enlargement. What may not have been considered by Russian leaders is whether, through their efforts to undermine Georgia's path to NATO accession, they may be increasing the chances of the alternative option of a direct bilateral US security guarantee to Georgia.

[75] Meeting with members of the Valdai Club, 12 Sept. 2008, http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text.speeches/2008/09/12/1644.

[76] RIA Novosti news agency, Moscow, 11 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol yy.

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Georgia's strategic vulnerability also influences psychologically the climate for developing the whole energy transit corridor from the Caspian through the South Caucasus and westard, viewed by European states in particular as a way of diminishing their high levels of dependence on Russian oil and gas. This large and controversial topic can only be mentioned here. The South Caucasus energy and transport corridor has resumed more or less normal functioning since the war in Georgia. However, Georgia's exposed position is not just a concern for the reliable operation of the major Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) and the Baku–Supsa oil pipelines and the Baku–Tbilisi–Erzurum gas pipeline through Georgia. The need to take the strategic volatility around Georgia into account and the question of how far to take Russian concerns into consideration will invariably enter into decisions on significant potential new projects, especially the Nabucco project to bring gas from Azerbaijan and Central Asia to the EU and any plans to bring oil south from Kazakhstan's huge Kashagan oilfield in the Caspian.

As was to be expected, Russian leaders have tried, with little success, to divert international speculation about any energy connection with their policy in Georgia. The Russian general staff was adamant that 'we do not touch the oil pipelines. Oil pipelines do not represent a military target', while Putin was eventually moved to insist that 'Russia does not pursue the purpose of interfering in any sort of energy processes in the region and did not in any way damage energy facilities on Georgian territory'.[77]

But this lack of damage is hardly the point. Obviously Russian attacks on pipelines would have been hugely damaging to Russia's worldwide image as a reliable energy exporter and would have placed the country squarely in the sights of NATO's increasing focus on pipeline security.[78] However, the image of Russian so-called 'reconnaissance groups' paralysing the functioning of Georgia's vital harbour of Poti, located just north of the terminal of the Baku–Supsa pipeline, and the nonchalance shown by Russian commanders in taking steps to dissect the country may be enough to raise serious questions for investors in future energy projects about bottom-line Russian attitudes to Georgian sovereignty and hence about Georgia's sovereign ability to comply with future agreements it makes on energy infrastructure and transit. Moreover, energy transit cannot be viewed on a country-specific basis. It has to be considered in the context of wider uncertainties raised by the Georgia conflict about Russian foreign policy towards countries on its periphery and the use of force as an instrument of policy.

[77] Russian Deputy Chief of General Staff Col.-Gen. Anatoliy Nogovitsyn, Interfax news agency, Moscow, 14 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon Alert FS1 FsuPol va; Putin in ITAR-TASS news agency, Moscow, 2 Sept. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol an.

[78] This focus could still take place, though the prediction by one prominent Russian analyst that as matters stand 'the US Army or NATO contingents may be deployed in the near future to "protect" the Baku–Ceyhan pipeline': seems unlikely. Andrei Fedorov, 'War on three fronts', *Argumenty nedeli*, no. 35, Aug. 2008.

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Russian foreign policy recast: 'we will protect our citizens'

A major international concern is whether the Russia–Georgia war might be replicated elsewhere in the future. under certain adverse conditions in Russian relations with neighbour states. The debate over this is influenced by two foreign policy principles proclaimed by Moscow that impinge directly on neighbour states with Russian communities or nationals.

The first is Medvedev's assertion that 'protecting the lives and dignity of our citizens, wherever they may be, is an unquestionable priority for our country'. In this respect he even claims that 8 September 2008 represents for Russia a trauma comparable to 11 September 2001 for the United States, with all this implies for a transformed and indeed resurgent Russian foreign policy. Second, Medvedev proclaims that 'there are regions in which Russia has privileged interests', regions that 'are home to countries with which we share special historical relations'. He invoked this weight of history as another justification for the campaign in Georgia: 'Russia has historically been a guarantor for the security of the peoples of the Caucasus, and this remains true today.' But Medvedev defines Russia's 'traditional sphere of interests' more broadly to include neighbour states with which it has traditionally had close relations.[79]

These principles are regressive and hark back to Russian debates in the early to mid-1990s. At that time geopolitically charged claims of this kind could be understood; Russia had recently been shorn of much of its territory (as the USSR), and ethnic Russians were scattered across the post-Soviet states in their millions.[80] A military doctrine in 1993 defined one mission of the armed forces as to counteract 'the suppression of the rights, freedoms and legitimate interests of citizens of the Russian Federation in foreign states'.[81] In the 1990s a commitment to support the interests of 'Russians outside Russia' was a theme of fluctuating importance in Moscow, although it was rhetorical rather than a central determinant of Russian foreign policy. Since about 2006, however, and particularly in the aftermath of the conflict with Georgia, Russia is refurbishing suppressed geopolitical categories and linking them to an activist foreign policy in neighbour states. This has given rise to specific fears that Moscow is tactically exploiting the provision of Russian passports and its demands for the right of dual nationality for citizens in CIS states.

Ukraine is central to this controversy. Kiev prohibits dual citizenship under Ukrainian law and has been protesting to the Russian consulate in Crimea in

[79] Speech to and meeting with members of the Valdai Club, 12 Sept. 2008 (in which he also declaimed that 'we will defend our interests, but most important of all, we will protect out citizens'), http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2008/09/12/1644; interview for TV Channel One, Rossia, NTV, 31 Aug. 2008, http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/speeches/2008/08/31/1150; statement on 8 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru.

[80] In a famous speech, President Yeltsin appealed for international acknowledgement of special powers for Russia in the region of the former Soviet Union and couched a rationale for intervention in the name of peacekeeping in these terms. This was justified, in the debate that followed, on the grounds that discrimination against Russian-speakers living outside Russia imposes on Russia the duty to protect them, and that it is in Russia that many thousands of those who suffer from inter-ethnic strife place their hopes. See report by V. Nadein, *Izvestiya*, 4 March 1993.

[81] A previous draft of this doctrine, released in May 1992, had even referred to the more intrusive military task of defending 'the rights and interests of citizens of Russia and people linked with it ethnically and culturally abroad': 'Osnovy voennoi doktriny Rossii', *Voennaya mysl'*, special issue, May 1992, pp. 4, 7.

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Simferopol over its distribution of Russian passports. In fact, most Russian passport-holders in Crimea gained their Russian citizenship between 1994 and 2004 under the presidency of Leonid Kuchma, who turned a blind eye to this practice. But there is growing nervousness in Kiev that increasing the proportion of Russian citizens in Crimea (and their total number remains unknown) would offer Russia a pretext to come to their 'defence' in some future crisis, perhaps partly to stall the withdrawal of the Black Sea fleet from Sevastopol or more broadly to impede Ukraine's progression towards NATO membership. This may be an overreaction by Ukraine, but is understandable in a psychological atmosphere where Russia's redrawing of post-Soviet international borders in the South Caucasus is viewed by many politicians in Kiev in the context of Russian pretensions to Crimea. Ukraine's President Yushchenko, who has coordinated many areas of international policy closely with Saakashvili, described Russia's use of the Black Sea fleet during the military operations in Georgia as threatening Ukrainian national interests, and Lavrov in turn accused Ukrainian policy over the crisis in Georgia as 'aimed virtually at the systemic breakdown of our interstate relations'.[82]

For all this acrimony, the prospect of a Russian-sponsored uprising in Crimea or parallels with South Ossetia should not be exaggerated. The only indigenous ethnic group in Crimea, the Crimean Tatars, have remained loyal to Kiev. Moscow's effort to influence the strategic course of Ukraine's foreign policy and its approach to NATO is more easily pursued by working on politicians in Kiev and playing on Ukraine's persistent inability to sustain firm ruling coalitions, as well as leveraging energy policy, than by fomenting opposition in Crimea among Russian passport-holders.

Russia's emerging foreign policy and the rhetoric accompanying it may be propelled ultimately by domestic political machinations more than by external events and opportunities. A well-connected Russian insider has identified a 'party of war' inside the Kremlin, a group of high officials who had pressed for a direct attack on Tbilisi to overthrow the Georgian government and had even sought to 'go further than Tbilisi', suggesting plans for other pro-western Russian neighbour states.[83] Other specialists are sceptical and point to a turnover in key Russian military command positions before the war, which impeded lobbying from at least that sector. Any 'party of war' may not be driven by senior officers, yet the Russian military are undeniably benefiting from the war in Georgia. Medvedev has ordered a programme of rearmament of the Russian armed forces taking account of 'the experience of the South Ossetian operation', which will be accompanied by a 27 per cent increase in defence spending for 2009 over 2008.[84]

[82] Lavrov in *2000* newspaper, Kiev, 19 Sept. 2008, BBC Mon KVU 240908 nm/bb. The Russian defence ministry even claimed falsely that Ukrainian crews manned Georgian air defence systems that shot down Russian warplanes in the conflict: Interfax news agency, Moscow, 13 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon Alert FS1 FsuPol ib. A poll on 1 Sept. 2008 showed that 48.5% of Ukrainians believe that a conflict similar to that in Georgia could break out in Ukraine: poll by Institute for Strategic Studies, UNIAN news agency, Kiev, 1 Sept. 2008, BBC Mon KVU 010908 mk/dz.

[83] Pavel Felgenhauer, 'Is Russia ready for a major confrontation with the West?', Jamestown Foundation, *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 5: 162, 25 Aug. 2008; article by Vladimir Milov, Gazeta.ru website, Moscow, 25 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol iu. For claims that the military were not fully under the Kremlin's control, see 'Kremlin's grip on troops tested', *Financial Times*, 2 Sept. 2008.

[84] Statement on Zvezda TV, Moscow, 18 Aug. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 MCU 190808 yk/hb.

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A quite persuasive case can be made that, as part of a broader campaign of stoking anti-western attitudes, Russian leaders deliberately presented the war as the first post-Cold War confrontation with the United States by proxy to reinforce enemy imagery. Opinion polls suggest that such a hardening of Russian views has taken place.[85] Such imagery and broad anti-western sentiments are deliberatively fostered since they form 'an extremely powerful tool for consolidation inside the country and solidarity with the authorities'.[86] From this perspective, for Russia the whole Georgia campaign was not essentially about South Ossetia or even about NATO enlargement, but about the survival and reproduction of Putin's domestic political entourage after Medvedev's assumption of the presidency. This is to be achieved through the creation of a new national consensus about a paradigm of foreign policy based on containing the West, especially the United States, which relies heavily on military assertiveness and 'mobilization mechanisms'.[87] The 'protection' of Russian citizens abroad then becomes part of this consensus and is chosen as a theme calculated to resonate effectively with both elites and the public in Russia.

Conclusion

The Russian campaign in Georgia triggered the most significant crisis in Russian foreign relations with western countries since the dissolution of the Soviet Union; it fuelled hostile exchanges between Moscow and Kiev and it has seriously unsettled many of Russia's other neighbours. Moscow's demand that its case for intervention in Georgia be accepted as legitimate has been presented almost as a test in the spirit of the American administration's reaction to the 9/11 2001 attacks—'you are with us or against us'. The choice offered is between Russia or Georgia. Meanwhile for domestic audiences Russian leaders present western criticism almost as a vindication that Russia is on the correct path in defending Russian 'dignity' and just interests. Moscow also insists that where Russian interests require this it will be ready again to take strong measures.

All this reinforces the policy and analytical importance of a thorough evaluation of Russia's conduct and motivations in its offensive in Georgia. But core questions remain. A central concern for the international community is whether the Russian–Georgian war was a maverick extreme episode, a kind of convulsion in Russian policy that shows no symptoms of recurrence, perhaps triggered by pathologies in Georgian–Russian relations? Or alternatively, whether it suggests the kind of response that might be expected again under certain adverse conditions in Russian relations with neighbour states? We should also take into serious account, as considered above, whether ultimately Russia's incursion deep into

[85] A poll held by the Levada Centre in 126 Russian cities on 12–15 Sept. 2008 recorded 67%, a record level of negative feelings (the highest since polling began in 1997) about the US. 'Russians negative about US', Interfax news agency, Moscow; *Johnson's Russia List*, 2008–175, 26 Sept. 2008, www.cdi.org/russia/johnson.

[86] As argued by Lev Gudkov, director of the Levada Centre for the study of public opinion, Ekho Moskvy radio, Moscow, 5 Sept. 2008, BBC Mon FS1 FsuPol tm.

[87] As argued by Lilia Shevtsova, Chatham House briefing note REP BN 08/02, Sept. 2008, pp. 5–7, www.chathamhouse. org.uk.

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Georgia reflected a Russian policy driven by domestic political convolutions rather than the pressure of external events.

Ultimately, the question here is whether a new phase of Russian 'interventionism' beyond its borders may be expected, perhaps emboldened by the much more extensive example of post-2001 American foreign deployments and supported by Russian military forces with a growing capability for forward projection around at least the Russian periphery.[88] This was not the international image Moscow propagated before the clash with Georgia. Lavrov described 'interventionism', in a thinly veiled attack on the US, as 'a strategy which is hardly realistic as its effectiveness can be ensured only in conditions of a shift to global imperial building' and would 'trigger growth of tension in global and regional politics'.[89] The newly minted Russian foreign policy concept of July 2008 blandly stated that Russia would 'actively support peaceful resolution of conflicts in the CIS area based on international law, respect for earlier agreements and search for agreement between the parties involved.'[90]

However, such statements have been eclipsed since the Georgia campaign by Medvedev's forceful assertion of Russia's commitment to its citizens abroad and the protection of its regions of 'privileged interests'. This is bolstered by the growing militarization of Russia's foreign image, through large scale exercises of conventional and strategic forces, blue water naval deployments and increases in the Russian military budget. Russian officials interpret the war with Georgia both as a success and boost to national esteem and, at the same time, by admitting that combat operations showed military weaknesses, justify a programme of rearmament and restructuring of Russian forces for future contingencies.[91]

All this suggests, at least, that the inhibitions of Russian leaders since the early 1990s about engaging in major combat operations beyond Russian borders have lessened. This might partly reflect Moscow's perception that its struggle in Chechnya, which drained resources for much of the period since 1994, is now manageable. But it is certainly related to a broader strategic determination to counteract the NATO and US presence in CIS neighbour states. Indeed, Moscow's defiant if not very convincing characterization of the war in Georgia as the first post-Cold War proxy war with the United States suggests that local conditions in Georgia or South Ossetia are ultimately subordinate to Russia's overarching sense of strategic competition with major western states and perhaps also to the need to sustain an anti-western discourse for purposes of domestic political consolidation.

[88] For earlier phases of such interventionism see Andrew Bennett, *Condemned to repetition? The rise, fall and reprise of Soviet–Russian military interventionism, 1973–1996* (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1999).

[89] Article by Sergei Lavrov published in *Russia in Global Politics* 4, July–August 2008, coincidentally posted on the Russian Foreign Ministry website the day before the crisis with Georgia broke out, 7 Aug. 2008, http://www.mid.ru.

[90] *The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation*, 12 July 2008, http://www.kremlin.ru/eng/text/docs/2008/07/204750.shtml.

[91] Russian articles that detail military weaknesses of the campaign in Georgia include, Olga Bozhyeva, 'Disarmed forces of the Russian Federation', *Moskovskiy komsomolets*, 21 Aug. 2008; Viktor Baranets, 'Army sent to fight in old suit of armour', *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 26 Aug. 2008; Ilya Kedrov, 'War in the background of the Caucasus Mountain range', *Voyenno-promyshlennyy kuryer*, 31 Aug. 2008.

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The psychological climate behind all this drives international distrust and heightened rhetoric. But Russian confrontation with western states or even military coercion in relations with Ukraine and other neighbour states is not predetermined. The Kremlin pronounces that the consolidation of a sphere of influence on Russia's periphery is a precondition for strengthening the country's position as an 'independent pole' in an emerging multipolar world. Russian 'strategic independence' is also presented as indispensable to confirm Russia's status as a potential global power. These goals are at root about image, respect and recognition rather than territorial enlargement or the need to dominate per se. Therefore an overreaction by western states to alarmist scenarios of a new era of coercive diplomacy, or worse, in Russian foreign policy may only reinforce Russia's at times truculent insistence that its status as an aspirant global power be acknowledged. However, careful attention will still need to be given to the relationship between military power and the pursuit of diplomatic objectives in the mindset of the Russian leadership.

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