

Georgia's military miscalculation.

Georgia president Saakashvili made the fundamental mistake of taking American and European encouragements and exhortations at face value when he ordered his troops to recover South Ossetia by force, this month of August 2008. Horrendous destruction occurred when Russian forces defeated his attempt.

When more than a decade ago European nations from the Baltic republics to the Southern Balkan re-emerged free after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact, the subsequent adhesion of these states to NATO and to the European Union was a foregone conclusion. Russia was still weak and could not object.

But thereafter NATO, prodded along by the US and the UK, started to overreach itself by making membership promises to ex-members of the former Soviet Union who have serious unsolved problems with Russia. NATO aggressively extended its role.

In contravention of its own founding charter, NATO sent European troops to help the US fight in Afghanistan. It bombed the civilian infrastructure of Serbia to "liberate" Kosovo. It encouraged Ukraine to ignore Russia by holding out possible membership and it promised the same to Georgia. Against the last two initiatives however, a recovered and stronger Russia raises legitimate objections, which cannot be ignored and cannot be dealt with by military means. Ukraine's Crimean peninsula, historically and de facto, is more Russian than Ukrainian. Ukraine's eastern part belonged to the Russian empire, while its western half has always been closer to Europe. Free elections show it to be a divided country with the fault line running right down the middle. These issues must be resolved before NATO membership can be offered.

In Georgia, the provinces Abkhazia and South Ossetia fought a civil war against the central government. They do not want to be part of the country. Georgia's previous president Shevardnadze realised this, but was replaced by the populist Saakashvili, who was strongly supported and financed by the US which also trained and equipped his army. A grateful Saakashvili allowed the construction of large US air-force bases in Georgia, right in Russia's backyard. In addition he sent Georgian troops to help the war in Iraq, which the US Air force kindly airlifted back to Georgia when he needed them to attack South Ossetia earlier this week. In all this, he acted against the prudent advice of Europe and especially of Germany, who see Russia as a responsible partner. But in the absence of a united EU foreign policy, and perhaps with American encouragement, Saakashvili's belligerence prevailed. Russia, already feeling threatened by the proposed American anti missile shield in Poland, reacted by pushing the Georgian army back from South Ossetia. All these issues are linked in the Russian mind. It is a matter of concern and wonder that the current US administration does not address them in serious diplomatic engagement.

Georgia has the added misfortune of being a transit country and battle ground for competing and easily-to-sabotage gas and oil pipelines routes from the oil rich countries around the Kaspian to the West. Russia's role as a moderating influence on these newly independent oil producing nations is still insufficiently appreciated in the West, but is apparent to any traveller in the area. Instead of appreciating the

extent of Russian support in the initial stages of their “war against terror”, the US keeps pressurising consortia of companies to route their pipelines through “friendly” territories of Georgia and Turkey, rather than through Russia which offers the shorter and more economical route. BP, politicised under its previous managing director, Lord Browne, agreed to incur a billion dollar extra cost by routing its Ceyhan pipeline obligingly through Georgia. Russian Gazprom of course, does exactly the opposite, routing its gaz and oil lines from Uzbekistan, Kazakstan and other Stans exclusively through Russian territory...

Saakashvili, with a friend like George W. Bush in the White House, gambled he could settle the South Ossetia problem by force. He only succeeded in showing that all problems on Russia’s borders are interlinked and that a solution must be negotiated on a different level.

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