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U.S. Policy and the Georgian-Russian Crisis

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Amid great power fretting over North Korea's nuclear test and continuing Iranian truculence against the West, Russia escalated its confrontation with the neighboring Georgia. Moscow is now using Georgia's arrest of four alleged Russian intelligence officers two weeks ago as a pretext to escalate its conflicts with Tbilisi. This is a dangerous development for the West, and specifically the United States, which could see its influence in the Caucasus region crumble if Russia is successful in forcing Georgia into its sphere of influence. U.S. policy must walk a fine line of encouraging settlement of the current dispute without becoming a liability through over-involvement.

Georgia may have overplayed its hand in arresting the Russian military intelligence officers, whom it accused of sabotage, and not just expelling them quietly—the normal *modus operandi* in such cases. In response to the arrests, Moscow recalled its ambassador from Tbilisi, evacuated diplomats and their families, and halted issuing visas to Georgian citizens. The Russian military forces stationed in Georgia are on high alert. Russia cut air and railroad links to Georgia, and blocked money transfers from Georgians working in Russia, an important source of income for many Georgian families.

Bearing the brunt of this invigorated conflict is one-million-strong Georgian Diaspora in Russia. Ethnic Georgians, including children, were loaded onto cargo planes and expelled from Russia. Russia cites their illegal immigration status. Prominent Georgian intellectuals who are Russian citizens are

being harassed by the tax police. Georgian businesses in Moscow are being singled out by law enforcement authorities. The handling of this crisis is further damaging Russia's international standing as a dependable member of the G-8.

Georgian Overkill?

Since Mikheil Saakashvili rose to power in the Rose Revolution of 2003, Russia has warily witnessed anti-Russian statements by Georgian leaders, a relentless push to evacuate Russian military bases (to which Russia had agreed previously), an attempt to join NATO, and opposition to Russian membership in the World Trade Organization. In response, the Putin administration has embargoed Georgia's key exports into Russia: Borjomi mineral water and wine.

Russia has made little secret of its desire to spark a war in the Caucasus to force regime change in Tbilisi. (See Ariel Cohen, "Preventing a Russian-Georgian Military Confrontation," Heritage Foundation *Webmemo* No. 1024, March 31, 2006, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/wm1024.cfm>.) It may get its wish. In September, South Ossetian separatists, who receive Russian military support, fired on a Georgian helicopter

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carrying the Georgian Minister of Defense. This provocation, if successful, could have led to renewed hostilities in the small secessionist territory that is a part of Georgia.

Geopolitical Roots

Russia's regional and global strategic aims explain why Moscow is escalating its conflict with Georgia. First, Russia has attempted before to block NATO enlargement into former Soviet territory. In 1999, Russia fulminated against the Baltic States' NATO membership. But at that time, Russia was extricating itself from the 1998 economic crisis while a power struggle was afoot in Moscow to succeed President Boris Yeltsin. In part because energy prices were much lower in 1999, Western European countries supported the Baltic States' NATO bid despite Russian protests. Today, with the West increasingly dependent on Russia's Gazprom, they are taking Russia's foreign policy positions much more seriously.

Second, the Kremlin is now buoyed by \$250 billion in petro-dollar reserves. These funds can buy a lot of hardware for the Trans-Caucasus Military District and pro-Russian separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Third, Russia is uneasy over the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main export pipeline (MEP), which takes Azeri oil to Mediterranean markets and crosses Georgia but bypasses Russia. Soon the Absheron-Erzurum gas pipeline will come online, bringing Azeri gas to Turkey and Europe, again bypassing Russia. Gazprom fears that this gas pipeline may eventually allow Turkmeni and Kazakhstani gas to circumvent its pipeline network on its way to Europe.

A Balance of Power Shift

If Georgia comes under the Russian sway, neighboring Azerbaijan and Armenia will feel the full weight of the Russian presence. Foreign policy experts in Moscow believe that the Russian government is angry that Azerbaijan has not allocated enough oil patches to Russian companies and has facilitated its oil exports via Turkey instead of Russia. With increased power in the region, Russia will act on these concerns.

Armenian opposition openly seeks a more pro-Western and less pro-Russian policy, pointing out that close ties with Moscow did not improve Armenia's abysmal living standards and did not bring international recognition of the independence of Nagorno-Karabakh, a breakaway province of Azerbaijan, populated mostly by Armenians.

A pro-Russian Georgia in the Collective Security Treaty Organization of the Commonwealth of Independent States would permit Russia and Iran to dominate Azerbaijan and Armenia, severely limiting U.S. policy options there. Furthermore, such a development would put to rest American ambitions in Central Asia and could cut off strategically important Kazakhstan from western energy markets.

The Kosovo Ripple Effect

Russia has warned repeatedly that it will retaliate severely if Kosovo is granted independence against the will of Serbia, a historic ally, and Russian President Vladimir Putin has called for the imposition of the Kosovo criteria on separatist enclaves in the former Soviet Union, including Transnistria (a part of Moldova), Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh. Under this policy, Russia would enforce referenda in these territories and recognize their independence, opening the door to their eventual incorporation in the Russian Federation. This approach would create a dangerous precedent for the Crimea, where the majority of the Russian-speaking population is pro-Russian; Russian-speaking Eastern Ukraine; and the predominantly Slavic Northern Kazakhstan.

Violations and alternations of the current borders of the former Soviet Union could generate severe tensions in Europe and open a Pandora's box of territorial claims and ethnically based border challenges there and elsewhere, such as in Iraq and Kurdistan.

Conclusion

The United States today is preoccupied with Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran, and North Korea. Russia is a key player in all of these, and its increased cooperation in these disputes would be welcome. The future of U.S.-Russian relations and global security

requires that Moscow behave responsibly and constructively. Quickly defusing the Georgian crisis through diplomacy would be a good place to start. Washington should encourage the European powers, the European Union, and Turkey to become more engaged in defusing the Georgian-Russian confrontation. Finally, the U.S. should advise Georgia not to escalate its rhetoric on Russia unnecessarily or needlessly antagonize its large neighbor.

After all, a peaceful and prosperous Caucasus is in Russian, Georgian, and American interests.

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