

Russia's firm response to the Georgian gamble in Ossetia is being interpreted in various ways, but the reality is clear, says Eric Walberg

21/8/8 -- Analogies of the Ossetia fiasco and its fallout with past events are coming thick and fast. Condoleezza Rice -- bless her heart -- says, "This is no longer 1968 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia." James Townsend, a former Pentagon official now with the Atlantic Council, compared the situation to Hungary in 1956. In both cases, the Russians being, well, the Russians. Neocon Charles Krauthammer says Georgia needs "equivalent of the Berlin air lift". The Baltic states and Poland go back further yet, arguing it is a replay of Hitler and Stalin's invasions of their territory, prompting Poland to quickly sign on the dotted line for US missiles (against the Iranians, of course).

But the most telling analogy is with Iraq and its ill-fated invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

Kuwait indeed had been a province administered from Baghdad for millennia, so Saddam Hussein understandably coveted it, as Saakashvili does Ossetia. Hussein was convinced that the US had given him the green light after he had spent 10 years fighting the United States' latest *bête noire*, Iran, just as Saakashvili was given a similar ambivalent go-ahead to invade Ossetia. Even Townsend admits, "I think they misunderstand our eagerness and enthusiasm and think we are going to be behind them for anything." Russian Ambassador to the United Nations Vitaly Churkin said it best: "It is hard to imagine that Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili embarked on this risky venture without some sort of approval from the side of the United States."

Taking this line of argument to its logical conclusion, perhaps the Americans encouraged the Georgian president in order to test the Russian reaction and to observe the preparedness of the Russian military. Yet another analogy with the present crisis is the 1930s Japanese occupation of Manchukuo. They made an incursion at Nomonhan to test the Russians. After General Zhukov destroyed their attacking force, they decided to leave the Russians alone, despite subsequent pleas by Hitler.

Saakashvili's strategy is also reminiscent of the Israeli conquest of 1948: by bombing the civilians he shows he wanted to have Ossetia without its native Ossetians. To this end he bombarded the capital, Tskhinvali, causing half the residents to cross the mountains to the Russian side. Fortunate for the Ossetians, and unlike the Palestinians, they had a reliable patron.

Georgians are noted for their fiery nationalism, but it's not clear that this time they are lining up behind their rash president. Former Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze has said that Georgia made a "grave mistake" by advancing into South Ossetia. The witty Shevardnadze, who is also a former Soviet foreign minister, said the crisis would not cause a new Cold War, as "the new Cold War has long since been instigated by the USA, through the Americans' so-called missile defence shield in the Czech Republic and Poland."

Referring to Russia's incursion into Georgia, President George W Bush said that invading a sovereign country that poses no threat is "unacceptable in the 21st century". John McCain echoed this: "In the 21st century, nations don't invade other nations," as if this is all some ghastly 20th century mistake, and as if the last eight years have witnessed a blossoming of world peace. In fact, the 21st century has already involved lots of nations invading other nations, though predominantly by the US and NATO. And given the anti-Russian policies by the US and its new clients in the recent past, the likely annexation of South Ossetia to the Russian Federation could well be followed by Abkhazia and Sevastopol.

It is not inconceivable that Crimea, eastern and southern Ukraine -- all of which are predominantly Russian -- could follow suit. None of these potential annexations would require much force, nor would they be surprising, and would certainly not be pretexts for the US launching WW III. In an interview with Forbes magazine in 1994, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, eulogised by the West only a few weeks ago for his fanatical anti-communism, called for "the union of the three Slavic republics [Russia, Ukraine, Belarus] and Kazakhstan." He explained that Lenin had given up several Russian provinces to Ukraine and in 1954, Khrushchev made a "gift" of the Crimea to Ukraine. "But even he did not manage to make Ukraine a 'gift' of Sevastopol, which remained a separate city under the jurisdiction of the USSR central government." Belarus and Kazakhstan are already so close to Russia they could be considered part of the federation, but Ukraine is playing Saakashvili's odious game of cosying up to the US and NATO, and is thereby creating an atmosphere where Russia will have to do something to protect itself.

Solzhenitsyn's prescription included withdrawing all Russians from Central Asia and the Caucasus, and is impracticable. Despite Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's admiration for him, it is unlikely that Russia will ever abandon the latter or repatriate millions of Russians from the former. On the contrary, Russia has a residual "imperial" duty: as the successor of the Soviet Union, it is duty-bound to protect Russians living throughout the ex-Soviet Union. Nor can Russia allow Saakashvili to ethnically cleanse the Ossetians, if only for practical reasons: 50,000 refugees from South Ossetia would destabilise the northern Caucasus. But the essential point about the arbitrary borders under socialism and the migration of nationalities to and fro for many decades makes a mockery and potential tragedy of treating the new "republics" in terms familiar to the West.

Ignoring this fundamental reality has caused inestimable suffering already in the former Yugoslavia, as Solzhenitsyn predicted long before Srebrenica, Kosovo and now Ossetia. Unfortunately, Bush et al are operating on autopilot, as even reluctant German Chancellor Angela Merkel, on her lightning visit to succour Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, defiantly announced, "Georgia will become a member of NATO if it wants to -- and it does want to."

Employing its own perverse logic, Poland quickly finalised an agreement to host the infamous US missile "defence" shield. The US administration even dropped its supposed opposition to supplying short-range Patriot missiles, which are highly mobile and can be redeployed easily to counter, say, Russian missiles responding to a US strike, a point which was not lost on Russia. So it should surprise no one that a senior Russian general said that Poland had just made itself a target of Russia's nuclear arsenal.

To add fuel to the nuclear meltdown, NATO wannabe Ukraine announced on Saturday that the demise of a bilateral Russian-Ukrainian defence agreement earlier this year "allows Ukraine to establish active cooperation with European countries" in missile defence. Ukraine's Foreign Ministry said Kiev could invite European partners to integrate their early warning systems against missile attacks. This is yet another blatant provocation of Russia, which has no intention of starting a war, but has a nuclear arsenal ready to reply to any first strike, a policy which the current US administration embraces.

Ukrainian President Viktor Yushchenko has also ordered commanders of Russia's Black Sea fleet, based in Sevastopol, to seek permission before moving warships and aircraft. Moscow said its commanders would disregard the order as its forces answer solely to the Russian president.

The current upping-the-ante is both childish and dangerous. Russia is not weak and in disarray any longer, and could very easily -- and with excellent historical justification -- annex Sevastopol and even the entire Crimean peninsula, where Russians and Tatars constitute 70 per cent of the population and which was a part of Russia since the time of Catherine the Great. At the same time, Russia is not belligerent or warlike, unlike a certain other superpower, and foolish "presidents" of "republics" would be wise to recognise they must live side-by-side with this powerful nation, and make the best of it, not the worst. In case this point is still not clear, if Ukraine stops its provocations, it need have no worries of any loss of "sovereignty".

## Ossetia: Diplomatic rubble

Written by Eric Walberg

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The duplicity of the West is everywhere in this current crisis. Even French President Nicolas Sarkozy's cease-fire proposal signed by both Georgian and Russian presidents was a ruse. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov revealed that the document that Saakashvili approved did not contain an introduction that had been endorsed by Russia, South Ossetia and the other breakaway region, Abkhazia. Meanwhile, US military planes are flying in "aid" and the US has announced it will henceforth have a permanent presence in Georgia.

Because of the very real threat that Georgian troops, backed by their American friends, could easily try again to destabilise things, the Russians are understandably unwilling to abandon the western Georgian city of Gori, which has a military base.

Tellingly, Bush referred Friday to efforts to resolve the conflict not with the Group of 8 industrial nations, which includes Russia, but with the G7, using the designation of the group before Russia joined. Ousting Russia from the G8 has been a keystone of McCain's foreign policy for years.

Bush et al don't realize that apart from the Baltics, which had two decades of independence before WWII, these ex-Soviet states are not really states at all, but fiefdoms of the most odious part of the former Soviet elite, now trying to play western-style electoral politics, with disastrous consequences. By pretending otherwise and threatening Russia for its understandable security interests, the US is playing with fire. "What worries me about this episode is the United States is jeopardising Russian cooperation on a number of issues over a dispute that at most involves limited American interests," said Ted Galen Carpenter of the Cato Institute in Washington.

By opening NATO to bits and pieces of the SU and Yugoslavia, by pushing Russophobic, vengeful Polish and Czech governments into hosting missiles which can be easily aimed at Russia, the US should be prepared for the possibility of a greater Russia, just as it should be resigned to a rump greater Serbia, which would include Serbian enclaves in Kosovo. This is what so far defines 21st century realpolitik.

Military defeat may actually be very good for the Georgians. The first thing the Georgians did when they became independent after the 1917 Russian Revolution was to expel all Armenians and confiscate their property. After WWII, Georgian Joseph Stalin expelled the Chechens from the Caucasus and the Germans from Prussia. The Ossetians and Abkhazians had good cause to distance themselves from Georgian chauvinism. We can only hope that the fiasco in Ossetia will let the Georgians -- and the Ukrainians -- rethink their attitude towards all their neighbours,

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including the Russians.

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/911/in2.htm>