

The Russo-Georgian War and the Balance of Power

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By **George Friedman**

The Russian invasion of Georgia has not changed the balance of power in Eurasia. It simply announced that the balance of power had already shifted. The United States has been absorbed in its wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as potential conflict with Iran and a destabilizing situation in Pakistan. It has no strategic ground forces in reserve and is in no position to intervene on the Russian periphery. This, as we have argued, has opened a window of opportunity for the Russians to reassert their influence in the former Soviet sphere. Moscow did not have to concern itself with the potential response of the United States or Europe; hence, the invasion did not shift the balance of power. The balance of power had already shifted, and it was up to the Russians when to make this public. They did that Aug. 8.

Let's begin simply by reviewing the last few days.

On the night of Thursday, Aug. 7, forces of the Republic of Georgia drove across the border of South Ossetia, a secessionist region of Georgia that has functioned as an independent entity since the fall of the Soviet Union. The forces drove on to the capital, Tskhinvali, which is close to the border. Georgian forces got bogged down while trying to take the city. In spite of heavy fighting, they never fully secured the city, nor the rest of South Ossetia.

On the morning of Aug. 8, Russian forces entered South Ossetia, using armored and motorized infantry forces along with air power. South Ossetia was informally aligned with Russia, and Russia acted to prevent the region's absorption by Georgia. Given the speed with which the Russians responded — within hours of the Georgian attack — the Russians were expecting the Georgian attack and were themselves at their jumping-off points. The counterattack was carefully planned and competently executed, and over the next 48 hours, the Russians succeeded in defeating the main Georgian force and forcing a retreat. By Sunday, Aug. 10, the Russians had consolidated their position in South Ossetia.



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On Monday, the Russians extended their offensive into Georgia proper, attacking on two axes. One was south from South Ossetia to the Georgian city of Gori. The other drive was from Abkhazia, another secessionist region of Georgia aligned with the Russians. This drive was designed to cut the road between the Georgian capital of Tbilisi and its ports. By this point, the Russians had bombed the military airfields at Marneuli and Vaziani and appeared to have disabled radars at the international airport in Tbilisi. These moves brought Russian forces to within 40 miles of the Georgian capital, while making outside reinforcement and resupply of Georgian forces extremely difficult should anyone wish to undertake it.

The Mystery Behind the Georgian Invasion

In this simple chronicle, there is something quite mysterious: Why did the Georgians choose to invade South Ossetia on Thursday night? There

had been a great deal of shelling by the South Ossetians of Georgian villages for the previous three nights, but while possibly more intense than usual, artillery exchanges were routine. The Georgians might not have fought well, but they committed fairly substantial forces that must have taken at the very least several days to deploy and supply. Georgia's move was deliberate.

The United States is Georgia's closest ally. It maintained about 130 military advisers in Georgia, along with civilian advisers, contractors involved in all aspects of the Georgian government and people doing business in Georgia. It is inconceivable that the Americans were unaware of Georgia's mobilization and intentions. It is also inconceivable that the Americans were unaware that the Russians had deployed substantial forces on the South Ossetian frontier. U.S. technical intelligence, from satellite imagery and signals intelligence to unmanned aerial vehicles, could not miss the fact that thousands of Russian troops were moving to forward positions. The Russians clearly knew the Georgians were ready to move. How could the United States not be aware of the Russians? Indeed, given the posture of Russian troops, how could intelligence analysts have missed the possibility that the Russians had laid a trap, hoping for a Georgian invasion to justify its own counterattack?

It is very difficult to imagine that the Georgians launched their attack against U.S. wishes. The Georgians rely on the United States, and they were in no position to defy it. This leaves two possibilities. The first is a massive breakdown in intelligence, in which the United States either was unaware of the existence of Russian forces, or knew of the Russian forces but — along with the Georgians — miscalculated Russia's intentions. The United States, along with other countries, has viewed Russia through the prism of the 1990s, when the Russian military was in shambles and the Russian government was paralyzed. The United States has not seen Russia make a decisive military move beyond its borders since the Afghan war of the 1970s-1980s. The Russians had systematically avoided such moves for years. The United States had assumed that the Russians would not risk the consequences of an invasion.

If this was the case, then it points to the central reality of this situation: The Russians had changed dramatically, along with the balance of power in the region. They welcomed the opportunity to drive home the new reality, which was that they could invade Georgia and the United States and Europe could not respond. As for risk, they did not view the invasion as risky. Militarily, there was no counter. Economically, Russia is an energy exporter doing quite well — indeed, the Europeans need Russian energy even more than the Russians need to sell it to them. Politically, as we shall see, the Americans needed the Russians more than the Russians needed the Americans. Moscow's calculus was that this was the moment to strike. The Russians had been building up to it for months, as we have discussed, and they struck.

The Western Encirclement of Russia

To understand Russian thinking, we need to look at two events. The first is the Orange Revolution in Ukraine. From the U.S. and European point of view, the Orange Revolution represented a triumph of democracy and Western influence. From the Russian point of view, as Moscow made clear, the Orange Revolution was a CIA-funded intrusion into the internal affairs of

Ukraine, designed to draw Ukraine into NATO and add to the encirclement of Russia. U.S. Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton had promised the Russians that NATO would not expand into the former Soviet Union empire.

That promise had already been broken in 1998 by NATO's expansion to Poland, Hungary and the Czech Republic — and again in the 2004 expansion, which absorbed not only the rest of the former Soviet satellites in what is now Central Europe, but also the three Baltic states, which had been components of the Soviet Union.

The Russians had tolerated all that, but the discussion of including Ukraine in NATO represented a fundamental threat to Russia's national security. It would have rendered Russia indefensible and threatened to destabilize the Russian Federation itself. When the United States went so far as to suggest that Georgia be included as well, bringing NATO deeper into the Caucasus, the Russian conclusion — publicly stated — was that the United States in particular intended to encircle and break Russia.

The second and lesser event was the decision by Europe and the United States to back Kosovo's separation from Serbia. The Russians were friendly with Serbia, but the deeper issue for Russia was this: The principle of Europe since World War II was that, to prevent conflict, national borders would not be changed. If that principle were violated in Kosovo, other border shifts — including demands by various regions for independence from Russia — might follow. The Russians publicly and privately asked that Kosovo not be given formal independence, but instead continue its informal autonomy, which was the same thing in practical terms. Russia's requests were ignored.

From the Ukrainian experience, the Russians became convinced that the United States was engaged in a plan of strategic encirclement and strangulation of Russia. From the Kosovo experience, they concluded that the United States and Europe were not prepared to consider Russian wishes even in fairly minor affairs. That was the breaking point. If Russian desires could not be accommodated even in a minor matter like this, then clearly Russia and the West were in conflict. For the Russians, as we said, the question was how to respond. Having declined to respond in Kosovo, the Russians decided to respond where they had all the cards: in South Ossetia.

Moscow had two motives, the lesser of which was as a tit-for-tat over Kosovo. If Kosovo could be declared independent under Western sponsorship, then South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the two breakaway regions of Georgia, could be declared independent under Russian sponsorship. Any objections from the United States and Europe would simply confirm their hypocrisy. This was important for internal Russian political reasons, but the second motive was far more important.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin once said that the fall of the Soviet Union was a geopolitical disaster. This didn't mean that he wanted to retain the Soviet state; rather, it meant that the disintegration of the Soviet Union had created a situation in which Russian national security was threatened by Western interests. As an example, consider that during the Cold War, St. Petersburg was about 1,200 miles away from a NATO country. Today it is about 60 miles away from Estonia, a NATO member. The disintegration of the Soviet Union had left Russia surrounded by a group of countries hostile to Russian interests in various degrees and heavily influenced by the United States, Europe and, in some cases, China.

Resurrecting the Russian Sphere

Putin did not want to re-establish the Soviet Union, but he did want to re-establish the Russian sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union region. To accomplish that, he had to do two things. First, he had to re-establish the credibility of the Russian army as a fighting force, at least in the context of its region. Second, he had to establish that Western guarantees, including NATO membership, meant nothing in the face of Russian power. He did not want to confront NATO directly, but he did want to confront and defeat a power that was closely aligned with the United States, had U.S. support, aid and advisers and was widely seen as being under American protection. Georgia was the perfect choice.

By invading Georgia as Russia did (competently if not brilliantly), Putin re-established the credibility of the Russian army. But



far more importantly, by doing this Putin revealed an open secret: While the United States is tied down in the Middle East, American guarantees have no value. This lesson is not for American consumption. It is something that, from the Russian point of view, the Ukrainians, the Balts and the Central Asians need to digest. Indeed, it is a lesson Putin wants to transmit to Poland and the Czech Republic as well. The United States wants to place ballistic missile defense installations in those countries, and the Russians want them to understand that allowing this to happen increases their risk, not their security.

The Russians knew the United States would denounce their attack. This actually plays into Russian hands. The more vocal senior leaders are, the greater the contrast with their inaction, and the Russians wanted to drive home the idea that American guarantees are empty talk.

The Russians also know something else that is of vital importance: For the United States, the Middle East is far more important than the Caucasus, and Iran is particularly important. The United States wants the Russians to participate in sanctions against Iran. Even more importantly, they do not want the Russians to sell weapons to Iran, particularly the highly effective S-300 air defense system. Georgia is a marginal issue to the United States; Iran is a central issue. The Russians are in a position to pose serious problems for the United States not only in Iran, but also with weapons sales to other countries, like Syria.

Therefore, the United States has a problem — it either must reorient its strategy away from the Middle East and toward the Caucasus, or it has to seriously limit its response to Georgia to avoid a Russian counter in Iran. Even if the United States had an appetite for another war in Georgia at this time, it would have to calculate the Russian response in Iran — and possibly in Afghanistan (even though Moscow's interests there are currently aligned with those of Washington).

In other words, the Russians have backed the Americans into a corner. The Europeans, who for the most part lack expeditionary militaries and are dependent upon Russian energy exports, have even fewer options. If nothing else happens, the Russians will have demonstrated that they have resumed their role as a regional power. Russia is not a global power by any means, but a significant regional power with lots of nuclear weapons and an economy that isn't all too shabby at the moment. It has also compelled every state on the Russian periphery to re-evaluate its position relative to Moscow. As for Georgia, the Russians appear ready to demand the resignation of President Mikhail Saakashvili. Militarily, that is their option. That is all they wanted to demonstrate, and they have demonstrated it.

The war in Georgia, therefore, is Russia's public return to great power status. This is not something that just happened — it has been unfolding ever since Putin took power, and with growing intensity in the past five years. Part of it has to do with the increase of Russian power, but a great deal of it has to do with the fact that the Middle Eastern wars have left the United States off-balance and short on resources. As we have written, this conflict created a window of opportunity. The Russian goal is to use that window to assert a new reality throughout the region while the Americans are tied down elsewhere and dependent on the Russians. The war was far from a surprise; it has been building for months. But the geopolitical foundations of the war have been building since 1992. Russia has been an empire for centuries. The last 15 years or so were not the new reality, but simply an aberration that would be rectified. And now it is being rectified.

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