Russia and the Georgia war: the great-power trap

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Europe has entered the new 19th century. The Russia-Georgia war of 8-12 August 2008 has acted as a time-machine, vaporising the "end of history" sentiment that shaped European politics in the 1990s and replacing it with an older geopolitical calculus in modern form.

An older calculus - but not a cold-war one. Indeed, though the conflict over South Ossetia has generated heady rhetoric of the cold-war's return, the real constellation of power and ideology it has revealed is different from the days of superpower confrontation in the four decades after 1945. This is indeed time-travel, not a mere reversal of gears.

It is the singular element of a power-confrontation not accompanied by developed ideological polarisation that makes the Russia-Georgia war the first 19th-century war in 21st-century Europe. The near-coincidence of the fortieth anniversary of the Red Army's invasion of Czechoslovakia to crush [1] the "Prague spring" in August 1968 makes the point. The punitive incursion into Georgia is not a remake; its conditions, motives, driving certainties and governing justifications are different. Russia's military expedition - and victory - in Georgia marks Moscow's attempt to return to the centre of European power-politics. It signals the resurgence of Russia as a born-again 19th-century power eager to challenge the early-21st century post-cold-war European order.

But - as the original time-traveller in HG Wells's novella [2] of 1895 discovered - the immediate satisfactions of a past or future world can be deceptive, as its more complex realities slowly unfold. The "new 19th century" is not a simple copy of the old. The Kremlin may have emerged from the five-day conflict (and its longer and even messier aftermath) as the winner; but it may in the longer term turn out to be the strategic loser [3] in its efforts to restore "spheres of influence" as the defining feature of European politics.

A triple failure

Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's president [4], made a strategic miscalculation in starting a military operation in South Ossetia on the night of 7-8 August. He gambled and he lost. Georgia has lost too - lost Abkhazia [5] and South Ossetia (the territories that had anyway managed to break free of control by Tbilisi in the post-Soviet wars [6] of the early 1990s); lost its military
infrastructure and the hope of rapid economic development. The ambition that impelled its post-2003 leadership - to be the Israel of the Caucasus - has backfired.

In his first days in power after the "rose revolution" of 2003-04, Saakashvili pledged to re-establish the country's territorial integrity before the end of his first (five-year) term. He modelled himself quite consciously on the medieval [7] Georgian king, David Agmashenebeli ("the Builder") - an identification that, indeed, has been a motif of his presidency. It is important to emphasise: to the Georgian people (as opposed to audiences in western capitals eager to hear his complaisant speechifying about building democracy or integrating the country in western institutions) Saakashvili's primary promise was the restoration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (and, at the outset of his rule, the dissident southwest fiefdom of Adzharia) to Georgian control.

Here, the time-machine begins to splutter. For Mikheil Saakashvili's period in office - febrile, controlling, image-laden - reveals him to be an extraordinary mixture of 19th-century political ambition and 21st-century political style. This combination makes the decision to launch an attack [8] on Tskhinvali, capital of South Ossetia [9], both characteristic and explicable. Saakashvili's strategy - like Franjo Tudjman's in the Serb-inhabited Krajina in the early 1990s - seems to have been to produce "facts on the ground" that would (inter alia) push Russia to accept an internationalisation of the local peacekeeping missions. It was a desperate plan, and the outcome has been devastating.

Mikheil Saakashvili blundered. But his chief ally and his direct adversary also acted stupidly. George W Bush's White House made a double mistake: it failed to grasp the real objectives of Saakashvili's government, and it misjudged Moscow's readiness to use force against Tbilisi. The Daily Telegraph (London) reported [10] that even on 9 August, the United States state department and the CIA offered the assessment that Russian troops will not invade Georgia "proper" (ie Georgia [11] without its existing two "lost territories").

The politics of mixed - and confused - signals emanating [12] from Washington continued throughout the five days of the Russia-Georgia conflict. The outcome is doubly revealing: of the fact that the US does not have leverage over Moscow, and that Bush's rhetorical commitment to guarantee the territorial integrity of Georgia is indeed just rhetoric. In short, the Bush administration's crisis-management was the worst of both worlds: it had no sense of direction, and it lost credibility.

Moscow too made a grave strategic miscalculation. The decision to follow the crushing of the Georgian assault on Tskhinvali [13] by invasion of Georgia proper - though with no political plan, no local political allies to help remove [14] Saakashvili, and no principle on which to build a Caucasus [15] settlement after the war - meant that Russia's actions were guaranteed to invite stinging international criticism. Russia has not offered anything, articulated any larger and inclusive project to make sense of its military campaign or enable it to reach out to neighbouring states and international partners. Russia has, in narrow terms [16], won; but it could yet turn out to be the biggest loser of the Georgian war.

**Moscow's strategic risk**

True, Russia's immediate military success is evident. The Kremlin has proved [17] that the country can operate again as an effective (if crude) military power. The war was popular with the Russian public too; for many Russians who still live with the traumas of the 1990s, this small victorious war was a long-awaited reversal of almost two decades of political humiliation. Its short-term effect is thus to strengthen the legitimacy of the Vladimir Putin-Dmitry Medvedev regime.
But to highlight the psychological aspect of the war for Russians is also to underscore its 19th-century character - for the issue at stake was less national territory than national sentiment, which in 19th-century politics played almost the same role that ideology came to do in the 20th century (and in both cases could cause wars as well as justify them). The Kremlin's core rationale in invading Georgia after Saakashvili's adventure was a determination to show and feel that Russia was again a great power. Indeed, Saakashvili's own purpose can also be understood as psychological as well as territorial: to assert Georgia's sovereignty on the borders of Russia.

In this sense, the Kremlin's actions after 7-8 August 2008 were guided by the fear of being perceived as weak and irrelevant, as much as by any deliberate political strategy. But 19th-century sentiments, like 20th-century ideology, can also be a source of disorder in international politics. Both, moreover, are vulnerable to the law of unintended consequences, which might come to apply to Russia in the wake of its victorious Georgian war. For there is a danger that Moscow will emerge from this triumph only to find itself strategically more isolated - both from the world, and within the post-Soviet space - than at any moment since Vladimir Putin came to power in 2000.

It is still not clear whether or not the Russian offensive launched on 8 August had regime change in Tbilisi as an explicit political goal (even if the Kremlin's detestation of the Georgian president and desire to see him fall is clear). But what in a sense is more important is that the Kremlin has in any case no political mechanism to ensure such regime change. It has no outreach whatsoever to Georgian society, and there is no legitimate political force in Georgia that is ready to challenge the pro-western orientation of the country. Russia can occupy [18] Georgian territory, but only at the cost of its own international isolation and a perilous deterioration in its relations with the west.

Russia's failure to oust Saakashvili and to instal a pro-Kremlin government in Tbilisi also means that Russia cannot gain control over the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline [19] project; thus Russia's military victory has no practical impact on Moscow's ambitions to establish a monopoly over energy routes in the ex-Soviet space. Indeed, European companies - in face of further tensions between Russia and the west - will most probably intensify their efforts to find alternative energy routes. More than ever, Americans and Europeans will now be convinced that "happiness means multiple pipelines".

Russia has also failed to ensure a halt to the process of Georgia's and Ukraine's integration into Nato. The outcome of the Nato summit [20] in December 2008 is hard to predict; the result of the alliance's emergency meeting [21] on 19 August gave little encouragement to Georgia's aspirations; but it is quite probable that in seeking an effective response to Moscow's Georgia challenge, Nato's member-states can agree to push for another round of enlargement of the alliance. If Tbilisi decides to switch its priorities away from the recovery of the lost [21] territories and towards anchoring itself in western institutions, then Georgia's integration [22] into Nato can become a real option.

On Nato's side, it is now easier to offer Georgia the "membership action plan" (MAP) route than to help secure its territorial integrity. After this short and nasty war, there is only a

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remote prospect of Tbilisi ever gaining effective control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. So it makes a lot of sense for Saakashvili to stop acting like Serbia’s former prime minister Vojislav Kostunica and to start acting like Serbia’s current president Boris Tadic.

**The great-power trap**

The law of unintended consequences could work in another way that damages Moscow. The United States's Russia policy is undergoing the equivalent of a surgical identity-transfer. Within days, George W Bush "the realist" was transformed into Bush the "cold warrior". In the wake of a display of embarrassing impotence over its strategic ally in the Caucasus, Washington is shifting towards a "soft-containment" consensus that aims to press the expulsion of Moscow from the G8, the end of its hopes of World Trade Organisation membership, the inclusion of Georgia and Ukraine in Nato, and a boycott of the winter Olympics in Sochi (along the coast from Abkhazia) in 2014.

A more immediate worry for Russia is the defensiveness of its remaining European friends. Poland's instant decision to conclude the agreement to host parts of America's missile-defence shield is a classic illustration that domestic hardliners in the country were able to use the Georgia conflict to take the upper hand in western policy towards Russia.

Russia has been paranoid about Nato encirclement; but its paranoia seems to have conjured its bleakest nightmare into existence. From now on, Washington's support for Moscow's neighbours will be defined by a country's relations towards Russia and not the nature of its regime. If any central Asian autocrats are interested in making a deal with the Americans, their time has come.

It is fascinating in this respect to see the contrast in the days of Moscow's military victory between the silence of Russia's allies in the ex-Soviet space and the confrontational attitude of its opponents. It is less Ukraine's (especially its president's) unconditional backing for Saakashvili that will worry the Kremlin than Belarus's reticence; on the very day that the Russian foreign ministry expressed its astonishment at the lack of support from Minsk, Belarus's president Alexander Lukashenko ordered his foreign ministry "to take steps to improve relations with the European Union and the United States". This stance is only partly compromised by Lukashenko's artful later remarks in praise of Moscow's operation while on a visit to Sochi.

Russia's military victory in the war in the Caucasus thus may in the end inflict more damage on Russia's strategic interests in the region than Russia's political defeat in the brief era of the "colour revolutions". In that period, Russia lost prestige and position in Ukraine and Georgia, but at the same time the country found common cause with the autocratic leaders in the post-Soviet space in a way that helped it to create an anti-western alliance in the region. The colour revolutions made the European Union look like a revolutionary and revisionist power; in response post-Soviet elites were mobilised to preserve the status quo.

But now it is Russia that is the revisionist power. Russia's language of protecting the rights of its compatriots will profoundly change the way Russian minorities are perceived in the post-Soviet states. Three-quarters of the Russian diaspora in the former Soviet Union live in Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Belarus. These three countries are strategically the most important to Russia, but they are also likely to be the most afraid of Russia's claim to entitlement to defend by force the rights of its compatriots across the post-Soviet space. It is not surprising, then, that Kyiv has initiated an inquiry into how many citizens with Russian passports live in Sevastopol. Russia's play with the principle of self-determination will also increase feelings of vulnerability within Russia itself; for among the post-Soviet states Russia is the only multinational federation.
Alexander Dugin sharply formulated the dilemma that is at the heart of Russia's state-building project. In his words, Russia in its current borders and with its current political system is a temporary phenomenon. Russia is too big and too ethnically diverse to be a normal, ethnically based nation-state; at the same time Russia is not big enough and not powerful enough to control its backyard in the way classical empires do. What Dugin did not say - but what is obvious to any observer of Russian politics - is that the 19th-century mentality of the current Moscow leadership excludes the perspective of any real integrationist project on the territory of the former Soviet Union.

Russia's missing "soft power"

In the confusing post-war, Russian media and Russian analysts are dissecting the brutal eruption of violence, assessing what it means for the country's international standing - and discussing Moscow's defeat in the "information war". The consensus is that the campaign against Georgian forces was a military success but a "PR disaster"; Moscow's propaganda machine is blamed for being totally ineffective.

But what many Russians experienced as a defeat in the information war is in reality an exposure of the inability of this 19th-century-minded power to exercise influence in European politics. Russia discovered in the five days of the Georgian war that it does not have any meaningful "soft power". Russia is dangerously lonely in the post-ideological world. The end of the Soviet Union and the death of communism deprived Moscow of its universal language and universal appeal; nothing has emerged to replace it.

The Soviet Union was an evil empire, but an evil empire with real "soft power". So, when Soviet tanks invaded Czechoslovakia on 20-21 August 1968, at least some of the communist parties around the world were ready to pretend that this was done in the name of socialism. Russia's occupation of Georgia proper did not trigger even this level of artificial support. Russia's legitimate insistence that Mikheil Saakashvili provoked the conflict and fired first was not strong enough to justify an operation by Moscow that inflicted such destruction on Georgia. In short, Russia's victory in Georgia won it respect but not friends.

The Kremlin's attempt to promote "sovereign democracy" to the status of a national ideology was only partially successful. The concept of "sovereign democracy" was instrumental in curbing western influence in Russia, but it does not have a global appeal. In this improvised conception, sovereignty is not a right; its meaning is not a seat in the United Nations. For the Kremlin, sovereignty means capacity - its possession implies economic independence, military strength, nuclear weapons and cultural identity. In Russia's view, only great powers can be truly sovereign. This view of sovereignty will not attract many followers among European small and medium-sized states.

Moreover, Russia's attempt to borrow the language of humanitarian interventionism used by the west during the Kosovo war in 1999 to justify its destruction of Georgia's infrastructure was farcical. It contradicted the Russian diplomatic position for the whole period leading up to the August 2008 conflict, and thus only increased suspicion that even if Moscow did not start the war, it was waiting for it. Russia's use of these borrowed linguistic clothes made its actions look more rather than less cynical and sinister. When Russia's foreign ministry started talking about ethnic cleansing and the Hague war-crimes tribunal, many observers recalled George Kennan's observation that Russia can have only vassals or enemies on its borders.

All this makes it unsurprising that Moscow found itself isolated in the conflict in the United Nations Security Council; that it was confronted with a declaration by the G7; and that the
greater part of international public opinion was unsympathetic to Russia’s actions. Moscow, however, was unaware of its image in the world. This is one of the prices paid for installing a managed democracy - the illusion that all television stations are like ORT [36].

Russia’s failure to persuade the world of the legitimacy of its actions in and towards Georgia should force Moscow to rethink its plans for a return to the world stage. Russia is a born-again 19th-century power that acts in the post-20th-century world where arguments of force and capacity cannot [37] any longer be the only way to define the status or conduct of great powers. The absence of "soft power" is particularly dangerous for a would-be revisionist state. For if a state wants today to remake the world order, it must be able both to rely on the existing and emerging constellation of powers and be able to capture the international public's imagination.

Another way of making this point is to say that the normative moment of the 1990s is over, but the need for universalist appeal has remained. The lesson of the Georgia war for Russia is that Russia cannot become the only kind of great power possible under 21st-century conditions if it remains trapped within a 19th-century definition of international politics. Russia needs a new time-machine. But then so does the world.

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