

Ideological Aspects of Georgian-U.S.-Russian Relations

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George Khelashvili

University of Oxford

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This memo deals with the place of ideology in post-Soviet affairs with regard to U.S.-Russian relations. More specifically, it explores possible reasons behind the particularly fierce rivalry between the United States and Russia over Georgia. A tentative answer to what accounts for this rivalry is a clash of ideologies which has resurfaced in U.S.-Russian relations over the last few years. It seems that, separate from strategic and economic considerations, ideological factors play a more prominent role now than in the 1990s. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization summit in Bucharest last April provided additional evidence to support such an argument.

At first glance, ideology seems to have disappeared from U.S.-Russian relations since the end of the Cold War. However, a spectacular showdown between the two powers over Georgian membership in NATO at the Bucharest summit can provide us with insight about the ideological aspects of the U.S.-Russian “strategic” rivalry that exists in the post-Soviet space. “Ideology,” in this context, can be defined as a set of principled beliefs about how states should relate to the outside world, which contributes to decisionmakers’ interpretations of particular international political changes or dispositions of states in various parts of the world. Examples of these principled beliefs are visible in the post-Soviet space where, currently, the United States declares that it supports local regimes that conduct transformations to create more liberal and democratic societies. In contrast, Russia adheres more to the principle of preserving the status quo of regional relations and domestic regimes and calls for nonintervention by powers other than itself. From the Russian perspective, it is understandable that Moscow would assume the role and responsibilities of the sole guarantor of stability in the post-Soviet space.

The new ideological battle differs from, and yet is firmly rooted in, Cold War memories and rhetoric. The United States fights in the name of promoting liberal democracy while Russia acts to secure special influence in its zone of influence. This so-called “near abroad” combines the overtones of the erstwhile Soviet quest for buffer

zones with its newly developed economic muscle in a doctrine which Russians sometimes call “liberal imperialism.”

Understandably, this ideological approach has an impact on both great powers’ foreign policy in the region. The United States has tried to entice regional regimes with the attractions of the “wave of the future,” gently pushing them toward political and economic change. In contrast, Russia tends to emphasize the more mundane needs of regional governments, such as the promise of regime stability and security and recognition of their legitimacy under Russian dominance. It is increasingly evident that the two ideological approaches locked in over the question of Georgia’s future, which both the United States and Russia view as a pivotal case for their respective ideological and geostrategic success.

U.S.-Russian “Strategic” Rivalry Over Georgia

A brief, but dramatic, rapprochement between the United States and Russia following the events of September 11, 2001, proved to be rather short-lived. Despite their close cooperation in the “war on terror” and an even closer personal rapport between their leaders, the United States and Russia soon had a falling out over several issues, including the development of post-Soviet politics. By early 2005, observers even started to talk about the “new Cold War” in the post-Soviet space.

Apart from their more significant disagreements, both powers have been particularly keen to defend their perceived strategic interests with respect to Georgia. This is evident from numerous cases of political and diplomatic scuffles between the two sides, over issues such as Russian pressure on Georgia’s breakaway regions, Russian economic embargoes, and Georgia’s membership in international alliances like NATO. However, the striking aspect of this situation is that the United States and Russia have far more important shared interests in the post-Soviet space than, say, membership of a single small country in NATO. These shared interests clearly include regional stability, preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, fighting terrorism, and dealing with other asymmetrical transnational security threats. Moreover, the new anti-ballistic missile initiative and the exploitation and transportation of Caspian energy resources do not necessarily have to be zero-sum games. In short, the strategic obstacles for disagreement are formidable but not insurmountable.

In order to understand the current strategic stalemate in U.S.-Russian relations in the post-Soviet space, therefore, it is important to examine the ideological component of both states’ foreign policies in this area. I will demonstrate this hypothesis by examining the case of Georgia’s proposed membership in NATO, which caused a diplomatic standoff during the alliance’s recent Bucharest summit. Georgia is a particularly good testing ground for U.S.-Russian relations as it involves many controversial aspects of great power relations, including energy transportation, NATO enlargement, regime change, and democratization.

Georgia as Testing Ground for the U.S.-Russian Ideological Rivalry

Taken out of the context of U.S.-Russian relations, Georgia’s economic and political importance in the region is far inferior to that of its neighbors (such as Azerbaijan or the Central Asian states). Yet, Georgia has become the centerpiece of many disagreements between the great powers. This is due to the fact that the Georgian case contains one feature that is very different from that of other states of the region – Georgia professes an

ideological foreign policy shared with Americans but vehemently opposed by Russians.

Georgia's ideological rhetoric (if not necessarily behavior) in foreign policy includes the following features: vigorous adherence to democracy promotion; liberal economic and political policies that are open to Western influences, institutions, and cooperation (again, a mainly declarative feature because in many aspects Georgia still shares fundamental characteristics with the southern part of the former USSR); and an emphasis on values in foreign policy formation as opposed to the blatantly pragmatic and anti-ideological approaches of other countries (such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan).

The Georgian government's ideological stance strikes a chord in both Washington and Moscow, but in quite different ways. The United States declares that Georgia is a "beacon of liberty," while Russia considers the government in Tbilisi to be a dangerous *agent provocateur* in the post-Soviet space. As a result, both sides see Georgia as the first in a series of geopolitical dominoes. Apparently, both Washington and Moscow assume there are grounds to believe Georgia's success or failure in economic development and political stabilization will seriously affect other regional states, for better or worse. However, this assumption neglects to account for the element of change that has existed in Georgia in the last few years. This change slowly brought Georgia out of its revolutionary path. Indeed, it is possible to argue that, to a certain extent, Georgia has become a rather "normal" post-Soviet state in both domestic and international affairs. Despite this, Georgia still features as a revolutionary image both in U.S. and Russian foreign policies.

The NATO Summit in Bucharest

The question of awarding Georgia, along with Ukraine, a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the recent NATO summit in Bucharest was yet another "apple of discord" in U.S.-Russian relations. The United States supported MAPs for Georgia and Ukraine while Russia opposed them, and both powers tried to push their own interests in their own ways. Russia employed more expedient political tactics, such as "carrots and sticks," tacit alliances, and vigorous diplomacy, while the United States largely relied on its political weight within the alliance. As a result, Russia scored a relative success, securing at least the temporary, if not ultimate, failure of U.S. efforts at further NATO expansion. Russia's "success" is even more striking as it is not even a member of the alliance. Preventing the MAP invitations provided a significant ideological victory for Russia, both domestically as well as in other post-Soviet states.

What is most striking about the debate on Ukrainian and Georgian membership, however, is that very little strategic rationale was offered for these countries' admission to NATO, except for the fact that "both nations have made valuable contributions to Alliance operations," as the Summit Declaration had it. This may not be a sufficient argument for accepting into the NATO alliance a country with numerous problems domestically and internationally, including unresolved conflicts. Therefore, U.S. insistence on giving Georgia a MAP at the Bucharest summit can only be explained by the ideological commitment of Washington to its Caucasian "protectorate."

Is this controversy over Georgia really meaningful in strategic terms? It seems that the U.S.-Russian battle over Georgia's geopolitical soul, explicitly presented in strategic terms and implicitly steeped in ideology, is harming all three parties involved in the competition. Indeed, the United States is losing Russian support on other key issues, Russia is reigniting Western fears of a belligerent Moscow, and Georgia is subjected to foreign political pressures at a time of domestic economic and political turmoil.

Conclusion

Ideological aspects should be taken into account, along with traditional strategic and economic considerations, when attempting to understand the new political showdown between the United States and Russia in the post-Soviet space and, more specifically, around the issue of Georgia. Georgia encapsulates the controversy over U.S. democracy promotion efforts and Russian countermeasures against the spread of ideas conducive to “color revolutions.”

The remarkable part of this ideological struggle is that neither the United States nor Russia seems to be entirely correct in its assumptions about the impact of Georgia on regional issues. Georgia cannot be thought of as filling the role of the so-called “beacon of liberty” for its neighbors any more, if it ever did. Compared to the other countries of the former Soviet south, Georgia has made only *relative* progress toward an open market and liberal democracy and still suffers from serious economic problems. At the same time, the political crisis of November 2007 and internal discontent with the conduct of elections in 2008 has heavily tarnished the democratic image of its government. For these same reasons, Russia should not be apprehensive about Tbilisi playing an undermining role in Moscow’s post-Soviet backyard.

Unfortunately, due to the persistent nature of ideological struggles, it is unlikely that disagreements between the United States and Russia over Georgia can be considerably alleviated in the near future. It is difficult to say what impact the change of leadership in Moscow and Washington will mean for the fate of the strategic and ideological triangle with Georgia. It seems that Georgia’s image as an indispensable ally and the regional beacon of democracy may indeed transcend the administration of George W. Bush, but the real question is whether this bare ideological connection is sufficient to guarantee continued attention to Georgian affairs at the highest levels of U.S. leadership. On the other hand, Russia’s need to control Georgia is more immediate and more central to its ideological obsession with the dominance of the “near abroad.” Therefore, unless Georgia receives solid security guarantees from the United States and NATO by December 2008, then Tbilisi’s ideological gambling may become untenable.

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