

The United States Between Russia and Georgia

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The latest crisis in Russian-Georgian relations, precipitated by the arrest of four Russian officers in Georgia on suspicions of espionage, could put the United States in an awkward situation in which it will be forced to explicitly choose between one or the other side.

The recent promise by Georgian Minister of Defense Irakli Okruashvili to celebrate the next New Year in Tskhinvali (the capital of the breakaway region of South Ossetia) apparently was not mere bragging; it seems that the Georgian leadership intends to bring the brinkmanship game to a close in the next few months. The dynamic of events is a telling sign. Only a few years ago crises were almost seasonal, with a serious conflagration occurring every spring and fall. Last year they became roughly quarterly. In the beginning of this year the pace quickened, and a serious crisis occurred approximately every week; now many weeks see two or three crises.

Support from the United States and NATO is crucial for Georgia's success in this game because it affords a certain degree of protection vis-à-vis Russia. So far, the United States has been able to support Georgia without alienating Russia. Russia, however, has apparently decided to play a similar brinkmanship game. By informing the U.S. Ambassador to Russia William Burns about the latest crisis the day after it happened, by calling an urgent meeting of the United Nations Security Council, and by arranging other consultations, Russia is effectively forcing the United States to take a definitive position. Each choice entails certain costs, and it seems unlikely that Washington will be able to avoid making one.

Russia: At the Limit of Temporizing

There is little doubt that the majority of Russians – both the public and the elite—would like to see Abkhazia and South Ossetia independent or even part of the Russian Federation, but there is very little or no willingness to pay the costs associated with such a policy. For that reason, Russia under President Vladimir Putin has been more interested in a compromise solution that would leave both regions as part of Georgia under conditions of considerable autonomy and guarantees of Russian economic interests. Such a compromise would have to have face-saving qualities to avoid the perception of a Russian geopolitical retreat. Russia has also sought to prevent the establishment of U.S. bases in Georgia, on Russia's southern flank, and appears to have used negotiations on the conflicts to try and fulfill that goal.

Contrary to widespread perceptions, Georgia's Rose Revolution was initially regarded in official Moscow circles as an opportunity. Minister of Foreign Affairs Igor Ivanov urgently flew to Tbilisi and convinced Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze to vacate his chair in favor of Mikheil Saakashvili. A few months later, Ivanov helped engineer the peaceful reintegration of Adjara, another troublesome region, into Georgia. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which border on Russia, required more delicate handling.

However, contrary to what Moscow apparently expected from the new regime, Saakashvili and his team almost immediately assumed highly charged anti-Russian rhetoric and began to demand the withdrawal of the remaining Russian military bases from Georgia and of Russian peacekeepers from Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Russian policy shifted by the end of 2005. Although it is difficult to fathom the personal motives and calculations of policymakers, the contours of the new policy suggested a decision to postpone the solution of Georgia's breakaway regions until the next Russian administration (i.e., 2008 or later) and in the meantime strengthen Russia's hand in dealing with Georgia. The new policy included two key elements:

- First, Russia decided to withdraw military bases from Georgia, a step it had objected to for many years. The desire to keep bases in Georgia was based on a perception, formed in the early years of the Cold War and still highly popular among hardliners and nationalists, that military bases equal influence. According to this view, the withdrawal of bases would eliminate Russian influence in Georgia. The relationship, of course, is the opposite: bases have been a consequence of influence, not the other way around. The decision to withdraw military bases, while confirming the "loss" of Georgia from Russia's sphere of influence, does remove an important vulnerability, however: Russia's virtually defenseless troops have been de facto hostages that have limited its freedom to act.
- Second, Moscow declared that the status of Kosovo would serve as a precedent for the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. While Russia has consistently supported Serbia's insistence on keeping Kosovo within its borders, it has harbored few illusions about the outcome of negotiations. Either way, Moscow stands to win: if the West desists and pressures Kosovars into remaining part of

Serbia, Russia can claim an important victory for its ally; if Kosovo gains independence, then Russia's hand in dealing with Georgia will considerably strengthen. Certainly, negotiations on the status of Kosovo are expected to take several years, and thus successful use of that tool will only become possible under the next Russian president.

In the meantime, Russia also decided to apply economic pressure to Georgia. This was probably a mistake, since it accelerated the crisis instead of freezing it until a time when Russia would be better prepared. The possibility that the endgame of the crisis might occur sooner rather than later—perhaps as early as the end of this year—caught Russia off-guard. Its actions in the last several months appear to have been improvised. It remains to be seen whether it can now play the “American card” against Georgia as successfully as the latter has played that card against Russia.

Georgia: Forcing the Solution

Whether by design or simply as a result of impatience, the Georgian leadership has sought to force the pace of events to achieve a solution before all pieces of the Russian plan fall into place. The tactic is risky because there is always a chance that Russia could snap and use force, but so far it has paid off. In the most general form, it is based on the following elements:

- *Denying Russia the comfort of the status quo.* Georgia has forced Russia into a choice between recognizing Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence outright or surrendering Russia's presence in the breakaway regions to some form of multilateral peacekeeping or police operation friendly to Georgia. Neither choice is good for Russia: in the first case, victory on the “Georgian front” will come at the expense of its broader international economic and political interests, while in the second case it will be accepting a sound defeat from a weak neighbor, with a commensurate loss of influence in the region and worldwide. On top of this, there is no chance that Georgia will allow Russia to retreat gracefully; Georgia's celebration of the agreement on the withdrawal of Russian bases demonstrated that Tbilisi will make the retreat as emotionally painful for Moscow as possible.
- *Maintaining a favorable image and reputation of Georgia in the West.* Since Russia tries to project an image as a responsible and law-abiding member of the international community, it will always be constrained in its actions vis-à-vis Georgia, as long as the latter is able to present its case as legitimate on both legal and moral grounds. Georgia's image can be summarized as a young market-oriented democracy under a dynamic liberal leadership under attack by an imperial aggressor that seeks to dismember the country and reverse pro-democracy trends.
- *Political and moral support in the West as a means of reducing the scale and effectiveness of Russian pressure.* Economic and financial assistance helps Georgia to partially alleviate the costs of confrontation with Russia and to modernize its armed forces. The specter of political and economic losses in case of armed confrontation ought to help restrain Russia during the high point of the brinkmanship game. As mentioned, however, there is always a risk that Russia could snap and openly

threaten or use force. Western support should substantially enhance the cost of such a policy and limit Russia to political and economic instruments that are not sufficiently effective.

- *Consolidation of the domestic political scene.* The near-wartime conditions (including, most recently, the announcement of a “total defense” policy) have allowed the Georgian government to maintain a high level of public support and marginalize or even suppress opposition without damaging its image in the West.

The downside of the scheme is that victory must be achieved in a very short time. It is difficult to maintain for several more years either the focused attention of the United States and Europe on Georgian affairs or Georgia’s favorable reputation. The strain of “total defense” may prove too much, and either the economy or the political regime, or both, could collapse. Finally, after 2008 presidential elections in Russia, Moscow may be much better positioned and more willing for a showdown with Tbilisi. The “game” should be over no later than by the middle of the next year, if not before.

So far, the tactic chosen by Mikheil Saakashvili and his team has proven successful, if risky. Russia’s already bleak reputation has been further tarnished, and it is having to fight hard to retain its existing positions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Its choices are extremely constrained because there is very little it can do to pressure Tbilisi. In the meantime, Georgia has established a valuable bridgehead into Abkhazia and continues to press forward vis-à-vis the breakaway regions and Russia.

The United States: Are There Any Options?

So far, the U.S. position on the Russian-Georgian crisis has been cautious and quite adequate. It has consistently supported Georgia, partially protecting it from Russian pressure. At the same time, it has placated Russia by insisting that Georgia’s conflict with Russia and the integration of the breakaway regions be resolved via diplomatic means. If Georgia intends to continue pressuring Russia into a final showdown in the near future, it could force the United States to declare its preferences more explicitly.

By calling an urgent meeting of the UN Security Council, Russia was effectively seeking to force the United States to make such a declaration even earlier or, more preferably, to continue its balancing act. An attempt by the United States to maintain its present policy effectively puts it on Russia’s side because Russian policy is predicated on temporizing.

For Russia, the gamble could be worth the risk; it is widely believed that only the United States is able to stop Saakashvili and equally widely suspected that Georgia acts with the tacit approval of Washington. This gamble is based on the realization that cooperation with Russia is still of a certain value to the United States.

On the other hand, if the United States firmly stands on the side of Georgia (by demanding, for example, that Russian troops be replaced by forces from other countries like GUAM members Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova), it risks losing Russian cooperation on issues where it still counts – for example, Iran and North Korea. Seen from Moscow, Georgia is effectively at war with Russia. Open U.S. support for Georgia would be tantamount to “siding with the enemy.”

On the surface, the Russian gamble has paid off in the most recent crisis, and the arrested Russian officers were extradited to Moscow. The new sanctions announced against Georgia, however, indicate that the game continues. When the next crisis happens, Washington will again be pressed to do nothing – and play into the hands of Moscow —or support Tbilisi and lose Russia. Whatever happens, Washington will find it very hard to chart its own course. Its choices are really being made in Tbilisi and Moscow.

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