

The U.S. and Georgia

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The international condemnation of Russian aggression against Georgia – and the concomitant assaults by Abkhazians and South Ossetians against ethnic Georgians within their territories – is in large part appropriate. But the self-righteous posturing coming out of Washington should be tempered by a sober recognition of the ways in which the United States has contributed to the crisis.

It has been nearly impossible to even broach this subject of the U.S. role. Much of the mainstream media coverage and statements by American political leaders of both major parties has in many respects resembled the anti-Russian hysterics of the Cold War. It is striking how quickly forgotten is the fact that the U.S.-backed Georgian military started the war when it brutally assaulted the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali in an attempt to regain direct control of the autonomous region. This attack prompted the disproportionate and illegitimate Russian military response, which soon went beyond simply ousting invading Georgian forces from South Ossetia to invading and occupying large segments of Georgia itself.

The South Ossetians themselves did much to provoke Georgia as well by shelling villages populated by ethnic Georgians earlier this month. However, Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili ruled out signing a non-aggression pact and repeatedly refused to rejoin talks of the Joint Control Commission to prevent an escalation of the violence. Furthermore, according to [Reuters](#), a draft UN Security Council statement calling for an immediate cease fire was blocked when the United States objected to “a phrase in the three-sentence draft statement that would have required both sides ‘to renounce the use of force.’”

Borders and Boundaries

In the Caucasus and Central Asia, the Russian empire and its Soviet successors, like the Western European colonialists in Africa, often drew state boundaries arbitrarily and, in some cases, not so arbitrarily as part of a divide-and-rule strategy. The small and ethnically distinct regions of South Ossetia, Abkhazia, and Ajaria were incorporated into the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic and – on the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991 – remained as autonomous regions within the state of Georgia. Not one of the regions was ethnically pure. They all included sizable ethnic Georgian minorities, among others. Despite cultural and linguistic differences, there was not much in the way of ethnic tension during most of the Soviet period and inter-marriage was not uncommon.

As the USSR fell apart in the late 1980s, however, nationalist sentiments increased dramatically throughout the Caucasus region in such ethnic enclaves as Chechnya in Russia, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan, as well as among those within Georgia. Compounding these nationalist and ethnic tensions was the rise of the ultra-nationalist Georgian president Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who assumed power when the country declared independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. With the possible exception of the Baltic states, Georgia had maintained the strongest sense of nationalism of any of the former Soviet republics, tracing its national identity as far back as the 4th century BC as one of most advanced states of its time. This resurgent nationalism led the newly re-emerged independent Georgia to attempt to assert its sovereignty over its autonomous regions by force.

A series of civil conflicts raged in Georgia in subsequent years, both between competing political factions within Georgia itself as well as in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, resulting in widespread ethnic cleansing. Backed by Russian forces, these two regions achieved de facto independence while, within Georgia proper, former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze emerged as president and brought some semblance of stability to the country, despite a weak economy and widespread corruption.

Russian troops, nominally in a peacekeeping role but clearly aligned with nationalist elements within the two ethnic enclaves, effectively prevented any subsequent exercise of Georgian government authority over most of these territories. Meanwhile, the United States became the biggest foreign backer of the Shevardnadze regime, pouring in over \$1 billion in aid during the decade of his corrupt and semi-authoritarian rule.

The Rose Revolution

Though strongly supported by Washington, Shevardnadze was less well-respected at home. For example, The New York Times [reported](#) how “Georgians have a different perspective” than the generous pro-government view from Washington, citing the observation in the Georgian daily newspaper The Messenger that, “Despite the fact that he is adored in the West as an ‘architect of democracy’ and credited with ending the Cold War, Georgians cannot bear their president.” Though critical of the rampant corruption and rigged elections, the Bush administration stood by the Georgian regime, as they had the post-Communist dictatorships in Azerbaijan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and most of the other former Soviet republics.

Georgia enjoyed relatively more political freedom and civil society institutions than most other post-Soviet states. Nevertheless, high unemployment, a breakdown in the allocation of energy for heating and other needs, a deteriorating infrastructure, widespread corruption, and inept governance led to growing dissatisfaction with the government. By 2003, Shevardnadze had lost support from virtually every social class, ethnic group, and geographical region of the country. Heavy losses by his supporters in parliamentary elections early that November were widely anticipated. Still, Shevardnadze continued to receive the strong support of President George W. Bush due to his close personal relationship with high-ranking administration officials. Contributing to this relationship were his pro-Western policies, such as embarking upon ambitious free market reforms under the tutelage of the International Monetary Fund, agreeing to deploy 300 Georgian troops to Iraq following the U.S. invasion, and sending Georgian troops trained by U.S. Special Forces to the Pankisi Gorge on the border of Chechnya to fight Chechen rebels. Opposition leaders Zurab Zhvania and Mikheil Saakashvili strongly criticized the United States for its continued support of the Georgian president.

In addition to the electoral opposition, a decentralized student-led grass roots movement known as Kmara emerged, calling for an end to corruption and more democratic and accountable government as well as free and fair elections. Though not directly supported by the Bush administration, a number of Western NGOs, including the Open Society Institute (backed by Hungarian-American financier George Soros) and the National Democratic Institute (supported, ironically, by U.S. congressional funding) provided funding for election-monitoring and helped facilitate workshops for both the young Kmara activists and mainstream opposition leaders. This led to some serious tension between these non-governmental organizations and the U.S. embassy in Georgian capital.

For example, when U.S. ambassador to Georgia Richard Miles learned that some leaders from the successful student-led nonviolent civil insurrection in Serbia three years earlier were in Tbilisi to give trainings to Kmara activists, he tried to discourage them by telling them that “Shevardnadze is the guarantee for the peace and stability of the region.” Noting that the United States was providing training and equipment of the Georgian army that anti-government demonstrators would soon be facing down in the streets, he referred to the Kmara as

“troublemakers.” Similarly, Miles discouraged Kmara leaders from working with the Serb activists, whom he had known from his prior post as chief of mission in Belgrade, insisting that “Georgia is not the same as Serbia.” (The young Serbs ignored him, and the scheduled trainings in strategic nonviolent action went forward anyway.)

The parliamentary elections that November were marred by a series of irregularities. These included widespread ballot-stuffing, multiple voting by government supporters, late poll openings, missing ballots, and missing voter lists in opposition strongholds. These attempts to steal the election elicited little more than finger-wagging from the Bush administration.

The Georgians themselves did not take the situation so lightly, however. They launched general strikes and massive street protests against what they saw as illegitimate government authority. This effort was soon dubbed the “Rose Revolution.” Gaining support from the United States only after the success of the nonviolent civil insurrection appeared inevitable, this popular uprising forced Shevardnadze to resign.

Presidential elections, certified as free and fair by international observers, were held two months later, in which opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili emerged victorious. Four months later, the authoritarian ruler of the autonomous region of Abkhazia, a Shevardnadze ally, was ousted in a similar nonviolent civil insurrection.

Though not responsible for the change of government itself, the Bush administration soon moved to take advantage of the change the Georgian people brought about after the fact.

U.S. Embrace of Saakashvili

Despite its longstanding support for Shevardnadze, the Bush administration quickly embraced Georgia’s new president. Taking advantage of Georgia’s desperate economic situation, the United States successfully lobbied for a series of additional free market reforms and other neoliberal economic measures on the country, including a flat tax of 14%. Though official corruption declined, tax collection rates improved, and the rate of economic growth increased, high unemployment remained and social inequality grew.

With strong encouragement from Washington, Saakashvili’s government reduced domestic spending but dramatically increased military spending, with the armed forces expanding to more than 45,000 personnel over the next four years, more than 12,000 of whom were trained by the United States. Congress approved hundreds of millions of dollars of military assistance to Georgia, a small country of less than five million people. In addition, the United States successfully encouraged Israel to send advisors and trainers to support the rapidly-expanding Georgian armed forces.

Although facing growing security concerns at home, the Bush administration also successfully pushed Saakashvili to send an additional 1,700 troops to Iraq. Thus, Georgia increased its troop strength in Iraq by more than 500% even as other countries in the U.S.-led multinational force were pulling out.

Though Georgia is located in a region well within Russia’s historic sphere of influence and is more than 3,000 miles from the Atlantic Ocean, Bush nevertheless launched an ambitious campaign to bring Georgia into the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). The Russians, who had already seen previous U.S. assurances to Gorbachev that NATO would not extend eastward ignored, found the prospects of NATO expansion to the strategically important and volatile Caucasus region particularly provocative. This inflamed Russian nationalists and Russian military leaders and no doubt strengthened their resolve to maintain their military presence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Washington’s embrace of Saakashvili, like its earlier embrace of Shevardnadze, appears to have been based in large part on oil. The United States has helped establish Georgia as a major energy transit corridor, building an

oil pipeline from the Caspian region known as the BTC (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceylan) and a parallel natural gas pipeline, both designed to avoid the more logical geographical routes through Russia or Iran. The Russians, meanwhile, in an effort to maintain as much control over the westbound oil from the region, have responded by pressuring the governments of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to sign exclusive export agreements and to construct natural gas pipelines through Russia. (See Michael Klare's [Russia and Georgia: All About Oil.](#))

Amid accusations of widespread corruption and not adequately addressing the country's growing poverty, Saakashvili himself faced widespread protests in November 2007, to which he responded with severe repression, shutting down independent media, detaining opposition leaders, and sending his security forces to assault largely nonviolent demonstrators with tear gas, truncheons, rubber bullets, water cannons, and sonic equipment. Human Rights Watch criticized the government for using "excessive" force against protesters and the International Crisis Group warned of growing authoritarianism in the country. Despite this, Saakashvili continued to receive strong support from Washington and still appeared to have majority support within Georgia, winning a snap election in January by a solid majority which – despite some irregularities – was generally thought to be free and fair.

Lead-up to the Current Crisis

A number of misguided U.S. policies appear to have played an important role in encouraging Georgia to launch its August 6 assault on South Ossetia.

The first had to do with the U.S.-led militarization of Georgia, which likely emboldened Saakashvili to try to resolve the conflict over South Ossetia by military means. Just last month, the United States held a military exercise in Georgia with more than 1,000 American troops while the Bush administration, [according to The New York Times](#), was "loudly proclaiming its support for Georgia's territorial integrity in the battle with Russia over Georgia's separatist enclaves." As the situation was deteriorating last month, U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice made a high-profile visit to Saakashvili in Tbilisi, where she reiterated the strong strategic relationship between the two countries.

Radio Liberty [speculates](#) that Saakashvili "may have felt that his military, after several years of U.S.-sponsored training and rearmament, was now capable of routing the Ossetian separatists ("bandits," in the official parlance) and neutralizing the Russian peacekeepers." Furthermore, Saakashvili apparently hoped that the anticipated Russian reaction would "immediately transform the conflict into a direct confrontation between a democratic David and an autocratic Goliath, making sure the sympathy of the Western world would be mobilized for Georgia."

[According to Charles Kupchan](#) of the Council on Foreign Relations, the United States may have caused Saakashvili to "miscalculate" and "overreach" by making him feel that "at the end of the day that the West would come to his assistance if he got into trouble."

Another factor undoubtedly involved the U.S. push for Georgia to join NATO. The efforts by some prominent Kremlin lawmakers for formal recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia coincided with the escalated efforts for NATO's inclusion of Georgia this spring, as well as an awareness that any potential Russian military move against Georgia would need to come sooner rather than later.

And, as a number of us [predicted](#) last March, Western support for the unilateral declaration of independence by the autonomous Serbian region of Kosovo emboldened nationalist leaders in the autonomous Georgian regions, along with their Russian supporters, to press for the independence of these nations as well. Despite the pro-American sympathies of many in that country, Georgians were notably alarmed by the quick and precedent-setting U.S. recognition of Kosovo.

No Standing to Challenge Russian Aggression

Russia's massive and brutal military counter-offensive, while immediately provoked by Georgia's attack on South Ossetia, had clearly been planned well in advance. It also went well beyond defending the enclave to illegally sending forces deep into Georgia itself and inflicting widespread civilian casualties. It has had nothing to do with solidarity with an oppressed people struggling for self-determination and everything to do with geopolitics and the assertion of militaristic Russian nationalism.

While the international community has solid grounds to challenge Russian aggression, however, the United States has lost virtually all moral standing to take a principled stance.

For example, the brutally punitive and disproportionate response by the Russian armed forces pales in comparison to that of Israel's 2006 attacks on Lebanon, which were strongly defended not only by the Bush administration, but leading [Democrats](#) in Congress, including presumptive Democratic presidential nominee [Barack Obama](#).

Russia's use of large-scale military force to defend the autonomy of South Ossetia by massively attacking Georgia has been significantly less destructive than the U.S.-led NATO assault on Serbia to defend Kosovo's autonomy in 1999, an action that received broad bipartisan American support.

And the Russian ground invasion of Georgia, while a clear violation of international legal norms, is far less significant a breach of international law as the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, authorized by a large majority in Congress.

This doesn't mean that the Russia's military offensive should not be rigorously opposed. However, the U.S. contribution to this unfolding tragedy and the absence of any moral authority to challenge it must not be ignored.

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