

Russia, Georgia and the United States: Dealing with New Realities

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As the destructive Russian military intervention in Georgia enters a murky “ceasefire” stage of uneasy testing, and as the American presidential campaign, already in its second year, heads into what promises to be an exceptionally hard-fought last three months, how either of these events will turn out remains to be seen. By the time these thoughts are published, the dynamics of both will have already morphed into new and perhaps unforeseen directions. A good deal of current history has yet to play itself out.

What does seem clear is that as a consequence of these latest events, the US president—whether George W. Bush as the current incumbent over the next few months, or Senator McCain or Senator Obama from next January 20 onwards—will not have the luxury of treating the strategic and political dilemmas posed by such Russian behavior as anything less than a first-rank priority amidst an already overcrowded national security agenda.

That readjustment of American attention should in itself be seen as a significant, if overdue, development—and crafting a new and comprehensive strategy for dealing with Moscow over the longer term needs to be recognized as a pressing and complex challenge for the next administration.

I

If precise prediction is so dubious under current circumstances, what can still usefully be said about those factors driving the direction of US–Russian relations at this particular juncture? What are the underlying questions and concerns we

should be worrying about in the context of crafting a new strategy? What seems all too likely for the near term: More trouble will follow.

It is not just that events in Georgia have unmistakably demonstrated a resurgent Russia's readiness to act on an expansive definition of its own interests in its neighborhood and in a spirit of resentment for perceived past humiliations—or that they also reveal a degree of miscalculation on the part of the US, and perhaps a troubling lack of sufficient policy-level attention to warning signs over time.

Riding a heady mix of petro-confidence and broadly popular nationalist sentiments, and now reinforced by military success in the field, the current Russian leadership, dominated by Putin in his new capacity as prime minister, in an unclear diarchy of power, will be tempted to continue, or even ratchet up, statements and actions on behalf of openly revisionist aspirations.

In turn, the Bush administration is moving well into its own understandable dynamic: steadily stepping up expressions of diplomatic and material support for Georgia and sharpened opposition to any continued Russian military occupation of large sections of that country, even while taking care with regard to any sense of greater direct American military engagement.

With Moscow thus elated and Washington no less embarrassed, and Western leverage to affect events on the ground in Georgia at best uncertain, at least for the time being, it is difficult to envisage a near-term change in circumstances (or in the tone of Moscow policy making for that matter) such as to radically alter for the better the political action/reaction cycle now well underway.

So what does all this mean?

First of all, this is not necessarily an immediate or inevitable replay of the Cold War at its worst—this despite occasionally overheated headlines.

The Russian Federation of today is not the existential and global strategic adversary, let alone ideological competitor, which the Soviet Union was in decades past. Its strengths and vulnerabilities are very different. So, too, is the radically changing global environment within which Russia, the US and other actors must now operate. To assume otherwise and simply to fall back on previous models would prove to be a serious error for policy makers seeking to define more accurately current Russian realities and their import for the US.

Nonetheless, there is an increasingly clear sense in Washington that the challenges (perhaps a more accurate characterization than threats) posed by recent Russian

behavior have now become quite real—and in some cases may be in the nature of “game-changers” (to use a term popular among Pentagon bureaucrats). That is to say, they have called into question certain basic premises of our own policies of the last two decades and begun to generate some real strategic costs and risks for us.

At initial issue is the degree of erosion of a fundamental strategic assumption: that of a relatively benign post-Cold War European security environment, occasionally troubled in spots like the Western Balkans but no longer the primary arena of broad and sustained confrontation and potential conflict. For the US, accustomed to having to deal with Europe as the critical cockpit demanding significant effort and sacrifice for much of the twentieth century, this essential shift has brought no small strategic benefit over the last two decades. But that now may be coming into question precisely at a time of our perceived overextension elsewhere in the world.

As Strobe Talbott has effectively underscored in the last few days, a recurring theme underlying much of US policy towards post-Soviet Russia during this period, even allowing for important differences among the three US administrations of that time, has been to pursue opportunities for possible cooperation with Russia with an eye to its growing and eventual integration into Europe and various key institutions of the international community. There have been good reasons to play this card over the years, consistent with an objective of encouraging Russia to move beyond the worst of past patterns of behavior with its immediate neighbors. Now, however, the very notion of Russia’s “Western vocation” is in tatters.

II

Indeed, the most immediate and troubling questions generated for US and Western policy makers by these recent Russian actions relate to the negative ripple effects for those states on its periphery—again coming at a moment when our own influence and credibility in those same regions have been damaged.

The circumstances of these various neighbors on each front of this renewed sense of Russian periphery or “Near Abroad”—whether in the Baltics, Black Sea, Caucasus, Caspian and beyond to Central Asia—are *sui generis*. All have differing relationships with Moscow geared to their own situations and calculations. But, as various commentators have stressed throughout this past week, all of Russia’s neighbors doubtless now feel less secure following the Georgian tragedy. This was intended to be so—an unmistakable Russian object lesson for its neighbors, perhaps with special reference for capitals such as Kiev and Baku to rethink carefully their respective priorities and strategic options vis-à-vis the West.

Reduced to shorthand, three mutually reinforcing sets of issues seem to animate a more assertive Russian stance, over and above any residual nostalgia for the habits of a past privileged role:

- The effort to maintain and expand Russian control or influence over the reliability of supply, transit and distribution of energy resources from out of these regions;
- The desire to deny, or minimize to the extent possible, US and NATO military engagement (either real or perceived) within these states; and
- Leadership concern to preempt and restrict any potential political spillover within Russia itself from the examples set by the popularly supported Color Revolutions of 2003-2005.

The unintended effects of the invasion of Georgia will further complicate our own response to this mix of Russian objectives. Not least will be the new round of tensions Russian policy may generate in these regions for the longer term.

For example, Moscow's latest parsing of "territorial integrity" as fungible in the case of Georgia seems to reverse earlier Russian acceptance that former inter-republic borders would constitute new international borders, a contributing factor to the relatively orderly aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, in contrast to the disastrous Yugoslav experience. As such, it can only be read as profoundly troubling by policy makers and the public in Ukraine, conscious of those political voices in Moscow seeking a return of the Crimea and/or assertion of indefinite Russian naval basing rights at Sevastopol over the current Ukrainian government's stated wishes.

This leads to an early and critical problem for the architects of any new Russian strategy for the next US administration: There will be no single simple formula for how to manage, to the extent we can do so, all of the diverse perceptions, expectations and anxieties surrounding our own role with regard to Russia's relations with its immediate neighbors.

(The charge that our support for continued NATO enlargement and enthusiastic democracy promotion, associated with the current administration, has been both naïve and risky will have to be balanced by recognition that our appearance of any acceptance, however artfully termed, of a *de facto* Russian *droit de regard* over its neighbors' policies would not be without potential for serious blowback as well.)

III

Moving Westward: How does all of this begin to reshape the nature of our own debate over how to anticipate and respond to these manifestations of new Russian realities? And more specifically for any new version of a US strategy, what should it mean for a new administration's handling of the transatlantic component of that debate, not least in sustaining the credibility of NATO in the face of an apparent return of East–West political-military tensions?

The return of East–West policy as a lively transatlantic issue should not come as a great surprise. Neither should it be at all unexpected if over the coming months European governments face renewed difficulties in seeking to craft common policy stances vis-à-vis Russia.

This is not new. There has, of course, already been extensive public commentary over the past four or five years as to the increasingly undemocratic, even autocratic, qualities of the current Russian regime. Repeatedly sharp-elbowed Russian use of energy assets as a tool for both internal and external political aims, even as European dependence upon Russia in this critical field has steadily increased, has generated concern among Europeans and Americans alike.

But the disproportionate and indiscriminate use of Russian military force against an ostensibly sovereign and independent neighbor, whatever the original complexities surrounding the Ossetian dispute, is something different. It will bring both an emotive force and sharpened geo-strategic sensitivities to discussion on these issues.

At the same time, there will also be heightened European inhibitions. Having vividly demonstrated the consequences of policy miscalculation (foremost perhaps by President Saakashvili and his advisers), the Georgian tragedy raises the stakes of misreading strategic red lines on the part of all sides.

As a consequence, debating policy towards Russia will return, perhaps with an energy and urgency not seen since the early 1980s, as a centerpiece of the Euro–Atlantic dialogue, both within NATO and in a US–EU context. These exchanges may initially be preoccupied with the specifics of a Western response to the ongoing Georgian situation (Washington presumably urging more forward-leaning engagement on the part of the Alliance, especially with Georgia; others arguing a much more restrained course in light of the recent debacle). But there will be additional issues:

- How to manage further Russian reactions to the possible deployment of US missile defense systems in Central Europe (viz. the sharp Russian comments on the abrupt conclusion of a long-stalled US–Polish basing agreement in the aftermath of the invasion of Georgia); and
- How to direct and pace any decisions toward an eventual deepening of Ukrainian (as well as Georgian) engagement with the Alliance, and specifically how this might be addressed in upcoming NATO Ministerials.

What will be a critical difference this time around will be the much more vocal role to be played by those new members of both the Atlantic Alliance and European Union: the Central Europeans and the Baltic states. These states, backed by the United Kingdom and Scandinavia, have already made no secret of the strength of their own concerns over Russia's assertiveness. Other European states—Germany, France and notably Italy come to mind—will be far more likely to adopt a more cautious line, even while discomfited by the Russian military intervention into Georgia.

In terms of both process and substance, these divisions will translate into repeated difficulty in the formulation of common European policy positions: in current circumstances, for example, those going beyond relatively straightforward calls for an early end to violence or the provision of humanitarian assistance. But this will be a rolling process and European positions will be evolutionary.

Effectively managing the transatlantic component of this process will be a multifaceted and long-term task for US policy makers, labor intensive and often frustrating, but critical nonetheless.

But what will be no less difficult, and what has not yet been addressed in most of the American public commentary thus far, is how this new stage of increased Russian assertiveness and the corresponding US response will affect those regional issues beyond the traditional European ambit of most Russian specialists in Washington: those of the Near East through South and East Asia.

IV

This brings us back to the Americans—and how our own American debate about dealing with Russia amidst new circumstances might turn out. That process is still in an early stage.

There is an important history yet to be written as to the course of US–Russian relations over the last eight or so years: that is to say, tracing the hows and whys of

an arc running from genuinely upbeat moments in late 2001–2002 into the current period in 2007–2008, one of mounting suspicion, strain and division perhaps best captured in, and further catalyzed by, Putin’s acerbic speech at Wehrkunde of last year.

There is likely no single explanation. How the US and Russia have come once again to open confrontation and ill-disguised resentment reflects both deliberate decisions on the part of Russian leadership that an obstructionist role would be much more to Russia’s advantage, and on the US side, a sense, perhaps, that the management of Russia’s expectations, concerns and role on issues away from our own top priorities (e.g., terrorism and the Iranian nuclear program) could be safely treated as a *de facto* secondary task.

But absent a broadly accepted narrative for how we have gotten to where we now are, much of the initial American reaction to the Georgian conflict and accompanying media commentary have been cast through the lens not just of the current American political campaign, but of an underlying division of perceptions of US policies in a dramatically changing world. (And because campaigns are in great part about emphasizing differences, it is not surprising that advocates of the respective presidential candidates have taken pains to contrast tone and nuance between the two, even while the substantive core of the public statements of both have strongly supported Georgia and condemned Russian actions).

That is to say, our popular discussion of both the “why” of the Georgian conflict and the “what next” of our policy toward Russia has been deeply colored by a reanimated argument over the wisdom, or lack thereof, in the various policies of the current administration—and of earlier ones. A reflection of this has been the almost daily invocation of differing historical analogies. Mused one former senior official: “Is this a replay of the Sudetenland in 1938 when the Nazis marched in? Or Budapest in 1956 when American broadcasts egged on the Hungarians to confront the Russians? Or Afghanistan in 1979 when shock of the Soviet invasion led to tougher Western attitudes? None of the above, or a combination of all?”

More useful than any mix of historical analogies for the new American president would be a clearer sense of just how he might need to go about articulating and sustaining a longer-term and balanced strategy for dealing with these new Russian realities.

At this still early stage, the prerequisites for crafting such a strategy—those fundamental considerations not easily overtaken by fast-moving events—are not likely to be the sort of political qualities easily brought to bear in American

politics. Therefore, cataloging the potential traps and missteps to avoid might constitute the rough beginning of a more useful guide.

Americans, it is asserted, do not do nuance particularly well, especially when our general political discourse seems inevitably driven to bold colors, quick results and oversimplification.

Yet any strategy for dealing with a resurgent Russia will have to be more than monochromatic and fixed on the immediate term. It will need to provide for opportunities to explore and press new areas of cooperation, perhaps as in reinforcing strategic nuclear restraint, even as it facilitates our vigorous pushback in other areas where needed, as in seeking complete Russian troop withdrawal from Georgia.

The qualities of “long-term” and “balance” in our strategy are easier said than done. Strategic patience on a broad front is a virtue difficult for us to cultivate in a time when leaders and governments are preoccupied with the next news cycle and its lead item.

Managing new Russian realities will be particularly tough for any US president because the issues will demand sustained high-level attention, the scarcest resource of any administration, even as they will not necessarily lend themselves to early political payoff in the form of visible progress.

As a consequence, there will always be a temptation for American leaders to succumb to the bilateral illusion with their Russian counterparts—that is to say, falling into the trap of perceiving current differences solely in a US–Russia prism or thinking that multilateral issues are easily amenable to bilateral summit-level deals.

To the contrary, the relative success of any new American strategy for dealing with Russia will be directly dependent upon the degree to which skillful leadership and persistent diplomacy can make such policies seem to be a genuinely shared effort with allies and partners.