

COMMENTARY

Georgia: Epicenter of Strategic Confrontation

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Russia's invasion of Georgia has dramatically brought to the surface the strategic confrontation between Russia and the West. Georgia lies at the epicenter of an escalating struggle between a revived and expansionist Russia and Western institutions that serve as a magnet for aspiring democracies in the wider Europe.

The war over Georgia, whatever its precise trigger, has been brewing for several years. Calculating that the Western reaction would be weak, divided, and distracted, the Vladimir Putin–Dmitri Medvedev administration concluded that forceful action against Tbilisi's attempt to regain the secessionist territory of South Ossetia would serve three strategic goals.

First, Moscow is using the pretext of defending the Russian populations in South Ossetia and the rebel region of Abkhazia to truncate Georgia, undermine its military capabilities, weaken the pro-Western government, and disable Tbilisi from moving forward toward NATO membership.

Second, the attack on Georgia sends a powerful signal to other states neighboring Russia that their strategic orientation will not be a sovereign decision. The Georgian crisis serves as a warning to countries such as Ukraine and Moldova that they should desist from petitioning for NATO entry. Otherwise, Moscow may intervene to protect the allegedly threatened interests of the Russian population.

Third, and most significantly, through its actions in Georgia, Russia is reasserting its trans-regional reach by actively stemming the further expansion of the Western or Euro-Atlantic zone and seeking to reverse the influence of the United States in the Caucasian, Caspian, and Black Sea regions.

NATO is seen as a threat by the Kremlin not because of its aggressive posture but because it provides some degree of protection to countries fearing Russian ambitions, as affirmed by the Central European and Baltic capitals. The European Union is also viewed as a menace by Moscow principally because its standards for democratic governance, the rule of law, and business transparency undermine Russia's strategy of political corruption and energy monopolization.

The Russian authorities believe that the United States has passed its zenith as a global power and a new multipolar world order needs to be constructed. Washington's preoccupation with Iraq, Afghanistan, and jihadist terrorism provides a valuable opportunity for a resurgent Russia to extend its influences in key regions adjacent to its territory, particularly throughout the wider Europe. Moscow estimates that Washington will not assist Georgia militarily and that other U.S. allies will become more reticent in supporting America in its broader global agenda.

In its longer-range calculations, Moscow's overarching ambition is to expand the "Eurasian space" in which Russia becomes the dominant political player. This would involve transforming Europe as a whole into a minor player or an appendage of the Russian sphere and debilitating Euro-Atlanticism by undercutting Europe's connections with the United States.

Russia has deployed a range of tools to curtail the further expansion of the NATO-EU zone and to weaken its coherence and effectiveness. These include divisive diplomacy, political subversion, informational warfare, and energy entrapment, whereby Russia converts energy dependence into intergovernmental influence. Moscow is also gaining major economic

inroads in Europe through the purchase of strategic assets that enable it to leverage politicians and business leaders to acquiesce to Russian interests under the banner of “pragmatism.”

The war in Georgia has added another arrow to Moscow’s quiver. The use of force against an independent pro-Western state will send shock waves throughout all former Soviet satellites. The Kremlin calculates that few Western capitals will have the stomach or stamina for a prolonged confrontation with Russia, and it is banking on division and indecisiveness by EU members compounded by a lame duck American presidency.

The Russia-Georgia war has become a test case for EU and NATO unity and their effectiveness in dealing with a major crisis in the wider Europe. An inability to pressure Russia to withdraw its troops, to emplace an international peacekeeping mission in Georgia’s disputed territories, or to restore Georgia’s territorial integrity will send a negative signal to all nearby states threatened by Russia’s expansionism. It will also encourage Moscow to pursue more vigorously its broader “Eurasian” agenda.

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