

Geopolitics at Work: the Georgian-Russian Conflict

Peter W. Schulze*

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* The Author did several teaching assignments at the Universities of Berlin, Maryland, Stanford and Berkeley. After several activities for the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation he was between 1992 and 2003 Head of the FEF-Office for the Russian Foundation in Moscow. He is Honorary Professor of University Rostov-on-the Don and since 2004 Professor for Political Sciences, International Relations and Comparative Government at the Georg August-University of Goettingen.

A. From Frozen Conflicts to Military Protectorates

The guns are silent. The smoke has settled and both war parties have more or less withdrawn to approved lines of a cease fire agreement, brokered by the European Union. In addition and somewhat surprisingly, the assessments in the media war which erupted after the hostilities and fully blamed Russia as an aggressor have changed too.

There is not enough time to list the episodes of the escalating conflict, which started well before the demise of the Soviet Union and led to an outside monitored cease fire agreement which was constantly broken by both sides.

August 8th, 2008 marked a radical change in the relationship between Georgia and the Russian Federation since 2004. The low warfare situation of provocations, accusations, shootings, economic embargos and a creeping policy to turn South Ossetia into a military protectorate of Russia erupted fully into a full-blown military conflict. The Georgian President, Mikhail Saakashvili, waged a “Blitzkrieg” on South Ossetia.¹ Georgian troops pushed forward to conquer Zkhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia and to block the strategically important Roki-Tunnel, so that Russian troops could not enter the war zone with heavy equipment.

Both aims were not achieved. The Russian military intervened 12 hours after the Georgian military offensive.² Russian troops pushed the

¹ A. Golts, ‘The Failure of Realpolitik’, in *The Moscow Times*, 12 August 2008, 9. Golts, Journalist and military expert, who is definitely not a supporter of the Kremlin’s foreign and military policy, draws a parallel between the Georgian attack on Zkhinvali and the case of Sarajewo during the Bosnian-conflict. “Whatever the Georgian army has done is no different from the purported war crimes for which former Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic is now standing trial in The Hague. Serbian artillery stationed on the hills surrounding Sarajevo systematically destroyed the separatist capital. This is exactly what the Georgian army has done by taking positions overlooking [Z]khinvali”. See as well F. Bomsdorf, (head of the Moscow office of the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung): *Der Krieg im Kaukasus kennt fast nur Verlierer*, *Report*, 13 August 2008.

² Russia did not need the war, but could not avoid it either. The Kremlin was put into a chess like position. It had no choice but to move to counter the Georgians. But Moscow waited until it became clear who started the war. However, this led to speculations about a power struggle between the hawks and the doves in Kremlin politics. One of the leading right wing voices in Washington, Robert Kagan, who became the foreign policy adviser of the former presidential candidate John McCain, immediately tried to whitewash Saakashvili and to put the blame on Russia. “The details of who

Georgian army back. And like recent campaigns in the Balkans in 1999 as well as in Gaza in 2009 have demonstrated, the overarching goal of military operations is to destroy systematically by air and tank attacks most of the offensive military equipment of the enemy. This includes dual useable infrastructure, i.e. means and routes of transportation, port facilities and of course all military hardware and equipment, which can be used for new offensive purposes.

In addition, to provide the conflict from escalating once more, a “cordon sanitaire”, a buffer zone of roughly seven kilometers was created and fortified around the South Ossetian border to disengage both sides and allocate additional security.

At the end of August 2008, both Russian chambers of Parliament, i.e. the State Duma and the Federation Council, as well as the Russian president Dmitry Medvedev signed and ratified a declaration, announcing South Ossetia and the other separatist region, Abkhazia, as sovereign states. By December 2008, bilateral security and cooperation agreements were concluded, allowing Russian troops to be stationed in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Apart from not being internationally recognized, both regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, can now be defined as Russian protectorates. Such a move, the recognition of both separatist bodies as sovereign states, implied a fundamental change in Moscow’s view on principles of international law. Fearing problems at home, the post-Soviet state never recognized separatist entities until then. However, the West’s intransigence in the case of Kosovo, and with the conflict in Chechnya under control, Moscow entered new terrain – much to the dismay of her partners in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and in CIS-countries.

Russia’s military intervention put an end to Saakaschvili’s masterfully played policy of “brinkmanship”, which frustrated the northern neighbor with numerous small incidents of provocation. And as expected, the Kremlin overreacted in return. Saakaschvili could blame the Russians over and over again for using disproportional means, due to an economic embargo for Georgian products and the closure of transport lines. The spiral of confrontations went out of control in 2008.

Now, after the war, the brinkmanship game is over for good. Nevertheless the Kremlin did not achieve all its goals in the short war. Obviously, the Georgian forces were defeated, the issue of the “frozen conflict” was

did what to precipitate Russia's war against Georgia are not very important. [...] This war did not begin because of a miscalculation by Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. It is a war that Moscow has been attempting to provoke for some time”. R. Kagan, ‘Putin Makes his Move’, in *The Washington Post*, 11 August 2008, A15.

solved and Saakaschvili humiliated. However the real goal, to topple the Georgian president was not accomplished. Even the sovereignty of South Ossetia and Abkhazia is somewhat an ambivalent victory, because this act paradoxically shields Tbilisi against Russian pressure in the near future. No other country of the world community, apart from Nicaragua, followed Moscow's step. And indeed, despite the refusal of the NATO summit in December 2009 to grant Georgia and the Ukraine access to the Membership Action Plan, it became clear that the Western community would do the utmost to protect Tbilisi against external threats.

Once it was clear that Moscow would support South Ossetia, the outcome of the war was entirely predictable. Therefore it is most astounding that bizarre speculations and rumours accompanied the war and even did not die after its end. And also remarkable, contrary to the one-sided judgment in western media which solely blamed Russia for the offensive and for using disproportional means, was the media coverage and the consensus among Russia's political elite, regardless its attitude to the Kremlin, which was extremely supportive of the Kremlin's action.³

Amidst all the speculation, one set of questions still troubles experts' minds: who won the bluff game - the Medvedev-Putin team or Saakaschvili? In other words, everyone had long expected a military conflict, but the question remained open when and who could trick the other side best into taking the blame.

This appraisal takes into consideration that both sides knew well about the respective buildup of military hardware and manpower thanks to satellite reconnaissance and instructors working in the Georgian army. Ever since the Washington administration discovered the strategic relevance of Georgia as a transit country for energy, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline became operative in 2005, and its geopolitical value for monitoring and securing US-interest in the greater Middle East operation/concept, the Bush-administration supported unconditionally Georgia's request for membership of NATO. This was indicated by the resolution to render support for Georgia's membership application by both the House of Representatives and the Senate, in February 2007.

In November 2003, soon after the "Revolution of Roses" which led Mikhail Saakaschvili to power, Washington assisted the modernization of the Georgian military, which by this time was poorly equipped, trained and

³ L. Shevtsova, 'The Kremlin's New Containment Policy', in *The Moscow Times*, 18 August 2008, 8: "The war has intensified a conservative backlash in Russia. The country is now highly unified against the West."

clothed. Military and technological aid was transferred and in addition 2,000 Georgian soldiers were commissioned to participate in the Iraq campaign. Within four years, trained by American and Turkish instructors, the Georgian military became a formidable force in the region. In addition, Israeli technicians upgraded the Soviet hardware, i.e. planes and tanks to NATO standards.

To sum up, Washington knew perfectly well that Saakaschvili was preparing for war. Such military movements were of course depicted by satellites and by the instructors working with Georgian units. Further, it seems to be utterly impossible that the Russian buildup on the North Ossetian border went unnoticed by US-spy satellites. Vice versa, the Russians knew about the Georgian war preparations. No doubt, similar technological devices and undoubtedly teams of informers operating inside Georgia gave respective signals.

Placed in this context that Washington knew about the Georgian and Russian military buildup and that Moscow waited for the Georgians to strike first, only the European Union and NATO seemed to have been left out of the picture. If we accept such a scenario for a moment, it begs some fascinating questions.

The most important ones in need to be answered are the following:

1. Did Washington share the obtained information about the Russian military buildup on the Northern border of South Ossetia with Saakaschvili?
2. Did Washington withhold such information in order to encourage Saakaschvili's war campaign despite the looming Russian counterattack?
3. Did Washington try in vain to stop Saakaschvili from launching the attack on Zkhinvali? This would imply that Washington lost its control over the Georgian president.
4. Did both, Washington and Tbilisi, underrate the decisiveness of the Kremlin to launch a massive counterattack?
5. Did the Bush-administration and the Georgian president jointly play a hazardous game, in which it was assumed that Saakaschvili would be propelled into a win-win situation, regardless of the outcome of the conflict?

Rewarding answers, even six months after the war, are not in sight. However, given the information about the Russian forces in place, it would have been quite bizarre, if the Georgian president had thought to win a military campaign against Russian forces. Therefore three issues remain crucial: first, was the information shared; or second did the Bush administration or leading figures within this administration assure Saakaschvili that the US would support him? And third did the US administration pursue other goals, i.e. linked to the election campaign, as the Russian Prime Minister Putin suggested?⁴ In this respect Saakaschvili would have been a tool in a much larger play.

Nevertheless, the assumed win-win situation demands some time to be discussed. Widen the game of brinkmanship to open warfare: Saakaschvili would indeed move into a comfortable win-win situation, shielded from personal consequences despite military defeat. First, the West would have never allowed him to be toppled as president. Second, the war would reunite the Georgian people against the external aggressor and quell opposition against him. Third, the West would rally behind Tbilisi and Saakaschvili. Fourth, the war would have been won ideologically and even more important, Tbilisi would not lose parts of her territory.

And indeed, the core areas of Georgia remained untouched, the opposition was silenced and the Western media portrayed Georgia as an outpost of Western civilization and democracy in a sea of autocratic regimes. And miraculously, after all the painful and fruitless struggles to regain control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, these trouble spots would be gone once and forever. Consequently the accession path to NATO would open. That is why the Bush administration immediately jumped on the chance and pushed for NATO membership of Georgia and the Ukraine.⁵ However, at the Meet-

⁴, Interview with Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in Sochi, by Matthew Chance for CNN.com/Europe, 29 August 2008, available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/08/29/putin.transcript/index.html> (last visited 13 March 2009): "If my suppositions are confirmed, then there are grounds to suspect that some people in the United States created this conflict deliberately in order to aggravate the situation and create a competitive advantage for one of the candidates for the U.S. presidency. [...] I have said to you that if the presence of U.S. citizens in the zone of hostilities is confirmed, it would mean only one thing: that they could be there only at the direct instruction of their leaders. And if that is so, it means that in the combat zone there are U.S. citizens who are fulfilling their duties there. They can only do that under orders from their superiors, not on their own initiative."

⁵ Chairman's Statement of the NATO Meeting of the NATO Foreign Ministers, NATO HQ, Brussels, 2-3 December 2008 (available at <http://www.nato.int/docu/pr/2008/>

ing of NATO Foreign Ministers at NATO HQ, in Brussels, on 2nd and 3rd of December 2008, a fast track of the Ukraine and Georgia to NATO was blocked by European member states and the Bucharest decision from April 2008 was re-enforced.

B. The Conflict's Purgative Power: The International Dimension

While the regional dimension of the war lost its menacing character, the conflict acquired an international dimension from the beginning. The Russian counter attack, which led to the temporary occupation of core territories of Georgia alarmed the international community. The General Secretary of the UN, the EU and the USA condemned the disproportional use of power, and demanded, together with an immediate cease fire, the withdrawal of Russian forces to the positions held before the war.

As argued above, the Kremlin did not need, nor did it ask for, a military conflict with Georgia. But Moscow welcomed the opportunity to portray its willingness to punish the Georgian president for his anti-Russian politics. By doing so, the Kremlin aimed at drawing a clear line for US-led influence in the CIS countries. The message was clear and meant containment, to limit Western influence in the territorial area, which stretches from the Baltic Sea to the region between the Black and Caspian Sea: an area, I call "Zwischeneuropa" (the Europe in between the Russian Federation and the European Union). Too weak economically, and too heterogeneous politically, the states of this region are unable to organize cross-border cooperation or to look after security and peace by their own means. During the last decade the two waves of NATO expansion towards the East and the successful completion of the eastward extension of the European Union, which relies in its economic, political and military strength on those institutions close to the Russian border and sphere of influence. While the EU's eastern move did not alarm the Kremlin that much, because Moscow underrated the EU still as a predominantly economic power without political or military

p08-154e.html (last visited 13 March 2009): "NATO Ministers briefed their Georgian colleague regarding the decisions on Georgia and Ukraine taken during the North Atlantic Council meeting on 2-3 December 2008. In that meeting, NATO Ministers reaffirmed all elements of the decisions regarding Ukraine and Georgia taken by NATO Heads of State and Government in Bucharest. They noted that Georgia has made progress, yet has significant work left to do. Therefore, they decided to provide further assistance to Georgia in implementing needed reforms as it progresses towards NATO membership."

muscle, NATO's expansion was met with strong opposition. NATO's sphere of influence borders now on the Black Sea and a third round of extension was well under way, aiming at the Ukraine and Georgia.

Since 2004, with the advent of the "orange revolution", this area is in turmoil and plagued by domestic power struggles, which create internal political instability and are often incited by outside forces. The area oscillates between the European Union and Russia, while the US is pulling her own strings in the back, pursuing her interests without sharing information about her policy goals.⁶ And open or covered attempts by Moscow to "roll back" the US-led onslaught or to achieve "regime changes" in states which were feared to be fully pulled into the US-sphere of influence failed miserably, damaging Russia's international standing.

In this respect, Moscow needed a convincing score, a victory, regardless of how the international opinion would react, to demonstrate neighbouring CIS countries that either the US cannot support them, and/or that Russia, after years of neglect for the area, is now ready to fight for her interest in the post-Soviet space.

Signals of such a shift were visible in Moscow's course of foreign and security policy. They were already given earlier to the international community. A change in paradigm, based on a newly acquired strength due to the massive windfall profits from energy exports, which filled the Federal Reserve since 2003, was in the making. Vladimir Putin's address of the international security conference in Munich, February 2007, served as a first alarm bell. The address did not imply a fall back to Cold War attitudes. Quite the opposite, cooperation was the focal point and interest of the Russian leader, however under changed conditions. Putin asked the Western powers to recognize the reality of a changed international environment, which unraveled in front of their eyes and saw Russia's return as a great European power. Accordingly, Putin asked for a treatment of Russia on equal terms in order to enhance cooperation, and to meet challenges to common security and interests. Members of the Russian government, like Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, did reiterate this position over and over again.⁷

⁶ For a more detailed analysis see: E. Bahr, 'Geleitwort', in W. Schneider-Deters, & P. W. Schulze & H. Timmermann (eds), *Die Europäische Union, Russland und Eurasien* (2008), 19-25.

⁷ S. Lavrov, 'Die Kaukasus-Krise und die Ukraine', in *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 15 September 2008, 8; see also, P. W. Schulze, 'Russlands Rückkehr als Machtfigur

The Caucasian conflict saw all three key geopolitical players in action, i.e. the EU, Russia and the USA. And of course, their motivations and interests differed quite substantially. However, as indicated, the management of the conflict prefigured in some way the shifts in international power constellations that may allow us to foretell the future working of a multi-polar world – at least for the overall European space.

Let me enhance this thesis with a few suggestions:

1. The European Union staged a dramatic and successful comeback in authority and reputation during the Caucasian crisis. Let us remember: the EU was barely visible and immobilized in her policies towards Eastern Europe after the ambitious project of a European constitution failed in 2005. And even the fate of the watered-down Lisbon Treaty is still in doubt due to the Irish referendum. However, suddenly the EU appeared nearly out of the blue to manage the Caucasian crisis. The answer is not easy and may contain two reasons. Definitely, despite the temporary weakness of the EU, its authority and potential power was never in doubt in Moscow's foreign policy circles. The Kremlin slowly but steadily accepted and feared the EU as a geopolitical rival in this part of the European space. In addition, it seemed to be pure luck, that the EU-presidency was held by the French president Sarkozy. His political skills and authority were at hand at the right time to conclude a cease fire, stop the war and hammer out a de facto peace arrangement which allowed all parties to save face. The Russian president Dmitri Medvedev was well advised to accept the compromise and to pull Russian troops back according to the Six-Points-Agreement reached between the EU and Russia. As a result Russia demonstrated her willingness for a lasting conflict resolution and the EU stated clearly her interests in shaping the fate of "Zwischeneuropa". In addition, it needs to be stated, that contrary to Russia the EU had very little means to pressure Russia into accepting the compromise solution. Russia knew the limits of her power quite well.

2. While active in the preparation of the conflict, Washington and the Bush administration were almost entirely blocked from

its solution. This was of course partly due to the presidential election campaign. But there are other, more structural factors, which kept the US out of the picture. First, changes in the international environment point to an early end of the uni-polar and US-dominated world order. Second, the US seems to suffer from a phenomenon which first appeared at the end of the “imperial presidency” of Richard Nixon, i.e. of “imperial overreach”. The Bush-administration got stuck in a plethora of barely solvable conflicts and issues, which it helped generate by irresponsible policy actions. And, in addition, being to a highly degree responsible for the Caucasian war, Washington could neither be part of, nor a partner in endeavors to look for, a solution. This situation may not change under the new Obama presidency, because a paradigm-shift has also happened in the US: the global economic and financial crisis has moved domestic issues to the top of the agenda in the foreseeable future.

3. As stated, Russia’s return as an active great power to the international scene will limit the range and manoeuvrability of NATO and the European Union to shape the political and security landscape of Europe. Georgia was a test case; the real problem for Russia’s European relations will arise with the future of the Ukraine.

4. Russia’s policy towards the “Near Abroad” has undergone a fundamental change. During the 1990s nearly all projects of closer cooperation among CIS countries failed. Even Putin’s pet project to stem the EU’s eastern move by creating the “United Economic Space” (together with Kazakhstan, Ukraine and Belarus) in Yalta in 2003 broke down due to events in the Ukraine. Ever since, the CIS space has not been abandoned as in the 1990s when the Russian state had no means to engage there. Since 2004, Moscow has tried to bring such countries into closer political, economic and security cooperation, which could or would not embrace the Western calls for pluralism, democracy, and the rule of law.

5. As indicated earlier, the zone of potential conflicts between Russia and the European Union stretches from the Baltic Sea to the space between the Caspian and the Black Sea. The states in

this space lack any preconditions to look for the security and welfare of the region by their own means. They are pulled in opposite directions. And the external powers of attraction, i.e. the EU, Russia, and also the USA, exert considerable influence on their internal political stability. In my view, there are four different scenarios possible for the near future: first, the area and its states will be completely dominated and split up between the EU and Russia; second, Russia and the EU will come to some mutual understanding to contain their rivalry and work commonly with these states on an equal basis. Third, a murky status quo will be preserved in which each side avoids policy actions that could be understood as hostile and could provoke counter-measures in return. Fourth, the issue will be solved by the creation of a new European Security Architecture in which Russia and the European Union, including NATO will form a real strategic partnership for peace and security in Europe.

The purging power of the conflict in Russian-European relations appeared shortly after the war ended.

Russia fulfilled the Six-Points-Agreement and as a reconciliatory signal, the EU invited Moscow again to discuss the future shape and content of their Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), which expired in 2007. It is only to be hoped that the cardinal mistake of the first PCA, not to define the role of Russia in Europe, will not be repeated. Despite all the bubbled foam about a “strategic partnership” emanating from Brussels, and even from some national governments, the relation between the EU and Russia always lacked clarity. This confusion was of course shared on the Russian side as well. Brussels did not know how to deal with Russia and vice versa. There was no strategy on either side and it was sometimes utterly unclear whether Russia was perceived as a potential enemy, a rival or only a competitor. The integration of the former COMECON countries into the EU added new fuel to complicate the issue.

At least for NATO such doubts did not exist, explaining the two rounds of expansion to the East. And NATO even reopened, in 2009, the temporarily disrupted function of the NATO-Russia-Council. And the new US president seems to be more inclined to invite rather than to alienate the country in meeting challenges both countries and the international community face in the future.

And miraculously, suddenly the highflying idea Russian president Dmitri Medvedev announced during his first visit to Berlin in June 2008,

namely to work for a new Peace and Security Order which would encompass the whole of Europe seems to attract even some transatlantic circles.

Maybe the process Gorbachev tried to set in motion, striving for a “Common European Home”, which then led to the Charter of Paris - in its nature a peace-constitution for the whole of Europe - can be revived again.