

The Caucasus in transition

Part One - Georgia: The elephant in the room

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Last week, we saw an event which may mark a watershed in the history of the Caucasus. Two female suicide bombers walked into Moscow underground stations, one a matter of yards from FSB headquarters, and detonated devices which together have killed more than thirty people. Within hours, Vladimir Putin had sworn to "destroy" those responsible, believed to be an Islamic terror group which wants to create a Muslim Caliphate out of three Russian states, Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingushetia.

Throughout the Caucasus, we have witnessed twenty years of massive instability. Well before 9-11, a potent cocktail of Islamic extremism and nationalism had precipitated a destructive and controversial war in Chechnya which did significant damage not just in lives and property but in international goodwill towards Russia. A second Chechen war heaped on even more devastation and misery. Then came the Moscow theatre siege of 2002 and Beslan school massacre. And, in 2008, Georgia and Russia went to war over the autonomous region of South Ossetia, drawing very much one-sided international condemnation of Russia and boding ill for post-Soviet prospects in the whole region.

During the 1990s, Russia suffered under the domination of the oligarchs and the vodka-sotted leadership of Boris Yeltsin after economic collapse and 'shock therapy' led to a dramatic fall from grace. Today, we see a return to authoritarianism under Putin, an undeclared leader-for-life with a nationalistic agenda, cemented by crisis after crisis, even as Russia's economy recovers and it is able to resume a prominent role in international diplomacy.

For good or ill, Russia is now a crucial participant in the international community, both as an economic partner for the West and a player in the great strategic geopolitical game. Yet, as recent events have highlighted, Russia has its own international problems to deal with, closely linked to the key international issues that matter to US and European leaders, and her influence in coming years may be pivotal in determining the future stability of a substantial area of eastern Europe and western Asia.

First amongst these is the thorny issue of Georgia. A key NATO ally in the Caucasus region, Georgia is an international crisis waiting to happen. For years, it has suited America to overlook the misdeeds of this highly conservative country out of national interest, bargaining that a presence in an ex-Soviet republic with is worth the trouble of irritating Russia and hoping to eventually help Georgia become a Western-style democracy that can be held up to the world as a great success story in exporting American politics and values.

Indeed, the Rose Revolution at one point seemed to bode well for a democracy dividend in the Caucasus. However, instead of a functioning liberal democracy, we currently see a highly

authoritarian state run by Mikheil Saakashvili, a man whom even his former Foreign Minister Salome Zourabishvili considers to be the worst kind of dangerous, over-ambitious populist.

The USA alone has pledged upwards of \$1 billion in foreign aid to Georgia in response to the 2008 conflict, with hundreds of millions of dollars more awarded over the course of the last 17 years to provide "transition assistance". This represents an enormous US investment in Georgia becoming a functioning, open democracy.

Yet reports from Freedom House have frequently cast doubt over Georgia's claims to democratisation. In particular, the Freedom House 2009 report cited serious irregularities surrounding the 2008 elections, abuses of state power for political advantage, a fractured and often unhealthy political culture, high-level corruption, a highly biased media subject to state intimidation, endemic abuses of the judicial and policing systems, and open harassment of religious, ethnic and cultural minority groups. This worryingly long list of problems has consistently proved a thorn in the side of US-Georgian relations and undermined the potential for further Georgian involvement in the international community.

The EU too has recently criticised Georgia for its democratic deficit, with Jose Manuel Barroso recently openly expressing the frustration that many EU leaders have quietly held for some years about the conduct of Georgia's state institutions and the behaviour of Saakasvili himself. Quizzed on upcoming Georgian elections, Barroso pointedly implied that Georgia needs to up its game or risk alienating the EU, which maintains a monitoring presence in the region. The recent hoax invasion story presented by the Imedi TV station came in for criticism by Barroso, too, and is widely held to have been little more than bare-faced propaganda intended to whip up nationalist feelings and turn Georgians against the pro-Russian opposition.

George Friedman's account of the impact of US foreign policy on Georgia's decision to go to war in South Ossetia, and the wider repercussions for the region, also makes for interesting reading. It also demonstrates that, as I argued at the time, Russia is perfectly aware of the realities of the US relationship with Georgia and its recent resurgence places it in a good position to take any necessary military action when nations within its natural sphere of influence step out of line.

In Russian eyes, US foreign policy is mired in Cold War politics, and the US must be appropriately educated that the unipolar era has been short-lived. The destabilising effect of US involvement in the region must not be underestimated. In Georgia in Ukraine, and throughout the Caucasus, the transition to democracy has been an uneven process and American backing seems to have yielded more political turmoil than it has prevented, sometimes resulting in splintered and unstable states. In contrast, Russia has long been concerned with the territorial integrity of its neighbours, troubled first and foremost about the precedents set by separatism and the consequences for the stability of its own immense swathe of land. Whilst Russian-led regional stability may not a perfect solution, and may pose its own foreign policy challenges, with the right kind of policy framework it has the potential to present a better solution than what the distant US can offer.

Though Georgia's actions in inflaming potential tensions have been well-documented, inertia

and undue optimism in the US and the amongst the EU nations has acted as an enabler for the flawed Saakashvili administration. It is clear that Georgia's leaders have no intention of heeding exhortations to build democratic institutions in the near future, merely stalling for time and hoping that its Western allies will consider any reduction in aid or engagement to be counter-productive. At this point, it's arguably time for the US and the EU to start playing hardball.

So, if US involvement in Georgia must be limited to diplomacy, and diplomacy is currently failing, then there needs to be a switch to a new kind of diplomacy. At present, Saakashvili is surely aware that he effectively has a blank cheque to prod Russia and limit domestic democracy while the US is tied to supporting him. The US needs to call his bluff and back Russian efforts to contain Georgia's ambitions, cautiously and with due care for the consequences of a Russian role as a co-equal global power. If the US can draw Russia into supporting Georgian democracy, then the two powers can together force out Saakashvili and prevent his erratic behaviour from precipitating any further conflict on Russia's southern borders.