
Analysis : What Does Moscow Want In Georgia?

By Brenda Shaffer
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In the last two weeks, many of us have learned that Tskhinvali is the capital of South Ossetia; that South Ossetia is a region a bit bigger than Luxembourg that is legally part of Georgia but ruled de facto by Moscow; that the guy who formally replaced Putin is Dmitry Medvedev; that the president of Georgia, Mikhail Saakashvili, has two "a"s in a row in his surname and is a Columbia University graduate.

Russian troops travel atop a military vehicle while entering the Black Sea port of Poti, Georgia.

Slideshow : Pictures of the week What is this conflict about? What are the ramifications, regionally, globally and for the Middle East? And is there a viable way to solve this conflict?

The South Ossetian conflict with Georgia is not about nationalism or religion. It is about power politics and Moscow's desire to retain influence in the former Soviet states that border it.

During the Soviet breakup, hundreds if not thousands of groups were concerned about their future security and would have been happy to use the opportunity to gain independence.

In fact the real story of the Soviet breakup is not about conflict, but its absence.

Only six conflicts emerged in the region after the breakup - two wars and four secessionist conflicts. While hundreds of ethnic and religious groups live side-by-side in the Caucasus and Central Asia, few actively sought independence following the end of rule from Moscow, which teaches us that ethnic conflict is not the main source of violence, but rather something else.

The only groups that achieved de facto independence within former Soviet republics were those that Moscow supported.

Moscow actively aided the de facto independence of groups that resided in geographically strategic points: Nagorno-Karabagh (ethnic Armenians in Azerbaijan); South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia; and Transnistria in Moldova.

Moscow's support of these groups' secession provided leverage for Russia in these new states during the Soviet breakup and until today. Minority groups in Georgia were especially enticing objects for support: Georgia is the key to the land-locked Caspian region. If you control Georgia, or it is unstable, there is no need for Russia to muscle the rest of the Caucasus and Central Asia: all these land-locked states need Georgia to access the sea and to export their energy resources to Europe without transiting Russia.

In contrast, the Kremlin didn't support its fellow Russians, for example in the Baltic states, who were shipwrecked abroad when the Soviet Union collapsed, without language or citizenship rights.

The South Ossetian conflict emerged in the early 1990s, on the eve of the Soviet breakup.

Why did it reerupt now?

Five factors seem to be at play. First, this spring Georgia asked to join NATO. Despite Washington's unequivocal support for Tbilisi, European states expressed reservations about accepting Georgia before it resolved its border conflicts with Russia. The re-firing of the conflict will surely increase the potency of that concern and push Georgia's NATO membership beyond the horizon.

Second, Russia wants to retain its domination of the European natural gas market. Europe's energy dependence on Russia is growing from day to day, and this endows Moscow with significant income and political clout. A large part of the natural gas that Russia markets to Europe is actually from Central Asia, and Moscow coerces those states to sell it to Russia at half the price for which it then resells it to Europe. In recent months, Central Asian states have explored circumventing Russia and transporting their gas resources directly to Europe via Georgia. The present conflict clearly upsets these plans.

Third, the Kremlin made it clear that if Washington recognized the independence of Kosovo (as it did), Moscow would recognize and support the independence of the secessionist regions in the Caucasus. Russia is extremely vulnerable to ethnic conflict (remember Chechnya and friends?) and did not want the Kosovo precedent on the table.

Fourth, Moscow wants to foil US plans to deploy ballistic missile shields in Eastern Europe. Threatening a close ally of the US gets the message to Washington.

Fifth, following the installation of Dmitri Medvedev as president of Russia, in-fighting in the Kremlin seems to be at play, and Moscow's disproportionate response to Tbilisi may be influenced by this.

What does this new war mean for the Caucasus region, globally and for the Middle East? If Washington fails to act effectively, the conflict will deal a big blow to US credibility in the former Soviet Union and beyond. If Georgia, Washington's darling, is not supported in its hour of need, then how can Tashkent or Baghdad feel at ease?

This war also has ramifications for the international efforts to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons. Russia's policy toward Iran is generally affected by the state of US-Russian relations. If the sides do not come to an understanding on the Georgia conflict soon, Moscow can not be expected to cooperate with the US on Iran.

Is there a way out of this crisis? There seem to be two policy options on the table. One is that the US, the states of the former Soviet Union and newly independent countries in Eastern Europe take a united and tough stand.

The second option is that the US offers a new grand bargain to Russia: Washington gives in on issues that are important to Moscow, such as missile defense and Kosovo, and the US gets its way in the Caucasus and Iran.

The second option seems the best for the US and Israel, but the first seems the most likely, considering the current climate of relations between Washington and Moscow.

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