
Beyond Georgia : The Ripple Effects of Russia's Attack

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As the world watches Russian troops gather on its border with Georgia, we asked Central Asia expert Martha Brill Olcott to look at the broader implications of the recent fighting:

Senators McCain and Obama are both trying to demonstrate their leadership capacities in their strong statements on the conflict between Russia and Georgia. But the man who takes power as president of the United States in January will have to confront circumstances quite unlike those upon which he is now commenting on. The current conflict in the Georgia shows just how difficult it is for the U.S. to maintain a strategic position in the Caspian, as well as how tough a competitor Russia is.

There is no easily solution to the conflict. It is virtually a given that Russia will not be pushed from its current position--that of military protector in the break-away regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia--through diplomatic pressure. None of the NATO nations will send in troops to support the Saakashvili government because of the risk of a direct NATO-Russian military engagement. NATO countries may also be cautious about how much rebuilding of the Georgian military they are willing to do if they fear Georgia will use them for offensive rather than defensive purposes. Economic sanctions will create more of a hardship for European countries dependent upon Russia's gas than they would for Russia. And international criticism of Moscow from the Security Council podium in New York will also have little effect, save to demonstrate anew the divisions within and ineffectual nature of the United Nations.

So Russia will come out of its military actions in South Ossetia much stronger than it went into them, both at home and in many of the neighboring states. The Russian public has long sought a Russian government that supports its citizens--who include much of the population of both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Most in Russia (and that would include those in the Kremlin) understood the Soviet-era assignment of these "autonomous" territories to Georgia as merely a temporary measure.

Russia's aggressive behavior toward these provinces will have implications elsewhere in the Caspian as well. The Azerbaijani's in particular, may want to rethink their strategic priorities, as they seek to hold onto the Karabakh province, whose Armenian population has been seeking independence since the late '80s. The Azerbaijanis first threw their lot in with the West at a time when Moscow, under Yeltsin, was much weaker. Russia's attack this week now means that Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, up for reelection in October, will need to seek guarantees from Moscow that it will not now support Armenia's claims in Karabakh or in Azerbaijan's other territories that are internationally recognized as occupied. Recapturing all of these lands is Azerbaijan's ultimate aim, and who knows what Aliyev might be willing to offer Moscow to grant him this.

Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are also going to have to calculate what this means for their own strategies. Both have been juggling competing offers for new oil pipelines--one from Western countries, who are calling for a Trans-Caspian (undersea) gas pipeline to export gas through Azerbaijan, Georgia, and on to Turkey, and one from Russia, who is offering higher gas prices and partial financing of repairs and expansion of capacity on the Soviet-era routes to Europe, all of which go through Russian territory. Developments in Georgia could make the newer Azeri and Georgian routes seem more risky. Kazakhstan too has been a major foreign investor in Georgia in recent years, and if the Saakashvili regime is ousted, Kazakhstan will want

to work closely with any successor regime, presumably more pro-Russian, to make sure that the Kazakh investments (largely in the energy sector) are secure.

So while current attention is focused on Tbilisi, Obama and McCain should be beefing up their knowledge of the broader region, as this conflict is sure to have ripple effects far beyond the Georgia-Russia border.

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