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# Caucasian war

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The stalemate between Russia and Georgia over the territory of South Ossetia, within the Georgian boundary, but linguistically and culturally more in tune with Russia, has been a "frozen conflict" since a peace agreement ended the last hostilities in 1991. As the icy stand-off has melted into a bloodbath it is clear that the international community is faced with a diplomatic minefield. Hostility between Russia and Georgia stretches back centuries, but the UN Security Council, the EU, Nato and the Organisation of Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) must also find a way through the Cold War legacy of mutual antagonism and endemic suspicion between Russia and the US. This was evident enough in yesterday's undiplomatic opening exchanges in which Russia accused the UN of bias towards Georgia and the US accused Russia of resisting the ceasefire.

The dispute between Georgia, a country of fewer than five million people, and South Ossetia, with a population of only 25,000, cannot be dismissed as a small skirmish in the Caucasus. Its roots reach deep into Russian history but its consequences will affect the western world. Both South Ossetia and Abkhazia, another Georgian territory with close ties to Moscow, have achieved a form of unofficial quasi-autonomy from Georgia, overseen by Russian "peacekeepers". The prospect of a similar outbreak of war in Abkhazia adds pressure on all sides.

The eruption into war of simmering hostility going back years between Georgia and Russia also brings a sharp reminder that Moscow's relationship with Ukraine is equally tense. Ukraine seized the opportunity to signal support for Georgia with a threat to bar Russian naval vessels from the port of Sevastopol, which Russia leases from Ukraine under a 1997 agreement.

The west's interest is officially couched in the high-minded causes of human rights and democracy, but is equally driven by the practical one of energy supply. Georgia's geography, which includes a Black Sea coast, has given it many advantages, including the ability to grow a wide variety of temperate crops, but its biggest prize is now a section of the oil pipeline from Azerbaijan which by-passes Russian territory on its way to Turkey. Plans for a similar alternative gas supply pipe will be put on hold by foreign investors if Georgia becomes destabilised. Even a short-lived Russian military offensive against Georgia therefore makes it more likely that the pipeline would be diverted through Russia, giving Moscow control over energy supply to the west.

This is a counter-move to the ambition of Georgia (and Ukraine) to join Nato.

Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia's American-educated, pro-western president, has the backing of President Bush, but France and Germany blocked his application earlier this year. Nevertheless, he appears to have over-interpreted the expression of possible future membership as signalling backing from member countries. Unfortunately, the warning by Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov that Georgia's Nato ambitions "will lead to renewed bloodshed" has proved prophetic. Despite his experience of the Kremlin mindset, Saakashvili has proved naive in international relations.

His fledgling democracy deserves support, but the endgame is now a long way off. The immediate task is to prevent further bloodshed, and both Russia and Georgia must be persuaded that it is in their long-term as well as short-term interest to withdraw their troops.

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