
The West encouraged Georgias reckless assault

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Moscow - The past week's events in South Ossetia are bound to shock and pain anyone. Already, thousands of people have died, tens of thousands have been turned into refugees, and towns and villages lie in ruins. Nothing can justify this loss of life and destruction. It is a warning to all.

The roots of this tragedy lie in the decision of Georgia's separatist leaders in 1991 to abolish South Ossetian autonomy. This turned out to be a time bomb for Georgia's territorial integrity. Each time successive Georgian leaders tried to impose their will by force - both in South Ossetia and in Abkhazia, where the issues of autonomy are similar - it only made the situation worse. New wounds aggravated old injuries.

Nevertheless, it was still possible to find a political solution. For some time, relative calm was maintained in South Ossetia. The peacekeeping force composed of Russians, Georgians and Ossetians fulfilled its mission, and ordinary Ossetians and Georgians, who live close to each other, found at least some common ground.

Through all these years, Russia has continued to recognize Georgia's territorial integrity. Clearly, the only way to solve the South Ossetian problem on that basis is through peaceful means. Indeed, in a civilized world, there is no other way.

The Georgian leadership flouted this key principle.

What happened on the night of Aug. 7 is beyond comprehension. The Georgian military attacked the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali with multiple rocket launchers designed to devastate large areas. Russia had to respond. To accuse it of aggression against 'small, defenseless Georgia' is not just hypocritical but shows a lack of humanity.

Mounting a military assault against innocents was a reckless decision whose tragic consequences, for thousands of people of different nationalities, are now clear. The Georgian leadership could do this only with the perceived support and encouragement of a much more powerful force. Georgian armed forces were trained by hundreds of U.S. instructors, and its sophisticated military equipment was bought in a number of countries. This, coupled with the promise of NATO membership, emboldened Georgian leaders into thinking that they could get away with a 'blitzkrieg' in South Ossetia.

In other words, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili was expecting unconditional support from the West, and the West had given him reason to think he would have it. Now that the Georgian military assault has been routed, both the Georgian government and its supporters should rethink their position.

Urgent steps must be taken to help the victims and to rebuild the devastated towns and villages. It is equally important to start thinking about ways to solve the underlying problem, which is among the most painful and challenging issues in the Caucasus - a region that should be approached with the greatest care.

When the problems of South Ossetia and Abkhazia first flared up, I proposed that they be settled through a federation that would grant broad autonomy to

the two republics. This idea was dismissed, particularly by the Georgians. Attitudes gradually shifted, but after last week, it will be much more difficult to strike a deal even on such a basis.

Old grievances are a heavy burden. Healing is a long process that requires patience and dialogue, with non-use of force an indispensable precondition. It took decades to bring to an end similar conflicts in Europe and elsewhere, and other long-standing issues are still smoldering. In addition to patience, this situation requires wisdom.

Small nations of the Caucasus do have a history of living together. It has been demonstrated that a lasting peace is possible, that tolerance and cooperation can create conditions for normal life and development. Nothing is more important than that.

The region's political leaders need to realize this. Instead of flexing military muscle, they should devote their efforts to building the groundwork for durable peace.

Over the past few days, some Western nations have taken positions, particularly in the U.N. Security Council, that have been far from balanced. As a result, the Security Council was not able to act effectively from the very start of this conflict. By declaring the Caucasus, a region that is thousands of miles from the American continent, a sphere of its 'national interest,' the United States made a serious blunder. Of course, peace in the Caucasus is in everyone's interest. But it is simply common sense to recognize that Russia is rooted there by common geography and centuries of history. Russia is not seeking territorial expansion, but it has legitimate interests in this region.

The international community's long-term aim could be to create a sub-regional system of security and cooperation that would make any provocation, and the very possibility of crises such as this one, impossible. Building this type of system would be challenging and could only be accomplished with the cooperation of the region's countries themselves. Nations outside the region could perhaps help, too - but only if they take a fair and objective stance. A lesson from recent events is that geopolitical games are dangerous anywhere, not just in the Caucasus.

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