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# The brutal revival of realpolitik

BY James Sherr

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As billions watched China stake its claim to being the 21st century's leading power, with a stunning opening ceremony at the Beijing Olympics, its former Cold War partner was pursuing its ambitions in an altogether more traditional way. Russia's brutal demonstration of power in South Ossetia, a breakaway region of its southern neighbour Georgia, marks the latest - and most alarming - sign of the Kremlin's determination to reclaim control over former Soviet states.

These former satellites have now been left in no doubt that Russia must be regarded as "glavniy", or No. 1, if they wish to avoid the fate of Georgia. Central to Vladimir Putin's nationalistic policy is a conviction that the power of the West - seemingly unassailable at the end of the Cold War - is on the wane. The current crisis demonstrates that the Cold War has not been replaced by common values between East and West, but by the revival of hard realpolitik.

Mikhail Saakashvili, Georgia's President, might have been unwise to employ force against the pro-Russian separatists in South Ossetia last week, but that is not the point. The Russian forces and the Kremlin hoped he would behave as he did. The episode is an application of "reflexive control": the defeat of an adversary through his own efforts. It is also an application of Carl von Clausewitz's maxim that war is a tool of policy.

The aim of Russia's policy, expressed in 1992, is to "be leader of stability and security on the entire territory of the former USSR". What has changed is not the aim but the "correlation of forces". As Boris Yeltsin declared to Russia's intelligence services in 1994, "global ideological confrontation has been replaced by a struggle for spheres of interest in geopolitics". Back then, Russia had little to struggle with. That is no longer the case.

If Western interests are not to be irreparably damaged, we will need to understand that they are being tested on three levels: local, regional and global. Georgia is not just a square on a chessboard, but an important country in its own right. For two reasons, the West cannot be indifferent to what happens there. First, Georgia's political culture is democratic, its people pro-Western, and its sense of national identity almost indestructible. Georgia can be defeated by Russia, but it can no longer submit to it, and therefore war between Georgia and Russia would be a frightening prospect even if no wider interests existed. Second, the only energy pipeline in the former USSR independent of Russian control passes through Georgia. There will be no meaningful energy security, let alone diversification of energy supplies, if these pipelines become vulnerable to sabotage, like those in Iraq, or to takeover by businesses fronting for Russian interests.

But Georgia is equally important to Russia. Russia has only controlled the nationalities of the north Caucasus when it has dominated the south Caucasus. Despite the so-called "normalisation" in Chechnya, the north Caucasus remains, to Russia's leaders, the Achilles heel of the Russian Federation and, after the slaughter of schoolchildren in Beslan in 2004, a subject of nightmares for Russia's people. Russia's determination to hold sway in South Ossetia and Abkhazia must be seen in this light. But it also serves another purpose: as a means to deny Georgia admission to the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. These territories mean far less to Russia than they do to Georgia. So long as this is the case, Georgia risks finding itself hostage to Russian intentions, and so for that matter do NATO and the Organisation

for Security and Co-operation in Europe. And so Russia would like everyone to think. "Everyone" includes Ukraine, whose Government, like Georgia's, aspires to NATO membership. Unlike Georgia, Ukraine has no territorial conflicts, but it has a potential territorial dispute, Crimea. What is more, Russia's Black Sea Fleet is authorised to remain there until 2017. Russia's regional objectives are straightforward. It aims to show its neighbours that Russia is "glavniy": that its contentment is the key to "stability and security", and that if Russia expresses its discontent, NATO cannot help.

It aims to show NATO that its newest aspirant members are divided, divisible and, in the case of Georgia, reckless. The broader implication is that the era of Western dominance is over.

Far from rejecting globalisation, the Russian view, in the words of the Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, is that the West is "losing its monopoly over the globalisation process".

The West will not have adequate responses to these events until it draws adequate conclusions. The first is that the era of democratic "coloured revolutions" is over. A few years ago, the Kremlin rightly feared Georgia's Rose Revolution and Ukraine's Orange Revolution might destabilise the political elite in Russia. Today, the issue is whether these countries will be able to achieve their minimal objectives. Given today's harsh "correlation of forces", the issue for Tbilisi is not whether it is right to use force against separatists but whether it is wise. The issue for Kiev is not whether its Prime Minister threatens its President but whether their divisions threaten the independence of the country. The issue for NATO and the European Union is whether their "currency of influence" buys stability and security in this region and, if not, whether it is time to change it.

The second conclusion is that NATO must revisit the assumptions upon which its enlargement policy has been based. Contrary to the view that NATO remains a Cold War institution, the fact is it has evolved too much. It assumed Russia would adjust and gradually address "common" security problems rather than pose a distinct set of security problems. Partner countries now find themselves confronting realpolitik and some unnerving measures in new member states - and virtually no one is prepared for it. Until recently, NATO was proud that it had no policy for resolving the region's conflicts beyond cliché: "autonomy", "respect for territorial integrity", "negotiation", "non-use of force".

Until there is a policy, there cannot be a favourable outcome.

The third conclusion is Russia is contemptuous of the West. Russians have shown a utilitarian asperity in connecting means and ends. In exchange, we present an unfocused commitment to values and process. Our democracy agenda has earned the resentment not only of Russia's elite but of the ordinary people who are delighted to see Georgia being taught a lesson. Russians have no worries about the emergence of a unified EU energy policy, and they are losing their worries about a unified commitment to NATO enlargement. The war in South Ossetia should be a reminder that contempt has consequences.

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