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# For Putin, a Line in the Sand

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MOSCOW -- When Vladimir Putin first took charge of Russia in January 2000, he immediately rushed to the Caucasus Mountains to encourage Russian troops fighting separatist rebels in Chechnya. Over the weekend, he again dashed to the Caucasus region to assert what he sees as another vital military mission for Russia: support for separatists in neighboring Georgia.

Russia's military operations in Georgia highlight two important trends that are likely to shape -- and perhaps poison -- Moscow's relations with the West for years to come. First, Mr. Putin, though no longer Russia's president, still plays a preeminent role in setting Kremlin foreign and military policy.

Second, the central element of this policy is Moscow's determination to reassert its role as the dominant force inside, and sometimes also beyond, the former frontiers of the Soviet Union. ([http://online.wsj.com/page/2\\_1601.html](http://online.wsj.com/page/2_1601.html)) For many in the West, the conflict in Georgia recalls Russia's 1979 invasion of Afghanistan, a military adventure that led the U.S. to boycott the Olympic Games in Moscow the following year. For Georgia and other Western-leaning former Soviet republics such as Estonia and Ukraine, the Georgian crisis shows that Russia has not shed what they condemn as "imperial" ambitions.

But in Russia, the military intervention in Georgia is hailed as a sign that Moscow can finally defend its own interests, no matter what outrage this might cause abroad. After watching helplessly as former Soviet republics and former Warsaw Pact allies joined the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and as the U.S. laid plans to move its missile defense scheme into Eastern Europe, Moscow has now clearly decided to draw a very firm and, if necessary, bloody line in the sand in and beyond the Georgian region of South Ossetia.

The region falls within Georgia's internationally recognized borders but its people, many of whom have been given Russian passports, are largely pro-Russian and have lived outside Georgian control since the early 1990s.

Russian officials say the West is playing a double game: It supported independence for Kosovo, something Russia fiercely opposed, but denies the same rights to South Ossetia and another pro-Russian breakaway region of Georgia, Abkhazia. They say Georgia started the fighting by sending troops into South Ossetia last week to try and regain control of the region.

When Mr. Putin stepped down as president earlier this year after eight years in the Kremlin, some expected the elevation of his handpicked and mild-mannered successor, Dmitry Medvedev, to herald a more moderate, less assertive Russia. (Mr. Putin took the far less important post of prime minister.) But instead of focusing on the often-mundane managerial tasks usually assigned to Russia's premier, Mr. Putin appears to have retained many of the policy prerogatives he held as president.

Speaking from Beijing Friday, where he attended the opening of Olympic Games, Mr. Putin vowed retaliation against Georgian attacks on South Ossetia. He then flew to North Ossetia, a Russian region whose people share the same language and culture as the Georgian region to the south. On his return to Moscow, he addressed the cabinet, berating the U.S. over the Georgian crisis. In the past, Russian prime ministers have rarely intervened on military and foreign policy, matters that were viewed as largely the preserve of the president.

When Kosovo declared independence from Serbia early this year, Mr. Putin, who was then still president, warned that this "terrible precedent" would "blow apart the whole system of international relations." This view now guides and, in Russian eyes, legitimizes its military strikes against Georgia and support for separatists in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

In a televised meeting with his cabinet Monday, Mr. Putin expressed irritation with the West's calls for an immediate halt to hostilities. "The scale of their cynicism causes surprise," he said. "It's the ability to cast white as black, and black as white which is surprising, the ability to cast the aggressor as the victim and blame the victims for the consequences."

Mr. Putin criticized the U.S. for transporting Georgian troops that had been based in Iraq back to Georgia. "It's a pity that some of our partners, instead of helping, are in fact trying to get in the way," said Mr. Putin.

In a letter to U.S. senators Monday, a senior figure in Russia's parliament stressed the Kosovo parallel. The desire of South Ossetia and Abkhazia for independence is "historically and actually much more legitimate than Kosovo's," said Mikhail Margelov, chairman of the foreign affairs committee in the upper house of parliament.

Russia's emphasis on the right to secede by restive regions of Georgia marks an abrupt turn away from a principal of territorial integrity championed in the past by Moscow, at least with regard to its own turf. Russia fought two wars in Chechnya to halt that region from breaking away from Russia. Mr. Putin, a fierce foe of Chechen separatism, used his first full day as president back in 2000 to visit the Chechen capital Grozny and cheer Russian forces there. He handed out medals and knives to soldiers.

Russia's embrace of the right to redraw boundaries has sent shivers through countries that were born when the Soviet Union collapsed in December 1991.

Russia's handling of the crisis in Georgia, is "worrisome," said Estonian President Toomas Hendrik Ilves in a phone interview. He added that he phoned Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili on the first day of the conflict to express his support. "That's why we wanted to be in NATO. That's why Georgia wanted to be in NATO. And still does."

Mr. Ilves said Russia's argument that it is merely responding to a Georgian attack on South Ossetia is hard to believe. "This required a long-term, massive buildup with planning, so it's difficult to say this is a reaction to anything. This was fairly well coordinated, with ships coming from Sevastopol and 10,000 troops moved in in a matter of a day."

Russia's European neighbors, most of them former Soviet republics, have long accused Moscow of trying to undermine their independence by supporting ethnic Russians or those with Russian passports living outside Russia.

In recent years, for example, Russia has effectively bypassed Latvia as a route for its oil exports amid allegations that Riga is mistreating ethnic Russians living there. Russia sharply curtailed oil exports through Estonia last year, after the government there moved a Soviet monument from the center of the capital, Tallinn.

Ukraine, another former Soviet republic, has also had tense relations with Moscow. Ukraine's president, Viktor Yushchenko, nearly died from dioxin poisoning in 2004 while running against a pro-Russian presidential candidate -- a poisoning that Mr. Yushchenko has linked to Russia. Moscow denies any involvement.

Mr. Yushchenko has developed close personal ties with Georgia's president, Mr. Saakashvili, a relationship cemented by the feeling that they share a common adversary in Moscow.

"They often call one another, give advice to one another," said Ivan Safranchuk, a professor at Moscow's Institute of International Relations. "The personal relationship is strong."

Mr. Yushchenko has already ordered his government to provide humanitarian assistance to Georgia. Ukraine is likely to step up pressure on Russia for deploying part of its Black Sea fleet, now based in a Ukrainian port in the Crimea, off the Georgian coast of Abkhazia. The fleet's presence in the Crimea is a divisive issue in Ukraine, with some Ukrainians calling for its eviction, and ethnic Russians calling for it to remain.

After he was elected president, Mr. Yushchenko called for closer relations with Europe, and to pursue eventual NATO membership, something that Georgia also wants. But Ukraine's room for independent action is limited by Russia's clout. When Ukraine tried to hold military exercises off the coast of Crimea two years ago, ethnic Russians protested loudly. The maneuvers were canceled.

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