
Is Ukraine Next ? Georgian War Exacerbates Russia-Ukraine Relations

By Richard Weitz
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The War in Georgia has seriously exacerbated relations between Russia and Ukraine's pro-Western government. On Aug. 12, Ukrainian President Victor Yushchenko joined the leaders of four other former Soviet states in Tbilisi to show solidarity with Georgia and its embattled president, Mikheil Saakashvili. Yushchenko told the crowd that had assembled in Tbilisi's central square: "You will never be left alone! . . . We have come to reaffirm your sovereignty, your independence, your territorial integrity. These are our values. Independent Georgia is and independent Georgia will always be!"

The following day, President Yushchenko boldly imposed severe restrictions on the movement of Russian military units in Ukraine. Specifically, he directed that Russian warships, warplanes, or other military units give 72 hours' notice before moving within Ukrainian territory. The order also applies to ships of the Russian Black Sea Fleet seeking to reenter their home base at Sevastopol. The Russian Foreign Ministry attacked the measures as a "serious, new anti-Russian step."

Ukrainian officials claimed that the restrictions were not a direct result of the Russian military intervention in Georgia. Instead, they maintain that they had long sought to regulate more effectively Russian operations at the Sevastopol base, but that Moscow had repeatedly delayed commencing talks on the issue by arguing that it had no plan to employ the Black Sea Fleet in foreign military operations.

Nevertheless, the Ukrainian Foreign Ministry had stated at the onset of the war that they would not necessarily allow Russian warships to return to Sevastopol if they supported military operations against Georgia. "We have information confirmed by our specialists that several vessels of the Black Sea Fleet left Sevastopol and either made their way or were making their way toward the territory of Georgia," Ukraine Foreign Minister Volodymyr Ohryzko explained while in Georgia on Aug. 10. "Obviously, if this is confirmed we will have to reconsider the conditions under which these vessels would be able to be stationed on the territory of Ukraine."

On Aug. 13, moreover, the Ukrainian Security Council issued a statement declaring that the presence of foreign warships in its waters "poses a potential threat to Ukraine's national security, particularly if parts of Russia's Black Sea Fleet are used against third countries." The Ukrainian government has long insisted it will not renew Russia's lease regarding Sevastopol when it expires on May 28, 2017.

For their part, Russian officials denounced the Ukrainian government for siding with Saakashvili, who Moscow holds responsible for starting the war and committing war crimes against Russian citizens in South Ossetia. After the Georgian War began, Sergei Shoigu, Russia's minister for emergency situations, expressed indignation that, "One week before these events, we send a column of humanitarian aid to Ukraine to help flood victims and the next we find they're offering military aid, arms for the destruction of civilians." One month prior to the invasion, Ukrainian troops participated in a large, multinational military exercise in Georgia, "Immediate Response 2008" which also involved Azeri, Armenian and American soldiers.

After the war ended in an overwhelming Russian military victory, former Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, who as the last Soviet foreign minister helped dismantle the Soviet Union -- a development that Putin called the "greatest geopolitical catastrophe" of the 20th century -- warned that "Ukraine most likely" would be the next country to experience increased Russian military pressure to abandon foreign and defense policies opposed by Moscow.

There are certainly many disturbing parallels in the situations Ukraine and Georgia find themselves with respect to Moscow. Pro-Western governments came to power following popular revolutions in both countries -- in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004. Along with Georgia, the Ukrainian government is seeking to join NATO. At this April's NATO summit in Bucharest, the alliance's communique said that both countries "will become NATO members" eventually. The Georgian and Ukrainian governments also have collaborated to pursue energy transit routes linking the Caspian Sea to Europe that bypass Russia.

Unfortunately, Ukraine shares some of Georgia's vulnerabilities as well. The Ukrainian region of Crimea has a majority Russian-speaking population. Some of its members would like to join Russia. The peninsula also hosts an important naval base that Russia does not want to relinquish. The Kremlin might be able to instigate a pro-Russian uprising in the Crimea in which the insurgents, following the South Ossetian precedent, would appeal for Russian military intervention to protect them from Kiev.

Various Russian leaders have suggested that, if Ukraine actually joins NATO or attempts to expel the Russian Black Sea Fleet from Sevastopol, then Russia might annex the Crimea. After the Bucharest summit, Putin told a news conference that, "The appearance on our borders of a powerful military bloc . . . will be considered by Russia as a direct threat to our country's security." Army Gen. Yury Baluyevsky, chief of the Russian General Staff, said that the entry of Ukraine or Georgia into NATO would lead Moscow to "undoubtedly take measures to ensure its security near the state border. These will be both military and other measures." Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov likewise said Moscow "will do everything possible to prevent the accession of Ukraine and Georgia to NATO." These statements appear aimed at stoking tensions with Ukraine to exacerbate the country's internal differences and reinforce West European reluctance to allow Ukrainian entry into NATO.

Nevertheless, there are certain major differences between Georgia and Ukraine. First, the Ukrainian armed forces are much stronger than those of Georgia. Whereas Georgia's prewar military had approximately 37,000 soldiers under arms, the Ukrainian military numbers over 200,000. The Russian armed forces is still five times larger, but would find a war with Ukraine, with a population -- which, though divided about NATO membership, would presumably rally to defend Ukraine's territorial integrity -- some 10 times larger than that of Georgia, a much greater challenge.

In addition, the United States and some other NATO countries have belatedly sought to reinforce their political-military position in the former Soviet bloc. The Bush administration appears to have accepted Saakashvili's warning that the weak U.S. response to the Russian intervention was creating a situation in which "America is losing the whole region" to Russia.

After days of supporting the Georgian position with nothing but rhetoric, President Bush announced on Aug. 13 that the U.S. military would conduct a relief operation in Georgia. Whatever humanitarian assistance it might provide the Georgian people would pale in significance to the deployment's symbolic importance as reaffirming Washington's continuing role and interests in Russia's neighborhood.

The announcement that NATO would hold a special meeting on the conflict, as well as the long-awaited consummation of a Polish-American deal on basing U.S. missile interceptors in Poland, also signaled that Washington and some of its allies were now determined to shore up their presence in the region to dissuade further Russian predations.

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