
Give Russia respect it's due

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Viewed through Moscow's eyes, the West's response to Georgia looks hypocritical. Remember Kosovo? Russia does

Western political leaders have reacted with outrage toward the Russian incursion into Georgia. But there is another way of looking at the situation, especially if we compare Western policies toward Kosovo and Russian actions in Georgia.

>From the Russian point of view, Europe and the United States first militarily attacked Russia's ally Serbia on behalf of breakaway Kosovo, and then helped the Kosovars obtain their current state of independence. But And yet, when Russia intervenes in South Ossetia to establish that breakaway region's independence from Western oriented Georgia, the United States and Europe react with shock and anger. In Russian eyes, the position of the United States seems to be that intervention is OK when we do it, but not when you do it.

The tensions surrounding these events are greatly increased by America's recent agreements with the Czech Republic and Poland to place missile monitoring radars in those countries. Despite protestations by the United States that its intentions are purely defensive, one only needs to consider what any American government's reaction would be to the placement of Russian radars in Mexico to defend against a rogue Latin American state in order to grasp why the installations make the Russians nervous.

During the decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States did not take Russia seriously. Even today, we continue to chastise the Russians for human rights abuses, for "misusing" their oil and gas resources for political purposes and for obstructing our wishes in various international venues.

What did we expect? That a great country with an educated work force just starting to feel its economic oats would be content to play second fiddle forever? It was just a matter of time before the Russians reappeared as a strong state on the international scene. They have now arrived, and it is in everyone's interest if we begin to deal with them like the great power they are.

Indeed, European stability demands a stable relationship between Russia and the West. Punishing Russia for its incursion into South Ossetia by dropping it from G-8, for example, would only undermine stability.

There is a reasonable solution to the situation, however. Both Ossetians and Abkhazians, just like Kosovars, see no other solution to their political desires than independence, as they have shown in repeated (if flawed) referenda and elections. Ossetians constitute about two-thirds of the population of that region, with most of the rest being Russians. Abkhazians make up about the same proportion of Abkhazia, with most of the rest being Georgians. In other words, if the ethnic principle works in Kosovo (as it seems to have worked in France, Germany, Poland, Slovakia, etc.) why not in these regions?

In fact, one of the primary threads of European history since 1850 has been the redrawing of state borders along ethnic lines. Georgia's position on the matter is much like Serbia's on Kosovo - Georgians do not want to live in

these areas, which are not particularly viable economically, but the government of Georgia cannot conceive of "giving up" territory, despite its inability to exercise its rule there. But just as stability will come to the Balkans as the Kosovo settlement becomes increasingly integrated into European structures, so the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia would help with the stabilization process in the Caucasus.

Such an outcome would not end ethnic strife there. Azeris and Armenians have been talking lately under Russian auspices, but relations remain fraught. And there is always the question of Chechnya. But agreement on South Ossetia and Abkhazia would be a step in the right direction.

What are the outlines of a solution? However it might be presented in diplomatic language, it is basically this: the West accepts the independence of the two regions including Russian "peacekeepers"; and the Russians accept the independence of Kosovo, including a NATO and EULEX (European Rule of Law Mission) presence. The two entities enter the United Nations and Russia stops vetoing the Kosovo solution in the Security Council.

The beneficiaries? Improved US/EU-Russian relations, increased stability in the Balkans and the Caucasus, and a resolution that the majority populations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia appear to want.

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