
A Project Of The Institute For Policy Studies

By John Feffer

World Beat - 12/8/2008

Empires die hard. The war that broke out last week between Russia and Georgia is a terrifying reminder that the disintegration of the Soviet Union is far from over.

Seventeen years ago, it looked as though that region might escape the worst consequences of imperial collapse. After all, the Baltic states achieved their independence with relatively little bloodshed. Ukraine and Russia - despite serious disagreements over oil, the Black Sea fleet, and minority rights - more or less managed to sort out their differences peacefully. Elsewhere, however, struggles over borders, political control, and resources convulsed the former Soviet Union, and the body count rivaled the horrors taking place in Yugoslavia.

Even before the Soviet Union's official collapse, Armenia and Azerbaijan began fighting over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh. Tens of thousands died in the civil war that began in 1992 in the Central Asian state of Tajikistan. Tens of thousands more died in the conflict between the Russian federation and the break-away province of Chechnya. In a war pitting Russian-backed separatists in Transdniestra against the new Moldovan government, another 1,000 people died. The former Soviet Union was on the verge of splitting into hundreds of bloody pieces.

Georgia, a small country bordering the Black Sea and sandwiched between Russia and Turkey, wasn't immune to this violence. Two regions bordering Russia - Abkhazia and South Ossetia - declared independence in the 1990s. Thousands died in the two conflicts, which pitted Russian-backed separatists against the Georgian government, and both regions managed to achieve de facto independence. But there's an important difference between the two struggles. Abkhazian separatists engaged in large-scale ethnic cleansing to make their parastate, which previously had a plurality of Georgians, more ethnically pure. South Ossetia, meanwhile, remains a diverse region with some villages aligned with the separatists and others with Tbilisi.

In the latest violence, which broke out just as the Olympics were getting under way in Beijing, Georgian military forces launched an offensive to regain control of South Ossetia. Russia struck back with an air offensive that has forced the Georgian military to retreat but at the cost of at least 2,000 lives, many of them civilians.

Russia, and particularly its dour Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, has emerged as the chief villain in this drama. International leaders have condemned Moscow for its attacks. According to the new Cold War narrative that has begun to take shape, Russia is attempting to recapture some of the glory of the Soviet empire through economic pressure, political arm-twisting, and, when all else fails, military means. Dying empires are bad enough. States that try to turn back the clock, like Germany or Hungary or Turkey after World War I, can be even worse.

Beware of this updated version of the black-and-white Cold War picture. While the new Russia has indeed done some terrible things - particularly in Chechnya - it has also played an important role in diminishing some of the worst aspects of the post-Soviet violence. After the mid-1990s, this region had become a patchwork of ceasefires and "frozen" conflicts, thanks in part to Russia. It helped mediate the end of the civil war in Tajikistan. It has been involved in mediating the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In the third of

Georgia's separatist struggles - in Ajaria - Russia helped to mitigate the conflict by agreeing to close its military base (albeit after some international pressure). Russian peacekeepers in pro-Russian breakaway regions - Transdnistria, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia - are clearly not neutral third parties, but they have also contributed to keeping the peace.

Yes, Russia's response to Georgia's attack is unjustifiable. It acted unilaterally and with disproportionate force. But this isn't old-style Soviet arrogance. Nor is it an attempt to reconstitute the Soviet empire. Rather, Russia is simply following the lead of the world's only superpower in pursuing its national interest at gunpoint. Unlike the United States, though, Russia confines its operations to its "near abroad" rather than attempting to project power in far-off lands.

Georgia, meanwhile, is far from the good guy in this drama. From the Bush administration's point of view, Georgia gets a free pass because it sent a contingent of troops to Iraq and has been eager to join NATO. But the central government has been intolerant and aggressive in dealing with minority groups and populations. The current government of Mikheil Saakashvili cracked down hard on peaceful demonstrations last November. And Tbilisi's most recent attempt to reabsorb South Ossetia - something even Serbia has not done with Kosovo - was the proximate cause of the current violence.

The breakup of Yugoslavia is over, with the rather peaceful secession of Kosovo. The dissolution of the Soviet Union, however, is still with us, in all the hot and cold wars that continue along ethnic and political fault lines in the region. U.S. policies designed to contain Russia - through NATO expansion or the construction of missile defense - only exacerbate the problems. When will the Cold War die-hards in the United States decide to work with Russia rather than against it in order to finally bury the ghosts of the Soviet Union and bring peace to that great swath of Eurasia?

Protest-free Olympics?

Beijing has worked hard to make its Olympics protest-free. A brief unfurling of Tibetan flags before the opening ceremony and a five-person, ten-minute pro-Tibet protest at Tiananmen Square have been the only signs of dissent.

As part of our strategic focus on sports and foreign policy, Foreign Policy In Focus contributor Roger Levermore looks at how the Olympics have been a staging ground for political protests, particularly since 1968 and the well-known fist-raising at the Mexico Olympics. He concludes in *The Double-Edged Sword of Sport and Political Protest* that "in all likelihood, the effectiveness of the protests surrounding the 2008 Olympics in China will be short-term and fade away in the memory. The Chinese government and International Olympic Committee (IOC) will heavily censor bottom-up protest (which is less likely to be covered by the mainstream media in any event unless it comes in the form of a terrorist attack). And state-led protests (which does interest the media more) inevitably wither in the face of the growing commercial and political importance of China."

FPIF contributor Shasha Zou reviews a new book that looks at the political context of the Rome Olympics of 1960 and its echoes in the Beijing Olympics of today. In 1960, she writes in *Rome vs. Beijing*, "The two competing superpowers used the Olympics as a battleground for propaganda, viewing each medal won, whistle blown, and smatter of spectator applause as a symbol of their superiority." China, similarly, is hoping that its staging of and performance in the Olympics will demonstrate its own ascendancy to the top ranks of world leadership.

In 1998, the Baltimore Orioles and Cuba's national baseball team split two games in a historic effort at sports diplomacy. With more reasonable

leadership in Washington, this might have been the beginning of a rapprochement between the two countries. But as FPIF contributor Saul Landau points out, nothing of the sort took place. "The games did not, as we know, lead to Washington's lifting of its embargo or travel ban," he writes in *Baseball - Big and Little*. "Baseball diplomacy led to the defection in 2002 of Cuba's star pitcher, Jose Contreras, who had held the Orioles to two runs in nine innings. But instead of joining the O's, he signed with the New York Yankees for millions of dollars. Even in the 21st century, Dollar Diplomacy still functions."

The World and Food

The food crisis continues, and the international community has not managed to marshal sufficient resources to tackle the problem. As FPIF contributor Sophia Murphy writes, food aid contributions have plummeted to only about one-third of 1999 levels, and the UN reports that countries have offered less than half of what is needed for just the most severely affected countries.

At the same time, she writes in *Food Aid Emergency*, the system of food aid need serious reform so that the food sent to recipient countries helps their economies rather than wrecks them: "The only sensible response to the mounting numbers of emergencies is to match emergency donations, dollar for dollar or better, with investments in the long-term capacity of agriculture to provide us with the food, feed, and fiber we need. These longer-term investments must go to publicly held food reserves, investment in sustainable technologies, vast improvements in water management, investment in roads, storage, communications, and other infrastructure."

The institutions of the international community have not done any better than the individual nation-states in addressing the food crisis. These institutions like the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO), argues FPIF contributor Alexandra Spielfoch in *The Food Crisis and Global Institutions*, "are still focused on investment and growth in agriculture based on privatization schemes, deregulation, and trade facilitation. This is exactly the approach that has contributed to many of the problems we are seeing today in the food system; it's likely that this approach will worsen rather than ease the crisis."

Down for the Count (Dracula)

Meanwhile, international institutions like the WTO are facing crises of their own. FPIF contributors Walden Bello and Mary Lou Malig point out in *The Dracula Round* that the WTO has been facing a number of near-death experiences. "Like the good Count of Transylvania, the World Trade Organization's Doha Round of negotiations has died more than once," they write. "It first collapsed during the WTO ministerial meeting held in Cancun in September 2003. After apparently coming back from the dead, many observers thought it passed away a second time during the so-called Group of Four meeting in Potsdam in June 2007 -- only to come back yet again from the dead. Now the question is whether the unraveling of the most recent 'mini-ministerial' gathering in Geneva was the silver stake that pierced the trade round's heart, rendering Doha dead forever."

For a look at what might emerge as an alternative to Dracula's Doha, check out Abbas Jaffer's review of FPIF contributor Mark Engler's new book on globalization. It's part of our new feature - FPIF Picks - that gives you short reviews of the best foreign policy books, films, and music.

Mexico and Iran

Mexico is the third-largest supplier of oil to the United States (after Canada and Saudi Arabia). So the United States is very interested in the

future of the Mexican oil industry, particularly the opportunities that open up for foreign investment if the complex is privatized. As FPIF contributor Manuel Perez-Rocha explains in Mexico's Oil Referendum, the debate on privatization is increasingly taking place in a regional context. The North American Security and Prosperity Partnership (SPP) - an effort by the leaders of Canada, the United States, and Mexico to bump NAFTA up a notch - definitely has oil on its agenda. "One of the SPP's core projects is the creation of an integrated 'regional energy market' in order to guarantee the supply of oil to the market that uses it most - the United States. The SPP has proven to be a great help to oil companies for the grab of Mexico's reserves," Perez-Rocha writes.

Are Iran and the United States on the brink of détente? After the July 19 meeting between Iranian, European, and U.S. negotiators, the optimists and the pessimists were evenly divided. FPIF contributor William O. Beeman doesn't seem much in the way of movement forward. "So little happened at the July 19 meeting, it could hardly be called a diplomatic encounter," he writes in The Iranian Chess Game Continues. "In fact, Iran has been pursuing a productive diplomatic course. Rather than responding to deadlines and ultimatums, Iran has steadily put forward proposals for resolving its differences with the European and American governments over its nuclear energy program."

New Schedule

Mondays, we've been told, are a bad day for newsletters. Inboxes are crowded with email, there's less time to read, and folks are in a post-weekend slump. So, with this issue of World Beat, we'll be switching to a Tuesday publication schedule.

Links

Human Rights Watch, "Overview of Human Rights Issues in Georgia," World Report 2008;
<http://hrw.org/englishwr2k8/docs/2008/01/31/georgi17743.htm>

Voice of America, "Police Quash Olympic Protests in Beijing, Hong Kong," August 9, 2008;
<http://www.voanews.com/english/2008-08-09-voa8.cfm>

Roger Levermore, "The Double-Edged Sword of Sport and Political Protest," Foreign Policy In Focus (<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5447>); There are some signs that the ever-globalized mass media is helping to portray sport-led political protest to a large audience, yet the effectiveness of the protests surrounding the 2008 Olympics in China will quickly fade away.

Shasha Zou, "Rome vs. Beijing: Olympics that Change the World," Foreign Policy In Focus (<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5440>); David Maraniss' latest book, Rome 1960: The Olympics that Changed the World, demonstrates how Beijing 2008 is simply another chapter in the quest for separation between sports and state.

Saul Landau, "Baseball - Big and Little: Its Role in U.S.-Cuba Relations," Foreign Policy In Focus (<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5453>); Perhaps young athletes from New England and Alabama can bring down the level of government irrationality on U.S.-Cuba policy a peg or two.

Sophia Murphy, "Food Aid Emergency," Foreign Policy In Focus (<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5450>); The food price crisis has made demand more acute and supplies even scarcer, but it hasn't really changed the underlying problems with food aid as a response to hunger.

Alexandra Spieldoch, "The Food Crisis and Global Institutions," Foreign Policy In Focus (<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5442>); Can global institutions and governments, in the midst of a food crisis, finally get it right?

Walden Bello and Mary Lou Malig, "The Dracula Round," Foreign Policy In Focus (<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5441>); Will the WTO's Doha talks come back from the dead?

Abbas Jaffer, "A Third Way: Globalization from Below," Foreign Policy In Focus (<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5443>); According to Mark Engler, the future of globalization is in question. Will the fight between "imperial globalization" and "corporate globalization" lead to the rise of democratic globalization?"

Manuel Perez-Rocha, "Mexico's Oil Referendum," Foreign Policy In Focus (<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5449>); Opposition parties organized a non-binding referendum to fight government efforts to gut a constitutional ban on private investment in the oil industry.

William O. Beeman, "The Iranian Chess Game Continues," Foreign Policy In Focus (<http://www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5445>); Diplomacy between Iran and the United States has entered the opening gambit stage and Iran appears to be winning at this point.