
Georgias Defeat And Americas Options

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What Mikheil Saakashvili began at his discretion, Vladimir Putin ends at his pleasure. The Russians have called a halt to their offensive in Georgia, and none too soon for the Georgians. What remains is the postwar settlement, and the American part in it.

A look at the situation on the ground speaks to the Russian dominance of the little Caucasian republic: the Russians have near-total freedom of movement in the western plain, with soldiers in Poti. Georgia's only meaningful lifelines to the outside world are the port of Batumi, and the long road to Yerevan. Neither of these are significant corridors for supply, and the port is free only at Russian sufferance. Further war would have seen a battle for Tbilisi in the coming 36 hours. The Georgians would have lost, and the war thence would probably have devolved into guerrilla actions centered about a sort of Georgian national redoubt in the south -- in regions populated more by Armenians and Azeris than by Georgians. To be spared all this is a mercy that Georgians, rightly inflamed by what's been done in mere days, may not fully appreciate.

The postwar settlement remains thoroughly opaque, even if, as the Russians report, the conditions of a ceasefire are agreed. The Russian war aim was never announced -- or rather, it only announced itself on the ground -- and its political end remains obscure. The formal disposition of the Russian-occupied secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia must be decided; the mechanisms of reparation, if any, must be agreed upon; and, most troublingly, the Russians are making noises about extraditing Saakashvili to the Hague. Here, a definitive settlement is to everyone's advantage -- not least the Georgians, who are ill-advised to act as if they are anything but beaten. Absurdities like putting Saakashvili in the ICC dock should be rejected, but otherwise, it is almost certainly best to let the Russians dictate their terms -- and let resistance to those terms emanate from sources able to make that resistance count, like Europe and the United States.

With this in mind, the first task of America's postwar policy in the Caucasus is distasteful in the extreme: pushing the Georgians to understand and act like what they are, which is a defeated nation in no position to make demands. This does not square easily with American sentiment -- nor my own -- nor with the Vice President's declaration that Russia's aggression "must not go unanswered," nor with John McCain's declaration that "today we are all Georgians." Russia's aggression and consequent battlefield victory will stand, and as the last thing the volatile Caucasus needs is yet another revisionist, revanchist state, it befits a would-be member of the Western alliance to make its peace with that. However inflammatory the issue of "lost" Abkhazia and South Ossetia are in the Georgian public square, it is nothing that the Germans, the Finns, and the Greeks, to name a few, have not had to come to terms with in the course of their accessions to the first tier of Western nations. We should not demand less of Georgia.

The second, and more enduring, task of our policy must be the swift containment of Russia. I use the term deliberately: to invoke another Cold War-era phrase, we're not going to "roll back" any of Russia's recent territorial gains, nor should we attempt to reverse what prosperity it has achieved in the past decade. (That prosperity, being based mostly upon transitory prices for natural resources, will itself be transitory in time.) Russia's leadership has declared that it seeks the reversal, de facto if not de jure, of the "catastrophe" of the USSR's end. Though not marked by any

formal decision in the vein of Versailles, this is nonetheless a strategic outcome that America has a direct interest in preserving. That interest has only gone up with the admission of former Soviet-bloc states -- and former Soviet states -- to NATO. Inasmuch as Russian revisionism threatens the alliance that has kept the peace in Europe for generations now, it must be confronted and deterred.

The obvious question is how this may be done with the tools America has at hand. It is a media commonplace over the past several days that the United States has no leverage over Russia. This is false. American policy can and does tremendously affect several things of tremendous importance to Moscow. A brief (though not comprehensive) list of available pressure points follows:

First, the Ukraine. First and foremost, there is no former Soviet state that Russia wishes to have in its orbit more than the Ukraine. Not coincidentally, the Ukraine was also the only nation besides the United States to render Georgia material assistance in this war, when it threatened to deny Sevastopol to the Russian Black Sea Fleet. European reluctance to antagonize Russia scuttled the Ukraine's potential NATO membership at the NATO Bucharest summit this past spring. In light of Georgia's fate, issuance of a MAP, or even outright NATO membership, to the Ukraine, is an appropriate riposte to Russia's war. Unlike Georgia, the Ukraine has no territorial or secessionist issues, nor an unstable leadership apt to launch unwinnable wars. It does, though, very much need the sort of guarantee that NATO exists to give.

Second, Russia's G8 membership. The G8 is purportedly the group of the world's largest industrial democracies. Russia, with a GDP smaller than Spain's and a per-capita income lower than Gabon's, was admitted in 1997 as a means of supporting its integration into international economic institutions. It's a privilege, not a right, and it should be conditioned upon responsible membership in the community of nations. Expulsion of Russia from the G8 is a longtime policy favorite of John McCain's, and it's time to consider his preference.

Third, Russia's client states. This is a short list, though Russian revisionism would wish to see it lengthen. Belarus is by far Russia's premier client, followed by varying degrees of Russian influence over Armenia, Serbia, Azerbaijan, and the central Asian states. (We'll exclude here clients like Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, all of which have statuses that are dubious at best.) We've already seen that Russia reacts to defend Belarus when the latter is criticized. An available pressure point, then, is to turn up the heat on the Belarusian regime -- specifically with support of dissidents in Belarus -- and link it explicitly to Russia's behavior elsewhere.

Fourth, Russia's dissidents. Russian public life is nowhere near Soviet depths, but it is nonetheless notable that the Moscow regime places a premium upon the control of journalistic institutions and media. (A great, English-language example of the slick and statist nature of modern Russian media may be found at Russia Today -- note the stories on Georgian "spy rings" and refugees from Georgian aggression fleeing into Russia.) Divergence from the Putin line is a good way to end up unemployed or dead, and so we ought to lend what support we may to independent media personnel -- and their means.

Finally, Russia's Internet. A major tool of Russian foreign policy in the past few years is what may only be described as cyber-warfare. We saw it when Russia wished to punish Estonia [pdf], and we saw it again this week against nearly all of Georgia's .ge-domain sites. This is a tremendously thorny problem, both because cyber-war by its nature affords the perpetrators plausible denial, and because it is quite easy to respond to a wrong with a wrong -- in America's case, by using its leverage over California-based ICANN to invalidate .ru domains from which Russian attacks emanate. Here, the basic

functionality of the Internet must be balanced against political concerns -- and there must be some mechanism for determining when political concerns from nations like Russia damage the basic functionality of the Internet.

Beyond applying pressure to Russia, American policy must focus upon reassurance to the NATO nations that expressed alarm at Georgia's subjugation. NATO allies Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and the Czech Republic all know quite well what it means to be crushed by the force of Russian arms, and all were therefore demonstrative in expressing their dismay at events in Georgia. If NATO and the American connection in particular is going to retain its meaning for them, it is up to us to provide the necessary reassurance. Although NATO is no longer a formally anti-Soviet (and therefore anti-Russian) alliance, we cannot pretend that it does not hold precisely that meaning for several of its member states. A failure to recognize this would concurrently weaken the alliance.

The war in Georgia is done but for the details, and the occasional sniping. Georgia lost on the first day, and Georgia has mostly -- though not wholly -- itself to blame. But if Georgia is prostrate, America and the West are not. If some good is to come of this, and if Russia's adventure in its "near abroad" is to be its last, we must act decisively -- and now.
