
The War in Georgia and Its International Consequences

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Following the eruption of conflict between the Russians and the Georgians over S. Ossetia, the international community, especially those organizations active in the S. Caucasus began to forcefully and publicly ask the questions that perhaps should have been asked long ago. The conference held in Tbilisi on November 6-7, co-sponsored by the Heinrich Boll Institute and the Bertelsmann Foundation was convened to search for "A European Strategy for the Southern Caucasus" and covered such topics as the war and its international consequences, future challenges for democratic transition and options for international cooperation. Mr. Oskanian spoke on the international consequences of the August events.

Below the text of Vartan Oskanian's intervention at the conference:

Let's give a broader context to what has happened in the region and try to address what has happened.

It is true that this is first a conflict between Russia and Georgia. And so the immediate consequences were first felt by the population here. The S. Ossetian population was effected most. The Georgian population, too in Gori, and elsewhere was seriously effected. The specific physical consequences were of course difficult. And, relations between Georgia and Russia were even more strained.

In my view, despite the immediate impact on the population in Georgia and S. Ossetia, this conflict goes beyond the region because the Russia-Georgia conflict must be viewed as one piece in the broader context of East-West, Russia-US, issues of regional dominance, NATO expansion. These are the issues that clearly cannot be ignored. If this is viewed purely in the context of Russia-Georgia, then, in addressing the issue and trying to conceptualize prospects that will lead to solutions, we will be going in the wrong direction.

We must seek a bigger context to address the problem properly and search for solutions that will be effective. One might even view the Georgia-Russia conflict and the S. Ossetian problem as a consequence and not a cause of what transpired in this region. That's why broadening the context is important.

And as we do broaden the context, it becomes obvious that security is the number one issue. Therefore, that has to be our main focus. I would like to draw a small parallel between the financial crisis of that the world is experiencing and the Russia-Georgia conflict. What triggered the financial crisis was the subprime crisis in the US. At first, it seemed to be small and local, and was only a housing-related problem that would only affect the US.

But now we see that its consequences are huge and wide-reaching. The whole world is affected and world leaders are talking about reviewing the Bretton Woods institutions. The Summit to be held in Washington DC next week will discuss these issues.

Let's draw a parallel between the financial crisis and the financial institutions on the one hand, and the security-related crisis and security-related institutions around the world. What if our security institutions are not relevant, just like the financial institutions are not relevant?

I commend the Bertelsmann Foundation and Heinrich Boll Institute for this document on Strategies for the South Caucasus on the European agenda. My call is to go broader and form a global agenda that will engage not only Europe but also Russia, China and others. Maybe there is need for a security summit in parallel with the financial summit.

If we look at history in the past few hundred years, we see that the world has gone through four or five major transformations: The Peace of Westphalia in the 1640s to the Concert of Europe in the 19th century, World War I, World War II.

After each major conflict, new institutions have emerged to address the new realities created as a consequence of the major conflicts. The Cold War period and its aftermath are the exceptions. The very institutions that contributed to ending the Cold War reinvented themselves to address the post-Cold War reality.

And even if this was somehow tentatively possible 15 years ago, today, with Russia's reemergence, with the emergence of Russia, Brazil, India, a new vision is required to revisit and refashion these institutions.

The outcome of the seemingly small Russia-Georgia conflict should be the cognizance of this fact, and world leaders should summon the political will to put this issue on the table and attempt to address it.

Individual approaches may further complicate this acute situation even further.

Some are talking about European Neighborhood Policy Plus, Turkey has come up with the idea of a security platform, the new Obama Administration may have its own version of a US solution. These cannot be complementary in themselves.

They will take us in different directions. There is a clear need for better coordination from all continents and major players to identify the specific problems in this region and address them.

We must accept that NATO expansion, whether we agree with the idea or not, was a main trigger of the Russia-Georgia conflict. All sides need to review this policy. This doesn't mean there must necessarily be a change in position, or a yielding to Russian demands. The simple fact of acknowledging that we need to address these issues would make a huge difference in defining, designing and conceptualizing the future security architecture in this region.

The major lesson to draw then, from the conflict here, without minimizing the on-the-ground consequences, without undermining the suffering and the physical damage, is to enlarge the topic and put it in a broader context, identify the issues clearly and devise the right mechanism to address them.

<http://www.civilitasfoundation.org/analysis/081113geo.html>
