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# Europe And The China Card

by Tony Barber  
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The August war in Georgia, and Russia's recognition of the breakaway enclaves of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, have plunged relations between Moscow and the European Union into their iciest condition since the Soviet Union's demise in 1991. But if it plays its cards right, it is the EU, rather than Russia, that in the long run will gain something from the crisis.

One month after the Kremlin embarked on the path of dismembering Georgia by recognising Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, what is most striking is how negatively the rest of the world has reacted. As far as I can tell, only Nicaragua has followed Moscow's lead to the point of full recognition. Even Belarus, the former Soviet republic closest to Moscow, has held back.

Elsewhere, sympathy for the Russian position has come from Azerbaijan's Armenian-controlled enclave of Nagorno-Karabakh, Turkish-occupied Northern Cyprus and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. All things considered, not a very impressive collection of supporters.

The most important expression of displeasure at Russia's action, though carefully coded, came from China. For Beijing, the formal recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was an attack on the principles of territorial integrity and non-interference in other states' domestic affairs that the Chinese regard as sacrosanct.

As Bobo Lo, an expert at the Centre for European Reform think-tank, puts it: "The analogy that matters is not Tibet or Xinjiang - long under de facto as well as de jure control - but Taiwan... Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia establishes a dangerous precedent, whereby de facto control supported by a dominant external power can introduce new realities."

Russia has not merely isolated itself but left itself "more friendless than at any time in the past 60 years", Bobo Lo argues.

This presents opportunities for the EU. European leaders worry about their over-reliance on Russian energy supplies, and about Russia's meddling in its former sphere of control in eastern Europe. But doesn't China's anger at Moscow's attempted partition of Georgia create an opening for the EU to develop a closer strategic relationship with Beijing?

In a sense, such a move would replay Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger's use of "the China card" in the early 1970s. Of course, it would get nowhere without the support of the British, French and German - the EU's dominant foreign policy players. But, as it happens, one or two European government ministers are already thinking along these lines.

Who, I wonder, will be Europe's Nixon?

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