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# Stand up to Russia over Georgia

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If proof were needed of the significance of the crisis facing the troubled Caucasus state of Georgia, it came on Tuesday with the start of exercises (<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f9742ec6-52cf-11dd-9ba7-000077b07658.html>) involving 1,000 US troops.

US officials insist the long-planned wargames have nothing to do with the recent dispute between Russia and Georgia over the breakaway Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. But they give Washington a chance to support pro-west Tbilisi at a critical time.

The exercises come just after Moscow brazenly admitted sending war planes over South Ossetia last week, allegedly to stop an attack by Mikheil Saakashvili, the Georgian president. While Russia has encroached on Georgian air space many times in supporting Abkhazia and South Ossetia, this was the first time in recent years that it has openly confessed to what was a flagrant violation of Georgia's territorial integrity. With the action coinciding with a visit to Tbilisi by Condoleezza Rice, US secretary of state, the message to the west was brutally clear: stay off our turf.

It is a message the US and the European Union must not accept. Russia is not interested in Abkhazia and South Ossetia per se. It has not recognised their independence claims for fear of setting precedents for its own Caucasus minorities. But Moscow is very interested in stopping Georgia developing as a pro-west state " and blocking its bid to join Nato. The west must be equally determined to help Tbilisi follow its chosen course. The problems involved in admitting a fragile state with separatist regions into Nato will take time to resolve. But the direction must be clear.

Georgia matters to the west because it is the current standard-bearer of the democratic revolt against Moscow that began in central Europe in 1989. While the flags of freedom flying in Tbilisi are stained by Mr Saakashvili's authoritarian lapses, Georgia's leaders still generally embrace democratic values.

Also, Georgia straddles the only non-Russian route taking Caspian oil and gas to world markets. Lose Georgia, and Russia wins an even bigger say over energy supplies. The risks were highlighted by this week's cut, for technical reasons, in Russian oil flows to the Czech Republic after Prague agreed to host part of the US missile shield.

Certainly, the west should try to engage Russia in talks over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as long as they are based on preserving Georgian sovereignty. It should also redouble efforts to restrain hotheads in Tbilisi from resorting to violence. But when Russia bullies Georgia. the west must back its vulnerable ally.

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