

Russia sends a message to its 'near abroad' and to the West

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The roots of the war in the Caucasus between Russia and Georgia are buried in the collective memories of both countries. The more immediate cause of the current fighting occurred last April at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization summit in Bucharest when the alliance decided to limit its membership drive to Balkan states.

Georgia and Ukraine, both of which are part of what the Russians call their "near abroad," were told "maybe some day, but not now." Because Russia is a country with no natural borders except the Arctic Ocean, the strategic importance of buffers between the motherland and foreign parts such as Germany, Turkey, or China, is hard to exaggerate.

Let us accept as a given the realist view that in international politics states are chiefly interested in their own security. It is therefore no surprise that the United States was strongly in favour of welcoming Ukraine and Georgia into NATO and that Russia was even more strongly opposed. France and Germany refused admittance to the two former Soviet states to protect their supplies of Russian natural gas.

In short, Russia temporarily kept two key parts of its near abroad out of NATO. On the other hand, they failed to prevent the building of ballistic missile installations in Eastern Europe. In the big picture, we're looking at a draw.

The Balkan focus, however, has paid big dividends to the West in fairly short order. The independence of Kosovo, which the Russians strongly opposed, is now effectively guaranteed by NATO. And the Serbian government has had major changes in attitude.

For generations, Serbia had been Russia's only willing European ally. By last spring it was surrounded on all sides by NATO and soon saw the benefits of joining the European Union. This newfound clarity concerning its national interest explains recent changes in policy and the arrest of Radovan Karadzic for war crimes. It is more than likely that Serbian intelligence has always known Karadzic's whereabouts. It has long been an unspoken condition for serious consideration by the EU that he be shipped to The Hague for trial.

But from the Russians' perspective, they had lost for some time their last outpost in Europe. Which brings us back to the Caucasus, to Georgia, and the Russians' southern flank.

Starting late last June, there has been an increase in violence in the secessionist region of Abkhazia, west of the Georgian capital of Tbilisi. As with the region of South Ossetia, north of Tbilisi, where the current fighting is centred, both parts of Georgia had enjoyed the presence of Russian "peacekeepers." And in South Ossetia, many of these nominal Georgians had been granted Russian citizenship as well.

For over a month, then, Georgians have been in an untenable position. Now they are being compelled by force to strike a deal with the Russians. Specifically, that means giving up their bid for NATO membership, which was scheduled to be discussed again in December. Moreover, NATO and the U.S. are in no position to oppose the Russians on this issue because they are tied up militarily in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Besides, the U.S. in particular has no reason to provoke the Russians to start providing even more help to the Iranians. So, the West having nothing much to confront the Russians with, look for plenty of stern western press releases. In short, Georgia is on its own, perhaps not hung out to dry but certainly at the tender mercies of the Russians.

The message to NATO, the West, and the U.S. is crystal clear: Russia is again in a position to be the guarantor of security in the Caucasus. And, by the way, NATO, consider this payback for Kosovo and Serbia.

Another message is even clearer. This is the first major Russian military intervention since the end of the Soviet Union. Russia has apparently sent armour and mechanized infantry into South Ossetia, which shows both confidence and indifference to that vague entity, world public opinion.

The countries with vivid memories of Soviet tanks are the recipients of the second message. Over the next few weeks, take note of the responses from Ukraine, the Baltic countries, the other Caucasus states, and the former Soviet territories in central Asia -- Kazakhstan, for example.

By taking this opportunity to redefine the strategic balance in the Caucasus, the Russians are instructing their neighbours to look at them in an older light: If you are part of our near abroad, don't think of becoming pals with the West.

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