

The Bear Wakes Up

Пише: Morton Abramovitz
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Now that the war in Georgia looks like it is coming to an end, the West must first quickly come together to ensure a cease-fire genuinely takes effect, safeguard Georgia's survival, and help reconstruct the country.

The time is now ripe for NATO to also consider how it allowed a small state to be shattered and to reach a reckoning with Russia's abusive behavior. All that requires some historical perspective, and that is difficult given the posturing, piety and self-justification permeating our public discussion. Posturing and piety are indeed an essential element of policy making in democratic countries; they are not substitutes for policy.

Quite simply Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili gambled and lost. Whatever Russia's constant provocations and Vladimir Putin's contempt for him personally, Saakashvili appears to have thought he could quickly retake South Ossetia in a *fait accompli* or, if he got in trouble, the United States and other NATO nations would send forces to rescue him. That misjudgment proved disastrous for his country. It is no apology for the disproportionate Russian response to acknowledge that Russia is the regional power, and for tiny Georgia to repeatedly antagonize and then directly engage it in armed conflict without real support is supreme folly. It is amazing that we let this dangerous situation percolate for so long and did not provide a restraining influence over Saakashvili, having dealt with him for the last four years.

To help resolve this new crisis with Russia we must recognize (finally) that the mythical world of the 1990s is gone—to cease believing that U.S. and NATO utterances can make the Russian sea recede whether it is in the Caucasus or central Asia .

The righteousness started in this case with the notion of the unipolar moment: that we are so

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omnipotent, having demolished the Soviet Union , that we can do what we want when we want to, double standards to the contrary. That we had free license to go into any area we wanted because we were moral and democratic—but woe to those who might tread into helping out Castro. That feeling of unlimited power was heightened when the United States defeated the mighty Slobodan Milosevic—without ground troops and without losing a single soldier in an air campaign which this writer strongly supported.

But the most dangerous concept was to think time had stopped, history declaring us victors. The uncontrolled expansion of NATO in the nineties—often in violation of promises made to Russia —was the major manifestation of this widespread sentiment. We forced the hapless Russians, still struggling to restore their country, to accept in their eyes ever-greater humiliation. They would get over it and it was a farsighted strategic move to expand the NATO alliance into Russia 's backyard, or so we thought.

Russian anger was further deepened by the Bush-administration decision to put advanced missile defenses in the Czech Republic and Poland , over strong Russian objections, and our securing independence for Kosovo. Worse we proclaimed Georgia an ally, helping train its forces, and promising it would get into NATO, a red flag if there ever was one for Putin. He hated Saakashvili precisely because of his close ties to the West, his efforts to make Georgia an anti-Russian bastion, and its desire to join NATO. Shrugging off the Russians is of course okay if you can back up your commitments, however implicit. We could not. Nor is this to assert moral equivalence—only that prudence and understanding of what realistically can be done once circumstances change are necessary.

Saakashvili overreached but so did the West. And no one in present or past American administrations is prepared to admit it. Indeed these two breakaway regions were mostly lost in 1993—when Georgia agreed to allow Russian “peace keeping” troops on its soil. Just no one bothered to confront that reality—the fiction of a “truce” was easier for Tbilisi to stomach. In the interim, Russia —the renegade provinces' primary backer—grew stronger and more emboldened. Even if Russian forces pull back from Georgia proper, they will not relinquish their military positions within Abkhazia and South Ossetia . What had been an implicit alliance between the two and Russia is now explicit. They are lost to Tbilisi .

Russia has gone well beyond merely “protecting their citizens” in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. They gave Saakashvili a bloody nose and made him appear reckless, whatever the terrible image they also portrayed to the world. Moscow hopes it has both undermined him politically and shown other former-Soviet states in central Asia —who are watching closely—that the bear is hibernating no more.

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It will be no easy task to get both a serious Western response to Russia 's egregious behavior and find a foundation for continued Russian-Western relations. What do we do about Georgia 's NATO application? Or Ukraine 's? We can understandably assert that Russia should not be able to block any country's desire to join NATO. Unfortunately our rhetoric no longer necessarily deters the Russians in their neck of the woods. None of this is made any easier in the midst of a furious election battle where the contestants will likely try to maul the other on this issue.

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