

Georgia Postbellum

Lincoln A. Mitchell

Last summer's war in Georgia brought into sharp focus several key components of U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War period, and raised major questions about the future of U.S. relations with Russia, Georgia and most of the former Soviet region. The war was also a wake-up call (to those who may somehow have still been asleep): The post-Cold War period—a time marked by a prostrate Russia and virtually unchecked American power in the region—is over. In this new post-post-Cold War period, the challenge for U.S. policymakers is to craft a strategy that recognizes both the potential danger Russia poses to its neighbors and the limits to U.S. influence in the region—limits that have only grown tighter thanks to the ongoing global economic crisis.

The war has already forced the United States to take a more critical look at its relationships with both Georgia and Russia. That task fell to a Bush Administration as it was coming to an end. But the war also forces us to situate those challenges in the context of a triangular relationship between Russia, the United States and Europe, because the United States cannot formulate an effective policy toward Russia without the support of the Europeans. This task falls to the Obama Administration as it is just beginning.

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Re-examining our relations with both Russia and Georgia in light of Europe will be a complicated undertaking, not least because of the diverse views toward Russia within the European Union. In general, the East European countries are far more concerned about an imperial Russia, while the West European countries are more concerned about maintaining economic and other ties with Russia, lest conflict push the European experiment beyond its breaking point. These differences are highlighted whenever the word “Georgia” is spoken within European Union council chambers. Many East European elites believe that NATO membership for Georgia (as well as Ukraine) should be fast-tracked; any other course of action would seem to reward Russian aggression and devalue NATO's reputation. But most West European elites believe that this is the very last thing we should do, lest it catalyze another war over Georgia, something that couldn't possibly end well.

If the European Union lacks a coherent Russia policy, Washington will be as hard-pressed as ever to give it one. We cannot “get tough” with Russia without a European partner, yet a failure to challenge Russia's imperial appetites could lead to disasters down the road. In such a situation, wise policy avoids forcing the issue in either of two dangerous directions. That is where U.S. policy was—precariously nestled in the bosom of useful ambiguity—before the summer war. And that is where the Obama Administration should return it to, if it can. Certainly, it should do nothing to force equally unpleasant choices upon itself over Ukraine or other potential flashpoints along the post-Soviet Eurasian shatterbelt.



Archeographics

To avoid such self-inflicted crises, the Obama Administration must learn from the mistakes of its predecessor. The United States got way too far out on its skis in its support for Georgia, and for its mercurial and accident-prone leader. The Bush Administration took risks it seemed unaware of, and, when war came, it was reduced to mostly feckless posturing. It did manage to avoid a broader conflict, but the whole affair was not a pretty sight. We should not let such a thing happen again.

Origins of the War

Avoiding a repeat of past mistakes requires understanding the origins of the Russo-Georgian war, but, not for first time, what one sees depends on when one starts looking. If we focus on the events of the spring and summer of 2008, we can argue over whether Russia plotted the war and trapped the Georgian leadership, or whether the Georgian leadership made an ill-considered decision to start shooting, handing Russia a pretext for retaliation. If we were to focus on the 2003 Rose Revolution, which brought President Mikheil Saakashvili to power, we would stress the importance of Russia's long-standing attempts to weaken and destabi-

lize Georgia, Saakashvili's efforts to move his country closer to the United States, and the domestic Georgian political considerations pushing him to war. If we were to start our history in the early 1990s, we would understand how Georgia became fragmented territorially in the immediate post-Communist period by the nationalist government of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Georgia's first post-Soviet leader. And if we go back to the Bolshevik Revolution and its immediate aftermath, we would see how the special status given to Abkhazia and South Ossetia by the Soviet leadership in the 1920s destined any future Georgian state to be dogged by issues of territorial integrity.

The truth is that all of these points of entry matter, and have something to teach us. Georgia had been part of the Russian Empire since the early 19th century, but from 1918 to 1921, Georgia was, for the first time in centuries, an independent state, and during those few years it did include South Ossetia and Abkhazia (although Abkhazia was not entirely consolidated into the state). The tiny republic was no match for the Soviet Union, however, and when the Soviet Union incorporated Georgia, Stalin, first as Commissioner for Nationalities in the USSR and later as the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, granted South Ossetia and Abkhazia,

among other things, the nominal right to secede from Georgia. (Of course, everybody knows that Stalin was Georgian; but a lot of Georgians insist he was really Ossetian.) This right, which was highly theoretical at the time, turned out to be a geopolitical time bomb, for it was exercised shortly after Georgia became independent once again in 1991. When it was exercised, the first post-independence Georgian government reacted in a way that exacerbated the division, employing an all-sticks, no-carrots rhetoric that it could not back up with effective action. Thereafter, the Russian government endeavored to keep the breach open in order to use the Ossetians and Abkhazians to gain leverage against Georgia.

It's a fair guess that the senior members of the Bush Administration knew little about these historical threads, even the post-Cold War ones, when they committed American prestige and reputation to the Saakashvili government and the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity. (They knew little of the history of Afghanistan or Iraq, either; knowledge-free zones are part and parcel of an ideologically driven foreign policy.) This and other mistakes yet to be mentioned left them unprepared for what happened last August 7–8.

The initial, still widely accepted view of the war's proximate origin is that Saakashvili was provoked one too many times by Russia and so decided that something had to be done about it. He then sent the Georgian military into South Ossetia, which gave Russia the excuse it had been looking for to attack the entire country, devastate its military and visibly re-assert Russian power in the region. The Georgians, not surprisingly, take a different view. The official position, which is shared by most Georgian citizens (due in no small part to government dominance of the media), is essentially that Russia began attacking Georgia early in the day on August 7 and that Georgia retaliated in self-defense. Alas, the Georgians have been unable to persuade many outsiders that this was in fact the case. Lately, more Georgians are also raising questions about the decisions their leaders made.

This growing chorus of questions amounts to a serious problem for the Saakashvili government. Major political and civil society figures outside of the government, most notably former Speaker of Parliament Nino Burjanadze

and former Georgian Ambassador to the United Nations Irakli Alasania have called for investigations into the origins of the war. If it can be shown that Saakashvili bears substantial responsibility for starting it, his already embattled regime will be further weakened—precisely what Saakashvili's detractors hope for. The perception that Georgia was responsible for the initial escalation hurts Georgia in the international context as well. While European and American governments agree that Russia's actions were reprehensible and showed signs of ambitions that go far beyond Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the question of whether Georgia fired the first shot speaks to both the judgment of its leadership and its reliability as an ally. Even those willing to contemplate Georgia in NATO might be daunted by evidence that the Georgian leadership is impulsive and imprudent.

There is a difference, however, between Saakashvili's methods, which may have been ill-considered, and his strategy, which arose from the logic of circumstances. The frozen conflicts provided context and, perhaps, pretext for Russian actions, but clearly the real stake was Georgia's orientation toward the world. Since Saakashvili came to power in January 2004, after helping to lead a protest movement that swept former Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze from power, his main aim has been to build an independent and democratic country aligned with the West. That is what irritated the Kremlin, which has preferred that Georgia remain a failing state that depends on Russia economically and politically—the Armenian model, one might call it.

Moscow made itself crystal clear. Before last summer's war, Russia had flown planes over Georgian airspace and even dropped explosives onto Georgian territory. The Georgian economy suffered from a Russian boycott of Georgian wine and mineral water, justified by the bizarre assertion that these products were tainted and dangerous. Russia has also become involved in Georgian domestic politics (although not to the extent occasionally suggested by the Georgian government) in a way that has generally been destructive for Georgia. The war was never simply about Abkhazia and South Ossetia; nor, therefore, is the aftermath.

That is why, regardless of what happens in the frozen conflicts, the United States cannot throw Georgia to the Russian wolves. That would not only wreak havoc on Georgia; it would also set a dangerous precedent for many other states in the roiling post-Soviet space. Besides, even if it were possible to abandon the Georgian mess through, say, a cold-blooded realpolitik exchange for Russian cooperation over Iran or Afghanistan one simply cannot secure reliable guarantees from a Russia increasingly racked by economic crisis and instability. The Obama Administration should not trade on the Georgian portfolio even if it can suppress its conscience long enough to do the deal.

The U.S. Role

For what it's worth, giving up on Georgia would be morally objectionable for yet another reason: U.S. policymakers helped cause the war by mishandling U.S. relationships with both Russia and Georgia.

Russia's aggression against Georgia clarifies the fact that Russia is a would-be regional hegemon whose goals frequently conflict with those of the United States. It is hard to believe that anybody who thought much about Russia could have been unaware of this by the summer of 2008; yet U.S. policy proceeded as though its embrace of the Georgian and Ukrainian "Color Revolutions" had no significant effect on Russian assessments and potential behavior. U.S. efforts to expand democracy and NATO into the former Soviet space were not necessarily wrongheaded, but they were almost guaranteed to create problems in U.S.-Russia relations. To have been blind to this fact was to invite a nasty surprise.

This is not solely a matter of balancing interests; there's a psychological dynamic at work as well. The way the United States treats Russia's interests is almost as important to Russia as the interests themselves. Russian frustration with the United States has been driven by U.S. style as well as substance. A case in point is the U.S. decision to support and later to recognize Kosovo's independence in February 2008, and it is a point very likely related to the Georgian war.

U.S. policy on Kosovo, whatever its merits, was bound to exacerbate Russian resentment

toward U.S. foreign policy as a whole. From the start of the Kosovo War onward, the United States pursued a policy that Russia opposed on specific political grounds and on more general grounds as well. Here was the West yet again attacking Serbia, Russia's oldest Slavic ally. And here was the West saying that ethnic criteria provided sufficient justification to dismember a state in the name of self-determination, even without the explicit consent of the United Nations Security Council. The Russian government said plainly that if the West proceeded with this breach of traditional restraint on behalf of its own interests, Russia would feel free to do the same, specifically pointing to Abkhazia and South Ossetia as examples.

There are good reasons why Kosovo is not comparable to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but Moscow genuinely saw them as parallel situations. Russia began acting accordingly after February 2008 by strengthening its ties with the Abkhazian and Ossetian leaderships in Sukhumi and Tsinkhvali. That American diplomats expressed surprise at Russian opposition to U.S. Kosovo policy, treating it as merely a tactical feint that could be propitiated with the right phraseology, outraged the Russians. They saw in that response proof that the Americans had not even been listening to what they were saying.

Unfortunately, they had a point. U.S. policy in recent years has overstated both the weakness and the good intentions of Russia, but above all, perhaps, it has overlooked its relevance. The Bush Administration was reasonably subtle when it came to understanding the price it would have to pay for publicly criticizing Russia's increasingly anti-liberal inclinations; it resisted domestic pressure to push Moscow on this issue, knowing that it would not help to secure Russian cooperation with regard to Iran, for example. But it never seemed to understand how its boastful embrace of the Color Revolutions or its vigor to expand NATO and support democracy assistance in the region would exact a similar cost. That's apparently not an insight George W. Bush got from looking into Vladimir Putin's soul.

The U.S. role in the war must also be understood in the context of policy toward Georgia. The United States did not start the

war, nor did it encourage Georgia to start it— notwithstanding the ludicrous and somewhat frightening claim by Putin himself that the Bush White House sought to whip up anti-Russian hysteria to help elect John McCain to the presidency. Nonetheless, during the years preceding August 2008, the United States acted in ways that emboldened the Georgian leadership and led it to behave impulsively. Indeed, it acted in ways that led the Georgian government to feel confident that the United States would support it in the event of war.

U.S. policy toward Georgia from the Rose Revolution to the end of the Bush Administration suffered from an inability, or perhaps unwillingness, to accurately understand Georgian politics. It was dominated by an increasingly personalized relationship between the two sides. Saakashvili and other leaders of the Rose Revolution, most notably Saakashvili's first Prime Minister, Zurab Zhvania, had spent years building relationships throughout the U.S. foreign policy leadership. When Saakashvili finally came to power, he had well-wishers throughout Washington at all levels of government who helped the new government secure both financial backing and the confidence of the U.S. government.

These personal relationships led to an excessively rosy U.S. view of Georgian reality. The American side tended to treat Georgia as an unequivocal success story and a thriving democracy, and tended to see the Rose Revolution, which was obviously only a part of a process, as the entire process of democratization itself. The U.S. Ambassador during most of this time, a Foreign Service Officer named John Tefft, had a clearer understanding of Georgian realities and of the sometimes perilous course its leadership chose, but his impact on decision-makers in Washington was limited. Despite his warnings, the U.S. government became incapable of any public disagreement with the Georgian government. The frozen conflicts were dominated by Georgia's focus on its own territorial integrity rather than on U.S. efforts to solve existing problems. And as the Georgian government moved more clearly away from its democratic promise, official Washington either explained away or simply ignored the problems. Thus, after Saakashvili violently dispersed peaceful demonstrators in

November 2007, it was not uncommon to hear people in Washington say, referring to Saakashvili by his nickname, "Misha had a bad week, but he's okay now." This sentiment only grew stronger after a snap election in January 2008, in which Saakashvili narrowly avoided a runoff in part through the liberal use of "administrative resources" by the government.

Over time, Saakashvili developed an unusually strong relationship with President Bush, as well as with many people close to Vice President Dick Cheney. This relationship allowed Saakashvili to have direct access to the President and Vice President, making it even more difficult for the few members of the Administration who were critical or concerned about developments in Georgia to be heard. The development of direct channels skirting the conventional structures between the leaders of the two governments was particularly important during the spring and summer of 2008. The personalization of relationships meant that perceptions of Saakashvili—rather than, say, the U.S. national interest—played a major role in how Georgia was viewed in the United States and elsewhere.

It's not hard to see how this situation developed. Saakashvili is an extraordinary personality who makes an extraordinary impression. He is relatively young, only 41 years old, extremely energetic, smart and witty—the kind of person who brightens a room when he walks in. He spent time in Washington and New York as a law student, is married to a Dutch woman and is famous for being able to speak many European languages. It is not unusual to see him switch effortlessly from Georgian to French to English to Ukrainian in the course of a single press conference. Although Georgia sees itself as European, Saakashvili himself seems more American than anything else, and more a New Yorker than an American.

Ironically, the Bush Administration's willingness to accept Saakashvili as a Georgian George Washington wound up harming Georgian democracy. Shortly after the Rose Revolution, U.S. support in Georgia shifted away from democratic development in areas such as media, political parties and civil society and toward strengthening the state. The reason? Against nearly all available evidence on the history of democratization, the United States increasingly

viewed the government as the chief engine of democratization in Georgia. But as so often happened during George W. Bush's tenure, reality pulled trump. Before he was even sworn in as President, Saakashvili pushed through a series of constitutional reforms giving more power to the presidency at the expense of the legislature. During the next three years, democracy in Georgia could have charitably been described as simply not a priority to the new Georgian government, which was intent on rooting out corruption, reforming the education system, retraining police, reducing bureaucracy and strengthening the state. In concrete terms, this meant less media freedom, no independent judiciary, and weakening opposition parties in order to produce Georgia's fourth one-party system in less than twenty years.

It was still possible during this time to see the positives as outweighing the negatives: Rampant corruption, for example, truly was weakening Georgians' faith in democracy, so it made sense to go after it even if it did strengthen the state at the expense of civil society. These things are not simple. The United States, however, simply didn't see any negatives or recognize any tradeoffs. In contrast, European views of Georgian democracy were grounded in a more realistic understanding and grew considerably more negative after November 2007. These differences emerged during the war, when U.S. and European statements often diverged in tone, if not always in substance.

The Historical Context

In fairness, Georgia's democracy record must be seen in a broader political and social context. Although Georgia is an ancient nation, its history as an independent state is brief. Before 1991, Georgia had been independent for only three years of the preceding two centuries. Georgia's development in this context created major obstacles to becoming a functioning democratic state. For example, stealing from the central government when you are unhappily under somebody else's rule can be rationalized as an act of rebellion and patriotism. But after two centuries of institutional corruption, it's hard to see stealing from the central govern-

ment in an independent state as the destructive and unpatriotic act it is.

Moreover, the first 14 years of Georgia's post-Soviet independence did not move Georgia toward becoming a functioning state or democracy. Two very different governments oversaw periods of widespread corruption, collapsing economies and the loss of almost a third of Georgia's territory. By the time Saakashvili became President, Georgia was an increasingly weak and divided state, wracked by poverty and a left with a civil society that consisted essentially of a tiny handful of well-known NGOs.

This was clear to anybody who spent time in Georgia during the Shevardnadze period. Substantial areas of the country, such as Svaneti and Samagrela, were largely controlled by gangsters. Collective action was nearly impossible. Individuals sought personal or family solutions to every problem. Regular electric service was unheard of, so every family and business that could afford one bought a generator, making the air on the main streets extremely difficult to breathe. As roads fell into disrepair, the only hope for fixing them was to have a millionaire move in next door and take on the job as a private project. (A representative of the local government of Tbilisi offered to fix the road to my house once after dropping me off at home, but I declined. I knew, in the end, that it would not be worth it.)

Apartment buildings in Tbilisi generally did not have front doors. They had been stolen and either sold as scrap metal or burned for fuel. But despite the obvious drawbacks of not having a front door, the enduring Soviet legacy of mistrust between citizens meant that it was almost unheard of for the tenants to join together and split the cost of a replacement. Instead, people just invested, if they could, in good locks and thick doors for their own apartments and hoped for the best.

The Bush Administration never appeared to appreciate the scale of the challenge Saakashvili faced in attempting to build both state and democracy. Anybody surveying the civil and political climate in Georgia during the late Shevardnadze period could not have realistically expected Georgia to become a democracy in a matter of a few years. But the Bush Administration seemed to expect precisely that.

The gist of all this is that U.S. policy was

multi-dimensionally distorted as the summer of 2008 approached. It saw democracy where there was none. It saw a heroic leader where there was only a fallible mortal in a tough spot. It became generically uncritical of Georgian policies and perspectives. It did not listen to its own experts, instead substituting the false confidence borne of personal relationships. Taken together, this meant that the U.S. government, while warning against military solutions, never raised concerns about the wisdom and realism of the Georgian cause itself in the context of overheating rhetoric. Thus it is not surprising that Georgia did not take U.S. warnings about using its military in South Ossetia or Abkhazia very seriously.

The personalized nature of the U.S.-Georgia relationship, in particular, made it too easy for Georgia to ignore official U.S. warnings. Although the State Department had never issued a meaningful public criticism of Saakashvili's government, State officials were wise enough to understand that a Georgian offensive in either South Ossetia or Abkhazia would not end well for Georgia or the United States. So Secretary Condoleezza Rice, Assistant Secretary Dan Fried and others privately urged the Georgian

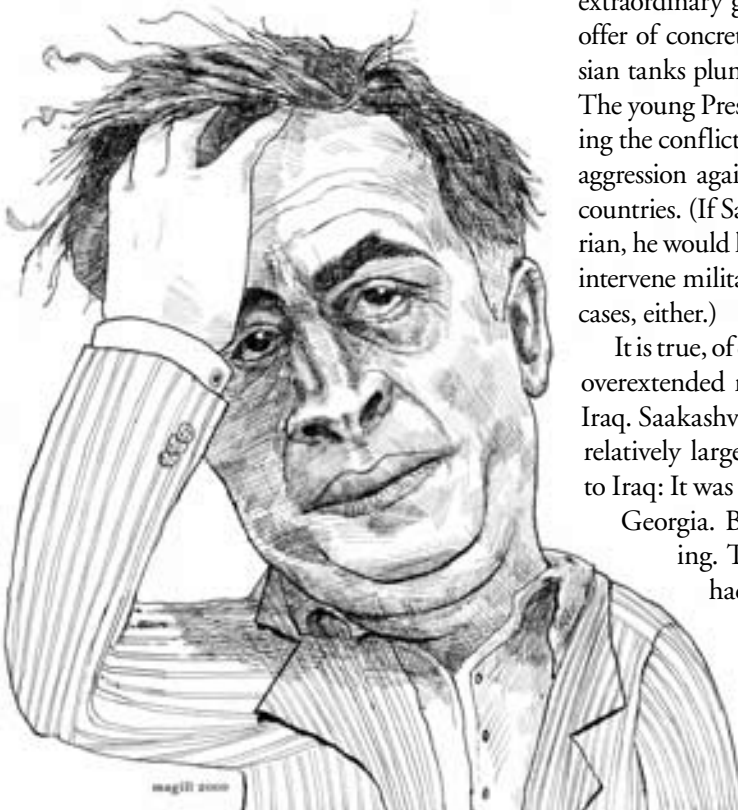
government not to take such a step. These warnings, however, were never going to be enough. The Saakashvili government's direct relations with Vice President Cheney's office, in particular, meant that if they did not like what they heard from the State Department, they could go somewhere else for a more pleasing opinion.

To some extent, too, Saakashvili's decision to ignore official warnings from the U.S. government and seek approval from other channels can be seen as part of a decision to transfer his primary relationship from Bush to Senator John McCain. Saakashvili's relationship with McCain was close. McCain had visited Georgia, where the President took him sightseeing and fishing in Georgia's beautiful mountainous countryside. Moreover, they had an important common friend in Randy Scheunemann, who served as the top foreign policy advisor to the Republican nominee and previously as a key Washington lobbyist for Saakashvili's government.

This turned out to be wishful thinking on two counts. Not only did McCain lose the election, but once the war began Bush did not act as aggressively as Saakashvili had hoped. The postwar assistance package to Georgia, while extraordinary generous, was not the same as an offer of concrete support to Georgia while Russian tanks plunged deep into Georgian territory. The young President, after all, had been comparing the conflict to Soviet-era acts of international aggression against Finland, Hungary and other countries. (If Saakashvili had been a better historian, he would have known that the West did not intervene militarily against the Russians in these cases, either.)

It is true, of course, that the United States was overextended militarily at the time, mainly in Iraq. Saakashvili knew that, which explains the relatively large Georgian military deployment to Iraq: It was meant to bind U.S. protection to

Georgia. But this, too, was wishful thinking. The implication that U.S. forces, had they not been tied down in Iraq, would have been deployed to fight Russia in Georgia was mistaken. There was simply no way to get enough of the militarily appropriate forces to Georgia fast enough to make a difference, especially



Mikheil Saakashvili

in a situation where the Georgians refused to reveal their intentions beforehand.

The Iraq war probably also played a role in Russian calculations, as did Washington's Kosovo policy. Protestations by the United States that Russia's invasion of Georgia was "unacceptable", while accurate in some abstract sense, rang hollow in the ears of many for whom the U.S. invasion of Iraq was similarly unacceptable and "illegal." John McCain's assertion that "in the 21st century, nations do not invade other nations" sounded like the height of absurdity. Whatever the influence on Russian thinking, the fallout from Iraq undermined U.S. attempts to communicate a fundamental reality of the war: Russia's invasion of Georgia was unacceptable according to any notion of international sovereignty or law.

What the War Changed

However the war happened, it happened, and things are no longer as they were. The war changed political realities for Georgia and the former Soviet Union generally, and it raised additional challenges for the United States. Understanding how the political environment has changed will be essential for crafting sound policy in the Obama Administration. It won't be easy even with the best of intentions, for the new political environment is complex and will likely push the United States in several different directions.

Russia's actions in Georgia reverberated throughout the region and far beyond. It is no coincidence that the leaders of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland and Ukraine joined Georgia's President at a rally in Tbilisi last August. For these countries, a resurgent, confident and bellicose Russia is frightening. While it is unlikely that Russia will try to provoke a similar war with them, it is all but certain that Russia will seek a larger role in their politics and try to push their leaders closer to Russia.

For the United States, the war means that our fearful allies in Eastern Europe may look to us for more help than we deem it wise to provide. We clearly must balance support to East European countries against the prospects of repairing the U.S.-Russia relationship. So far, the latter has garnered more attention, judging

from talk of pushing the "reset button." That fact does not comfort senior decision-makers in Warsaw or Riga.

Meanwhile, it remains unclear how the Obama Administration's pro-Georgian policy, which is so far essentially unaltered from that of the Bush Administration, squares with improving U.S.-Russia relations or solving the problems of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia's recognition of their independence has little legal significance: Only one other state, Nicaragua (as well as Hamas and Hizballah), has followed Russia's lead in recognizing them. However, it provides a pretext for Russia to increase its military presence in those regions, further integrate them into Russia, and make the division between those regions and Georgia even sharper. Any attempt to resolve the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia thus must now begin at a more difficult starting point. Even advocating a temporary international administration of these regions requires challenging Russia and asking them to give something up. There was a time when the prospect of a more democratic and federally organized Georgia held out hope for a solution—the kind of non-chauvinistic Georgian state in which those not of Georgian ethnicity could feel at home. That hope, too, has receded with the growing bitterness caused by the war.

The war, however, did not change everything, and it certainly did not touch off a "new Cold War." It was strange that fears of a new Cold War became one of the dominant media narratives in the United States during the first few weeks after the war began. Those who talked about a new Cold War apparently had very dim memories of the old one. What ideological threat did Russia pose to the West, as Soviet Communism once did? What economic dynamism were they afraid of? After 1991, what vital American interest did Russia threaten in a manner akin to Khrushchev's promise to "bury" us? The Soviet use of force in Central Europe during the Cold War—in East Germany, Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia—was fraught because of the global stakes to which it was linked in a tight bipolar world. To see the Russian use of force against Georgia, as thuggish as it was, through a Cold War lens is absurd.

Nonetheless, Russian aggression in Georgia remains a serious issue, one that should not



Getty Images

Gone but not forgotten: A final column of Russian soldiers departs Georgia, August 22, 2008.

be ignored. But it is not worth starting a new, long-term, global conflict with Russia to resolve or rectify it, particularly if the first casualty of such a conflict is the coherence of NATO. The Obama Administration needs to sort out what it wants and come to some sober understanding of what it will have to trade to get it. It cannot have a policy marked by full-throated democratization rhetoric, NATO expansion and unreconstructed pro-Georgian, pro-Ukrainian policies and still expect to keep NATO politically coherent, much less secure Russian cooperation on a range of non-trivial issues. On the other hand, it cannot create a kinder, gentler Russia simply by throwing old friends and old virtues overboard. Russia's anti-liberal, imperial and frankly nefarious intentions in its near abroad are real, as are its ongoing efforts to destabilize Georgia. Its behavior flows from historical predicates and political proclivities that cannot change quickly or easily.

What we need, then, is a more sober assessment of the ability of and cost for the United States to influence political outcomes in the region, as well as a clear understanding that Russian interests cannot be ignored without peril. The United States cannot determine its strategy toward Russia in isolation from the task

of building consensus with its European allies. American policymakers have sometimes given in to the temptation to belittle European views as feckless or intellectually fallow. But as satisfying as that may have felt, it has only helped Russia by making it more difficult for the United States and Europe to act together.

Clearly, the Obama Administration has inherited a problem: U.S. goals are undercut by the scant availability of U.S. power (defined as the ability to translate U.S. assets into influence over outcomes). That is what the war in Georgia really showed. Since it is most unlikely that the United States will return to a position of comparative dominance in Eurasia anytime soon, we must either curtail our goals, which could be dangerous and counterproductive, or devise other ways to achieve them. That will mean learning all over again how to think strategically, how to plan, how to genuinely coordinate with allies, and how to implement and monitor a set of policies that privilege nuance and patience over supposed moral clarity and instant gratification. We need a higher tolerance for mixed outcomes and a lot less zeal. And without addressing the core issues in the triangular relationship between the United States, Europe and Russia, we will never get there. 🌐