



Written by on September 30, 2008

Fanning the Flames in Georgia

Occupying the territory between the Black and Caspian Seas, the rugged Caucasus Mountains, where Europe and Asia meet, is a rough neighborhood. Home to dozens of different languages belonging to three entirely separate stocks — the Indo-European, Altaic, and Caucasian proper — and two major world religions, Christianity and Islam, the Caucasus are both a cultural crossroads and a patchwork of religious and ethnic animosities, some of them stretching back centuries. In an area where Chechens, Georgians, Armenians, Azeris, Dagestanis, Ossetians, Kalmyks, Russians, Kurds, Turks, and many other ethnicities and tribes jockey for control of land and trade routes, conflicts are frequent, often bloody, and almost incomprehensible to those foreign to the region.



One of those long-standing conflicts, the rivalry between Georgia and a small autonomous region known as South Ossetia, grabbed headlines in August as a result of a quick and decisive war between Georgia and Russia. The war began when Georgian troops, who had only days earlier participated in an international military exercise that also included roughly 1,000 Americans, invaded South Ossetia and laid siege to Tskhinvali, the regional capital. Russia, long an ally of the South Ossetians (North Ossetia is an autonomous territory or oblast within Russia), counterattacked by land, sea, and air, routing the Georgian military and occupying South Ossetia, another Georgian region with secessionist designs named Abkhazia, and a considerable swath of Georgian territory, including the important Georgian port of Poti on the Black Sea.

Western leaders, including George Bush, who have been grooming Georgia's president Mikheil Saakashvili for years, responded with self-righteous outrage, demanding a return to the status quo ante. The war was swiftly cast in the American media as a Soviet-style power play by Moscow, and dire warnings about a second Cold War were the order of the day. But as is so often the case, there is much more than meets the eye to the ongoing Georgian conflict, the latest but surely not the last conflagration in the Caucasus.

More Than Meets the Eye

The Ossetians, descendants of the Alans, a warlike tribe which participated in the invasion of the Roman Empire along with the Vandals and Goths, lived originally along the Don River but were driven south into the Caucasus in the Middle Ages during the Mongol invasion. Their language belongs to the Indo-European stock and is closely related to Iranian and Kurdish. Most Ossetians converted to Christianity, and more than 60 percent of them are Christian today, although there is also a sizable Muslim minority.



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The land where many Ossetians chose to settle so many centuries ago, Georgia, has one of the oldest cultures on Earth and was, after Armenia, the second country to adopt Christianity as its official religion. Georgia's peculiar Caucasian language has a writing system all its own and literature stretching back many centuries. Because of this, and because of her millennia-long occupancy of a large portion of the central Caucasus, Georgians have long viewed the Ossetians as modern interlopers, trespassers on hallowed Georgian territory and undeserving of independence.

By contrast with the Ossetians, the Abkhaz people of Georgia's other breakaway region have been in the Caucasus since time immemorial. Abkhazia, stretching along the northeast coast of the Black Sea, apparently converted to Christianity in the first half of the first millennium A.D., and has been by turns an independent state, a Roman conquest, a principality within the Byzantine Empire, a part of the medieval kingdom of Georgia, and an Ottoman possession. Like Georgia and Ossetia, Abkhazia became a part of the Russian Empire in the first decade of the 19th century, and like them was later absorbed into the Soviet Union as a part of the Soviet Republic of Georgia.

When the Soviet Union broke up in the early 1990s, the newly independent nation of Georgia incorporated the two former Soviet autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgian leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia lost little time asserting control over the two restive regions, launching a war in 1991 against Ossetia, which had been in open revolt for two years. Russia entered the war on the side of the Ossetians, and after more than a year of bitter fighting and several thousand deaths, a cease-fire was signed restoring to Ossetia some measure of the autonomy (but not full independence) that the Georgian parliament had revoked in 1990. Gamsakhurdia, although a genuine Georgian patriot and longtime dissident against the Soviet government, was, like many of his compatriots, unwilling to give any political recognition to Georgia's minorities. "Georgia for Georgians" was a popular slogan at the time of independence, and self-determination on the part of the reviled Ossetians was not to be contemplated.

No sooner had the Ossetian conflict cooled in the summer of 1992 than Georgia invaded Abkhazia with several thousand troops, using the kidnapping of a Georgian government minister as a pretext. The Georgians took the Abkhaz capital Sukhumi with little resistance, but were eventually repulsed and driven from Abkhazia by a large force consisting of Abkhaz militia and sympathetic minorities from all over the Caucasus — Circassians, Chechens, Cossacks, Ossetians, and others. The Abkhaz proceeded to expel or kill large numbers of Georgians, in a Balkan-style episode of "ethnic cleansing" little remarked in the West but possibly costing tens of thousands of lives, both Abkhaz and Georgian. Eduard Shevardnadze, former foreign minister of the Soviet Union under Gorbachev and sometime president of Georgia, was in Sukhumi at the time and narrowly escaped death.

From the early '90s to the present day, an uneasy status quo has held sway in both breakaway republics, with both Georgia and Russia maneuvering for control of the regions. With the ouster of President Shevardnadze in 2003 and the rise of Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgian politics have taken a decidedly pro-American tilt. Georgia sent a very large contingent of troops into Iraq — all of whom were speedily evacuated and returned to Georgia, with American help, following the outbreak of the August war — and, along with newly assertive Ukraine, applied for NATO membership.

At the same time, Georgia has become a transit center for oil from the Caspian Sea. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, completed in 2005, crosses the country en route to the Turkish coast, and the Baku-Supsa pipeline, brought online in 1999, ends at the Georgian Black Sea port of Supsa.

Given the intractable enmities bound up in the Georgian conflict, it would seem unwise for America to



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take sides or otherwise inject its influence, but that is precisely what the Bush government has chosen to do. Vowing to push for Georgian entry into NATO, the Bush administration has leveled a steady barrage of criticism against Moscow for behaving precisely as the United States — or any great power — is wont to behave in its sphere of influence. "Russia has invaded a sovereign neighboring state and threatens a democratic government elected by its people," said President Bush. "Such an action is unacceptable in the 21st century.... Russia's government must respect Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty." Given recent U.S. military interventions in Haiti and Panama (not to mention Iraq), the Bush administration's moral posturing over Russia's Georgia adventure (in which a number of Russian peacekeepers were killed before Moscow ever launched her counterattack) ring hollow, to say the least.

Nor is there any basis for defending Georgia's NATO ambitions, at least from an American point of view. NATO already commits the United States Armed Forces to defend all sorts of out-of-the-way places of no strategic value to the United States. Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, former Soviet republics all, are already members; is America ready to start World War III to defend them? Yet that is precisely what the NATO alliance will require of us, should Russia ever decide to re-annex them, and it will do the same vis-à-vis Georgia, should this trouble-prone Caucasus state ever become a member.

The Chief Motive

As events stand, the Georgia/South Ossetia War, a brief, inconsequential flare-up in a region where the United States has no business looking for trouble, has already led to near-naval confrontation between Russia and the United States in the Black Sea. At the time of this writing, Russian bombers are in the Western Hemisphere (in Venezuela) for the first time since the Cold War, and the United States is threatening further unspecified measures against Russia for her intransigence. For her part, Russia has withdrawn her military forces from most of Georgia proper, but has kept large garrisons in both breakaway regions and formally recognized the independence of both.

In spite of the triviality of the Caucasus flare-up, the powers that be in the West seem bent on antagonizing Russia. Immediately after the Georgian conflict, the Bush administration announced a deal to station missile interceptors — ostensibly to defend Europe against Iranian warheads — in Poland. Russia responded by sending long-range bombers to Venezuela and threatening to re-militarize Cuba. Defense of Georgia or even of her oil pipelines seems inadequate rationale for potential nuclear war, yet the Bush administration seems determined to turn this regional brush fire into a Cuban Missile Crisis-like international stare-down.

The chief motive for the exaggerated hullabaloo is the expansion of NATO, which continues to absorb more nations and redefine its organizational mission almost two decades after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. What was once touted as a military alliance to defend the West and its interests against the communist menace has been reinvented as an all-purpose global military force. NATO led the Western European and American intervention in the various Balkan wars in the 1990s, and NATO forces are now in command of the war in Afghanistan, a conflict far removed from Cold War animosities. "Presumed dead more often than the hero in a melodrama," U.S. Ambassador to NATO R. Nicholas Burns wrote in 2003, "the new NATO keeps on defying the pundits' predictions by adapting itself to a rapidly changing world."

Absorption of Georgia, the Ukraine, and other former Soviet republics has become a prime objective of the NATO organization, as NATO Secretary-General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer made clear in a recent speech in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. "The process of NATO enlargement will continue, with due



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caution but also with a clear purpose — to help create a stable, undivided Europe," Scheffer said. "No other country will have a veto over that process, nor will we allow our strong ties to Georgia to be broken by outside military intervention and pressure."

If the purpose of NATO is now the creation of a "stable, undivided Europe," Americans would do well to wonder why America still belongs to the organization. After all, America's military was created to protect America and her vital interests, not those of Europe, much less the remote and fractious Caucasus. Yet if the Eurocrats in charge of NATO have their way, Georgia, along with all her Caucasian broils and her blood feud with Russia, will be drawn into the alliance, an event that will make war between Washington and Moscow much more likely than it ever was during the Cold War.

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