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# Washington blunders into an unwinnable campaign against Russia

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- Contrary to the impression cultivated by Western media, the war between Russia and the West-supported Georgia was initiated by the latter. This salient fact has weighty consequences. Russia-West relations will never be the same again.
- In recent years Russia strove to launch a diplomatic process leading to a comprehensive framework for the safe-management of the “frozen conflicts”, but its efforts have been ignored. Moscow has little strategic interest in, and has long opposed, the recognition of separatists. This is also the main reason why it opposed the independence of Kosovo.
- The analytical mainstream, which holds that this is not a new cold war is mistaken. In fact we are witnessing a more dangerous confrontation. The Cold War with the Soviet Union never featured an attack on the Russian military by a Western ally in the Soviet backyard. Washington’s persistent anti-Russian stance in Europe may risk an escalation reminiscent of the 1962 Cuban crisis.
- The United States is militarily overstretched and has few realistic options in its responses to Russia. Russia on the other hand has numerous options and can inflict a lot of damage at a little cost.
- After what it considers a betrayal by the West, Moscow can indeed be expected to play hard ball. The West lacks the political and military resolve, while its strategic thinking is confused. Its credibility will suffer accordingly.
- Russia’s aims, as expressed in the “Medvedev Doctrine”, formulated at the end of August, will not be accepted as legitimate by the West. The anti-Russian campaign will, therefore, continue to rumble on.

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### **A Western ally in the Caucasus attacks Russian citizens and troops**

The brief war between Russia and Georgia, ushering in Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence, is undoubtedly the most significant geopolitical event in Europe since the end of the Cold War. Hence it is imperative that the event and its repercussions are analysed without losing sight of the key facts.

While Russia understandably was prepared for the Georgian attack and has pulled no punches in response, the fact remains that the US-financed and -trained Georgian military were the first to attack. The conflict flared up not because the allegedly expansionist and autocratic Russia invaded Georgia to grab its territory, as the Western narrative has it, but because Georgian forces attacked Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, to impose Tbilisi's writ in the independence-seeking region.

#### ***The acknowledgement of vital facts is of the essence***

Given the widespread and persistent belief in the West, doggedly perpetuated by the most influential media, think tanks and government establishments, that Russia attacked Georgian forces and subsequently invaded Georgia in order to effect a regime change in Tbilisi, these vital points cannot be stressed enough: It was Georgia, and implicitly its Western backers, who invaded Tskhinvali, the security of which had been underwritten by Russian peace-keepers. Presumably to catch the Russian leadership off guard, the Georgians chose to move in the dead of night and only hours before the opening of the Olympic Games in Beijing (a shrewd timing indeed, as even the "paranoid" Kremlin would not expect an attack during the celebration of world peace), killing a dozen or so of peace-keepers as well as a large number of civilians.

These facts and the precise sequence of events have been verified by independent researchers and can be readily ascertained by anyone who considers verification of material evidence to be of the essence.<sup>1</sup>

#### ***The West has attempted to sanitise the outrage committed by its Georgian allies***

Attempts have been made to obscure or somehow sanitise these disturbing facts ("disturbing" as such behaviour is clearly incompatible with the high democratic standards supposedly upheld by the West) by claiming that Russia's response was "brutal" and "disproportionate", or that Moscow had "set up a trap" for the hapless Georgians and their allegedly un-informed American advisers. While this may or may not have been the case, it begs the question of what kind of response would be deemed "proportionate"? Presumably one in which a humiliated Russian army would fail to dislodge the Georgian forces from Tskhinvali, thus enabling them to enforce Tbilisi's "constitutional order"? Moreover such claims do not alter the important truth that Russia was not the aggressor.

As a matter of fact, the careful dissection of events and scrutiny of their sequence – which would show the hollowness of such claims – is no longer needed. The actions of the West show clearly and unambiguously what the purpose of such disinformation was in the first place. Far from making amends by censoring President Saakashvili and calling him and his officials to account – not to mention expressing regret at the slaughter of South Ossetia civilians – the West, and especially Washington, is committed to re-arming Georgia by providing it with extensive economic, political and moral support. (Washington's claims that none of this aid goes directly to the Georgian military miss the point: aid for reconstruction and other civilian purposes simply enables a militarised state to release more resources for the military).

As might have been anticipated, the war has also been used as a justification for calls to speed up Georgia's accession to NATO. Thus President Saakashvili and his regime have been rewarded and embraced by the West as its closest democratic ally in an autocracy-riven region.

### **Russia's regional security proposals have been swept aside**

According to the standard Western narrative Russia's "expansionism" and "disrespect for international law" have been demonstrated by its recognition of the separatist

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Gordon Hahn, "Georgia's propaganda war", Johnson's Russia List, No.163, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2008.

regions. However, is it being overlooked that Moscow had long and steadfastly opposed the recognition of their independence. In the heat of the anti-Russian media campaign it has been forgotten that Russia has no interests in recognising separatist regimes, as this can set precedents threatening the very integrity of the Russian Federation.

***Moscow has no interest in promoting separatism***

Such considerations have been one of the main reasons why Russia opposed the declaration of independence of the Serbian province of Kosovo. Unfortunately, Moscow's responsible stance on Kosovo has been misinterpreted – perhaps even wilfully – and accordingly dismissed as neo-imperialist meddling in the Balkans.

In fact, in recent years Moscow had advocated an international conference to address all “frozen conflicts” in the former communist world, with a view to hammering out universally agreed guiding principles for their resolution or safe-management. As recently as May, the freshly inaugurated President Dmitri Medvedev proposed an international conference on European security, which, among other things, would deal with the issues of separatism. His initiative too was ignored and misinterpreted as an attempt to decouple Western Europe from the United States – the aim of former Soviet leaders. The West is apparently unable to grasp that the USSR no longer exists, that the Kremlin is run by a thoroughly different brand of leader and that new geo-political realities demand fresh thinking.

With all of Russia's constructive proposals coming to nought, and with Georgia (backed by Washington) charging headlong into South Ossetia, a qualitatively new stage has been reached. After years of an increasingly bitter cold war, the West's campaign against Russia appears to have crossed the Rubicon.

**A cold/shooting war with a risk of eventual nuclear escalation**

According to mainstream analytical wisdom this is not, and cannot be, a new cold war. This claim is based on a raft of considerations, such as that the Soviet Union and its ideology no longer exist and hence that there is no irreconcilable systemic conflict. It has also been pointed out that the economic and political interests of Russia and the West have converged to an extent sufficient to prevent a cold war. Admittedly, there is something otherworldly in the idea that the West would be waging a hostile campaign against a power whose, hydrocarbons' supplies keep its economies going.

***The arguments that we are not witnessing a new cold war do not stand up to scrutiny***

Unfortunately, in the light of recent events such arguments are no longer of any value. The stark fact is that, regardless of business and economics, Russia found itself in the position of having to repel an armed attack by a Western ally, an event that did not happen even during the most tense periods of the Cold War. While the strategic thinking in the most stridently anti-Russian EU/NATO capitals does, indeed, verge on being unfathomable (as these governments appear to want to bite the hand that feeds them), their anti-Russian behaviour *is* a reality. If this not cold war, what is? (Besides, as we argue below, the new cold war has ideological and geo-political roots similar to those of the Cold War between the West and the Soviet Union.)

In truth this is worse than the Cold War with the Soviet Union, which, while bitter, was conducted in line with relatively well-understood rules. Judging by the Georgian battle and its aftermath, this new cold war is shaping up as a protracted geo-political standoff, in which the behaviour of players such as Georgia and their covert backers is unpredictable. The new cold war thus has the potential of generating shooting wars at numerous flashpoints along the Russia-West frontline. As the Russian and Western geo-political plates grind against each other, further “earthquakes” of the Georgian kind are likely. (The clash over Crimea in the context of Ukraine's accession to NATO appears the most likely candidate).

The West's leader, Washington, has no intention of withdrawing from Iraq, Afghanistan and now Georgia; and it will increasingly focus on what it perceives as the actual (or potential) Russia-Iran axis. Russia and the West can also be expected to lock horns with an increased intensity over their influence in the former Soviet republics.

Taking a long look ahead, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan and Armenia will likely become the most critical countries in this context.

Worse still, with Washington apparently determined to go ahead with the installation of anti-missile defences in Central Europe, and with Moscow signalling its resolve to take appropriate counter-measures (such as targeting medium-range missiles on their locations), the present-day conflict could conceivably escalate into a replay of the 1962 Cuban crisis, this time with the West acting as the aggressor.

Yet the campaign against Russia will unlikely be openly declared and conducted without an interruption: Western electorates and taxpayers might object and start demanding explanations as to why such a campaign is being carried out. The most likely scenario is thus a low level simmering conflict punctuated by crises of varying degrees of intensity, in which Russia will continue to be cast in the role of an expansionist villain. It will be a war by stealth to which the Western public will get accustomed.

At the same time, it can be assumed that trade and business between Russia and the West will continue to develop, as the incentives for such a development remain enormous. However, investors and the business community unfortunately will have to put up with significant extra barriers, with the depth and intensity of mutual business relations falling well below the optimum.

### **The West has wasted a historic opportunity to strike an alliance with Russia**

This is the first time since June 1941 that the Russian civilians and military, though not Russia's territory proper, were attacked by an aggressor inflicting significant casualties. While a direct comparison with the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union cannot, of course, be made, the fact remains that most ordinary Russians as well as the country's elite perceive evident Western complicity in Georgian attack as a profoundly hostile act. A leading pundit has drawn the not unreasonable comparison with Al-Qaeda's terrorist attack on the United States, reminding his readers that in September 2001 President Putin was the first foreign leader to offer his condolences to his American counterpart.<sup>2</sup>

#### ***The Russians perceive the events in Georgia as an aggression and a betrayal by the West***

Unfortunately, the Western public, misled by its media and perceiving Russia as the villain of the piece, have been unable to comprehend the extent of the blow to the West's reputation in Russia. This has been a "public relations" disaster of the first order. The damage is irreparable.

At a minimum, the Russians perceive these events as the latest and most outrageous act of betrayal on the part of the West. Not only have they been ridiculed and systematically ostracised since their democracy took root, amidst the Soviet wreckage of almost two decades ago, with the genuinely popular regime of Vladimir Putin persistently demonised as "autocracy". Russian citizens (in a neighbouring state) have now been attacked by Western ally, while Russia stands falsely accused of aggression itself. The condemnation of Russian "aggression" by NATO and the European Union and the continued support for President Mikheil Saakashvili adds further insult to injury.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the West had an historic opportunity to develop a strategic partnership with Russia based on shared interests in countering terrorism, stabilising the former Soviet space as well as Afghanistan and Pakistan, checking the nuclear ambitions of Iran and the joint development of Russian and former Soviet resources. This course, however, would have necessitated accepting Russia as an equal partner with its own interests and conceding that Russia has an inalienable right to build its democracy in line with its own history and cultural traditions. Unfortunately, the West rejected this opportunity in the misguided belief that Russia, supposedly

<sup>2</sup> Vyacheslav Nikonov, "The war in the Caucasus: what is the West refusing to understand?", *Izvestia*, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2008.

“defeated” in the Cold War, had no right whatever to any such equality and must be eternally punished for its alleged sins.

Thus this is a wholly unnecessary war of choice – one that follows the precedent of Washington’s attack on Iraq. And as in Iraq, this campaign too is bound to run into the sands.

### **The West cannot win**

Even a cursory look at the correlation of forces suggests that Washington’s covert declaration of war on Russia is a folly based on the wholly unrealistic assessment of the Atlantic Alliance’s strengths and weaknesses. While NATO has been adept at enlarging its ranks, it is visibly and alarmingly failing as an effective military force, with its campaign in Afghanistan hopelessly undermanned, under-equipped and constrained by operational restrictions. The US forces, as well as the forces of its closest allies such as the UK or Canada, are overstretched.

However powerful the US military may be, it cannot take on all of Washington’s (frequently imaginary) enemies at the same time. If moving against Saddam’s Iraq was seen by some US strategists as a grave and costly error (diverting attention and resources from the fight against terrorism), the embarking on a campaign against Russia at a time when success is least likely is a much more profound miscalculation.

*The West’s assessment of the situation is fundamentally misconceived*

Having been badly stung in Georgia and having been pushed around for far too long, the Russian bear will no longer be a cuddly little toy. Moscow has countless options to make the Atlantic Alliance’s life very difficult indeed and it will use them mercilessly as and when it sees fit. The West can only minimise its pain by moderating its behaviour, which is something Moscow will try to induce. As regards the former Soviet space, the West stands little chance of a significant breakthrough in a region for centuries controlled by Moscow. On this particular chessboard the Russian grand master is facing a blundering novice.

The West is also risking Russia’s accelerated re-orientation towards China. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO) is primarily a tool for the pragmatic safe-management of the tricky Russo-Chinese relationship in the post-Soviet space. However, if both powers were sufficiently provoked the SCO could mature into a deeper economic and military alliance. Judging by the events of recent years, Washington appears bent on turning this worst spectre into reality.

It is also important to underscore the not uninteresting fact of the EU/NATO’s dependence on Russian hydrocarbons, with Russia catering for 25% of EU’s gas consumption and 40% of its gas imports (with these proportions scheduled to increase) and a third of its oil.

That dependence notwithstanding, there has been a series of bizarre proposals for supposedly retaliatory action against Russia, such as the blocking of the construction of the Nord Stream gas pipeline.<sup>3</sup> Certainly, this would reduce Gazprom’s income, but the price paid by Europe in terms of lost supplies of gas would be immeasurably higher, while Russia would simply accelerate the re-direction of exports to Asia (especially China). An alliance that engages in such fantasies can in no way be regarded as a credible force.

The West seems to be hoping that it can push Russia into international isolation. Indeed, this has been the rationale behind the EU decision to punish Moscow by suspending negotiations on a new cooperation agreement. Western capitals, however, are deluding themselves if they believe that this really hurts. Russia actually does not need much from the EU, as its exports (mainly of hydrocarbons and raw materials) to the bloc are not subject to quantitative restrictions. Equally, the Russian economy would not suffer appreciably were it to be indefinitely excluded from the WTO. As

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Anders Aslund, “The west should use economics to rein in Russia”, The Financial Times, 5<sup>th</sup> September.

regards the proposed exclusion of Russia from the G8, this would be no more than a symbolic gesture, as the G8 summits are little more than photo opportunities for Western leaders. In any case, the Group's credibility as a supervisor of the global economy continues to wane, having failed to enlist countries such as China and other BRIC countries as its members.

### **The Medvedev doctrine: the systemic roots of the war**

Western pundits and establishments continue to invoke the spectre of a "resurgent Russia" as the prime cause of the new war, depicting it as an expansionist aggressor in the Soviet mould. Actually, on proper examination it is obvious that Russia's "aggression" is no more than its insistence on independence and the rejection of the US's claim to global primacy, sins that Russia has indulged in since the installation of Putin's regime at the start of this decade. Moscow is not threatening anyone; it merely wants the West to recognise that it also has the right to promote its own interests, even if they conflict with those of some Western countries. Russia also insists on the right to arrange its domestic affairs as the elites and the population see fit.

*Russia's aim will be rejected as illegitimate by the West*

While these objectives have been articulated with growing urgency since the start of the Putin presidency in 2000, the Georgian imbroglio prompted Moscow to publish on 31<sup>st</sup> August the following five principles, which is already known as the "Medvedev Doctrine":

- Russia recognises the primacy of international law as the basis of civilised international relations.
- The world should be multi-polar, with the uni-polar system deemed to be unacceptable. Moscow rejects the notion that a single country, be it as mighty and influential as United States, can take all the decisions. Such a system is unstable and threatened by conflict.
- Russia does not seek confrontation with any other country. It has no intention of isolating itself. It wants to develop as close relations with Western Europe and the United States as possible.
- Russia reserves for itself the right to protect the lives and dignity of its citizens – wherever they may be – as well as to defend its business interests. It will respond to any aggressive acts against them.
- Finally, just like other countries, Russia reserves for itself the right to engage in friendly special relationships with countries and regions, with which it has close cultural and historical ties. (To be precise Medvedev spoke of the pursuit of "privileged interests").

While the "Medvedev Doctrine" is a succinct exposition of eminently sensible principles, reflecting the state of affairs in the real world, it is clearly also a gauntlet thrown down to Washington and its hard-line European allies. As noted above, the latter do not accept that Russia has the right to independence either in its domestic affairs as well as in foreign policy. Russia's Western opponents will be particularly suspicious about the issue of the protection of its large diaspora in the former Soviet Union and the pursuit of any "privileged relationships" in the region. Such a stance will be considered as a pretext for aggression, in the same way as, for example, Adolf Hitler dismembered Czechoslovakia. As long as the West considers Russia to be an "autocracy" not integrated into the Atlantic Alliance (which in effect means in the foreseeable future), Russia's pretensions to the pursuit of special interests will be viewed as illegitimate.

However, possibly the most serious affront is Moscow's rejection of global US primacy. Here Russia in effect advocates the return to the traditional system of balance of power (at regional levels, such as in Europe, as well as among the great powers on the global scale). Such a system governed international relations in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before the collapse of that system ushered in the First World War. Taken to its logical conclusion, this model entails the dismantling of US-led alliances (some might say, empires) such as NATO and the assertion of EU, or individual European powers, especially Germany, as sovereign international actors.

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At this point the case of those who claim that the new conflict is not, and cannot be, like the confrontation with the Soviet Union collapses. The campaign against Russia is driven by ideology and geo-political objectives as irreconcilable as those that drove the Cold War against the Soviet Union. The difference is that this time around it is the West, which guided by misconceived appraisal of reality unfortunately plays the role of the aggressor.

*The possibility of a fundamental re-appraisal in Washington is the only hope for a more optimistic scenario*

Thus the only hope for an optimistic scenario is the possibility of a fundamental re-appraisal of US policies following the presidential elections. It is just conceivable that an overstretched and war-weary United States, experiencing serious economic difficulties will modify its stance on Russia. Unfortunately, however, both presidential candidates appear to have adopted an almost identical anti-Russian stance and both have surrounded themselves with foreign policy advisors for whom “standing up to an aggressive Russia” constitutes an article of faith. Thus, those hoping for a fundamental sea change in the US’s stance on Russia should hope for the best but prepare for the worst.

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