

CITADEL UPON A HILL

The advent of the current Russo-Georgian conflict saw history being provocatively launched into an interpretation of East-West relationships. On the one hand, Russia's incursion into the breakaway Georgian province of South Ossetia, following what many analysts describe as an unfortunate military gamble on Georgia's part, was widely depicted as comparable to the Nazi march on the Sudatenland, or decades thereafter, to the brutalities of the Prague Spring of 1968.

On the other hand, the incursion appeared a logical development that had grown out of years of post-Soviet nostalgia for the revitalization of a once powerful homeland that has increasingly converged with the West's democratic enlargement into Russia's geopolitical backyard. In reality, both the EU and Russia term these volatile eastern European, multi-ethnic states an integral part of their respective Near Abroad, thus creating a grey zone of contention whose once "frozen conflicts" have now been activated and made visible to policy-makers and public alike.

It is difficult to discuss short-term outcomes in light of questions involving more localized security and peace-keeping concerns. However, a partial synthesis about prospective longer-term trends appears to be emerging that encompasses both changes in perspective and those that promise a degree of permanence. (1) A first element is that a reclamation of post-Soviet space within one Near Abroad is a rising challenge to eastern EU states with larger Russian-speaking or multi-ethnic populations. This shift nevertheless does little to remove Russia's ongoing difficulties with Chechnya in the Northern Caucasus. Moreover, it has been accompanied by Georgia's own leavetaking of the Confederation of Independent States just as it has prompted Poland to readily accept, along with the Czech Republic, a US missile shield. Contemporary events have also provoked a Ukrainian request for the same. (2)

A second element is that the Russian incursion into Georgia has initially dampened hopes for Georgia's or Ukraine's NATO membership. But it has also solidified popular and political support for the EU's Near Abroad, particularly within the Baltic States. Finland's NATO membership remains in question, and its past territorial fragmentation by Russia is more than a distant memory. However, its close ties with Estonia and accordance with EU enlargement goals may well signal an enhanced need for a clarification of the interplay between the EU and NATO as integrating mechanisms.

A third element is the increasing realization that the EU's capacity to speak with one voice has been dampened by the recent rejection of the Treaty of Lisbon as well as by a series of bilateral energy-based policies. The Russo-Georgian conflict may thus highlight

Euroskepticism. Yet it might also propel forward a necessary inter-Union dialogue about the extent which economic interests should play in international political life relative to values given the EU's emphasis on the inclusion of human rights and humanitarian goals in both its internal and external affairs. (3)

A fourth, related element lies in the complex interface between the visibly shattered people and streets of Gori and a broadening western audience. The city's medieval citadel has long looked down on the debilitating effects of more ancient wars as well as the local efforts and terrors of its native son, Joseph Stalin. Residents are reported to be as ambivalent about Stalin's legacy as they are about the still unkept promises of the Russian military, which has been instructed to leave all the while it is seen to be digging deeper into the trenches that now surround the city. (3)

A major outcome is that a number of onlookers have noted a decline in a US leverage in the grey zone while hoping for a return of a definitive influence without, however, a return of Cold War sentiments. In this regard, many may turn their attention again to the coming US presidential elections in November, 2008. President Ronald Reagan liked to characterize the US as a modern 17th century "city upon a hill," a place that was always seen as both an accompaniment to, or an enlargement of, others' democratic aspirations. It was also a place where older patterns of behavior and ideas could be modified and changed, and a new beginning undertaken. (4) Both major candidates, following the present administration, are expected to stress considerable restraint from the East along with a continuity in Western integrative ties. Though specific policies will be forthcoming, a primary outcome of the Russo-Georgian conflict may be a reinforcement of the fact that the American election constituency continues to stretch far beyond its own geographic borders, and well across the European political landscape.

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