

Georgia remains focus of Washington-Moscow tensions

One year since Russian-Georgian war

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On August 7 last year, long escalating tensions between Russia and the former Soviet republic of Georgia erupted into full-scale war. The immediate focus of the conflict was a military attempt by Georgia to win control of the Russian-backed separatist enclave of South Ossetia, which has existed as a de facto independent entity since the early 1990s.

Tensions between Georgia and South Ossetia had been running high for months, with both sides accusing each other of preparing for war. On the night of August 7-8, Georgian armed forces launched an aerial and artillery assault on the breakaway territory, including a bombardment of its capital, Tskhinvali, in which scores of civilians were killed. Georgian ground troops were ordered in to gain control of the province.

Moscow responded to the attack on South Ossetia, in which it maintained a military presence, with overwhelming force. After five days of heavy fighting, Russian forces forced out Georgian troops and entered Georgia proper. Overpowered by the counterattack, Georgian forces retreated, leaving Russian troops to briefly occupy the cities of Poti and Gori.

The massive Russian military response to the initial attack took the Georgian government by surprise, as it did the regime's backers in Washington. Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, had hoped the support his government received from the United States gave him sufficient protection to force South Ossetia back under Georgian control, and that Washington would come to his aid in the event of a Russian response.

However, faced with the prospect of a direct military confrontation between US and Russian forces, Washington refused to provide full military backing for its client. Nonetheless, amidst condemnations of Russia from politicians and the American media, the US did send a Navy detachment to Georgia's Black Sea coast.

Under the cover of humanitarian intervention, the USS Mount Whitney, flagship of the US Sixth Fleet, was moved within close proximity of the Russian Black Sea Fleet flagship, Moskva, which had been deployed to the area by the Kremlin. The message was clear: Moscow was not to go any further into Georgia or it would risk war with Washington.

Hundreds of civilians were killed or seriously injured during the conflict, and there were many reports of atrocities committed against civilians by both sides. Thousands of families remain displaced to this day.

Since the end of the war, South Ossetia and Abkhazia—another separatist Georgian territory—have declared independence, which has been recognized only by Moscow and the government of Nicaragua. Nearly 8,000 Russian armed forces remain stationed in the two territories.

Saakashvili has faced large protests in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. Opposition parties and demonstrators have condemned his handling of the conflict, as well as his authoritarian rule.

Saakashvili won office in 2003 as a result of the so-called “Rose Revolution,” a political coup sponsored by the United States with the aim of bringing to power a strongly pro-American regime that would advance Washington’s interests in the Caucasus region.

Following the liquidation of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy in 1991, the US had groomed Georgia as a client state. The government of Eduard Shevardnadze, the former foreign minister of the USSR who was Georgia’s president from 1995 until Saakashvili deposed him in 2003, sought to cultivate links with the US. But his vacillation between Moscow and Washington was unacceptable to the US. To counter Russian influence in Georgia and the surrounding region, Washington sponsored the “Rose Revolution.”

The war over South Ossetia was a direct product of US imperialism’s drive to establish hegemony over the vast energy resources of Central Asia, much of which is piped through the Caucasus en route to Europe. Saakashvili’s government has received billions of dollars in US civilian and military aid, and hundreds of US military personnel have been imbedded in the Georgian armed forces. With the encouragement of Washington, Saakashvili has also pursued Georgian membership of the US-led military alliance NATO, a move deeply opposed by Moscow.

The Russian ruling elite, for its part, is seeking to reassert its influence in what it regards as its “near abroad,” including Georgia. The increasingly assertive Russian presence in a region that had been ruled by Moscow for two centuries prior to 1991 cut across US ambitions, creating the conditions for war.

One year on from the war, nothing of substance has changed.

At the start of this month, Russia and Georgia accused each other of launching attacks across the boundary between South Ossetia and the Georgian territory controlled by Tbilisi. Moscow accused the Georgian army of firing mortars and grenades into South Ossetia, warning that Russian troops would respond with “all available forces and means.”

The government in Tbilisi accused Russia of firing on Georgian villages and moving border posts deeper into its territory. Representatives from the European Union Monitoring Mission, which has a mandate from both sides to maintain 225 monitors along the boundaries of the breakaway territories, could not confirm either set of claims.

While on the presidential campaign trail last year, Barack Obama echoed the bellicose statements of the Bush administration and his Republican rival, John McCain, condemning the war as an act of Russian aggression. However, since coming to power Obama has sought a more nuanced relationship with Moscow.

After his administration announced that it would seek to “reset” its relations with Russia, Obama visited Moscow for talks with Russian President Dmitri Medvedev and Prime Minister

Vladimir Putin. During these talks, the US president was widely reported to have acknowledged what Medvedev has called Russia's "privileged interests" in the ex-Soviet republics of Georgia and Ukraine, in exchange for Moscow's cooperation with the US-led occupation of Afghanistan and negotiations with Iran.

As several US diplomatic sources have privately said, this means that Georgian and Ukrainian applications to join NATO have been shelved, while the Kremlin permits the US Air Force to transit Russian airspace on its way to Afghanistan, a concession granted by Medvedev shortly before Obama's arrival in Moscow.

Seeing a window of opportunity, the Russian elite has sought to capitalize on its alliance with Washington's "war on terror" to aggressively pursue its interests in the Caucasus. Soon after his summit with Obama, Medvedev paid a highly provocative visit to South Ossetia—still a part of Georgia under international law—where he inspected Russia's military forces and confirmed his support for the independence of the two provinces. Russia has vetoed a proposed United Nations monitoring mission in the disputed territories, and recently accepted offers from the South Ossetian and Abkhazian governments for Russia to carry out their border patrols for the next five years.

While Washington is permitting Moscow some latitude in the Caucasus, in order to concentrate its fire on the war in Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan, it has not abandoned its aim to dominate the region and secure its oil and gas transit routes.

This was made clear this week in testimony from the administration before the US Senate Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Europe. Addressing the senators, Assistant Secretary of State for Europe and Eurasia Philip Gordon stated that the US had provided Georgia with \$1 billion in assistance since the August 2008 war.

Gordon told the committee: "Some have had questions about whether our efforts to improve our relations with Russia would negatively affect our policy toward Georgia. The vice president's answer was unequivocal—'We, the United States, stand by you on your journey to a secure, free and democratic, and once again united, Georgia.'" Gordon was quoting a statement made by Vice President Joseph Biden during his visit to Tbilisi last month.

Gordon laid out the basic position of the Obama White House regarding Georgia: "We strongly support Georgia's independence and sovereignty, and its territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. We reject the concept of spheres of influence. We support the right of Georgia and other countries to choose their own alliances. At the same time, we urge Georgia to exhibit strategic patience, to do everything possible to avoid further conflict, and to vigorously pursue political and economic reforms."

This line was reinforced in testimony from Alexander Vershbow, assistant secretary of defense for international security, who said, "We have also stressed to the Georgian government that any strategy to take on Russia is counterproductive and is doomed to failure. This will require a long-term approach and strategic restraint on Georgia's part."

In other words, Washington is willing to bide its time on Georgia, but US imperialism has vital strategic interests that are to be aggressively advanced, using Georgia as a proxy.

To help maintain this course, the White House established the US-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission in June, led by US Deputy Secretary of State James Steinberg and

the foreign minister of Georgia.

While Gordon told the committee that there is “no military option for reintegration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia,” the US continues to sponsor the Georgian military, seeking to integrate it with NATO.

Gordon reiterated the administration’s position that the US supported Georgia’s “NATO aspirations,” and, while membership in the alliance is unlikely to take place soon, Georgia’s cooperation with NATO will continue through the “Partnership for Peace” program and joint military exercises—despite objections from the Kremlin. In addition, Gordon reaffirmed Washington’s commitment to the two countries’ “longstanding bilateral military relationship” and thanked Tbilisi for sending troops to participate in the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Vershbow told the senators that the US had not “rearmed” the Georgian military since the war. This is an evasion. While the US has not provided what it classifies as “lethal military assistance,” it is “building defense institutions, assisting defense sector reform, and building the strategic and educational foundations that will facilitate necessary training, education, and rational force structure design and procurement,” according to Vershbow.

Tens of millions of dollars from the Pentagon have also been diverted through the US International Aid Agency before being funneled into the Georgian police force.

Despite the billions of dollars of aid, much of it going to the military, Georgia is far from being seen as a reliable client state. The August 2008 war was a military and political disaster for Saakashvili, and has allowed Russia to advance and consolidate its position in the breakaway territories.

Gordon gave a stark account of the situation faced by US imperialism as a result of the war: “One year after the Russian invasion, Moscow continues to strengthen its grip on South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Thousands of Russian forces remain in both regions, a significant increase from pre-war levels, and in April Russia signed an agreement with the separatists whereby Russia will guard the administrative boundaries for the next five years. South Ossetian and Abkhaz economic dependency on Russia also continues to grow.”

While Washington is playing a game of “strategic patience” in the Caucasus, it does not have infinite patience with Saakashvili. The Obama administration continues to back the Georgian president, but it is simultaneously looking to groom new forces to secure its influence in the country. During his trip to Tbilisi last month, Vice President Biden met with Georgian opposition party leaders eager to secure Washington’s blessing for their attempts to take power.

Though he praised the “remarkable economic reforms Georgia has implemented since the Rose Revolution of 2003,” Gordon warned the government in Tbilisi that it must make “political and economic reforms.” Such criticism could be amplified into calls for “regime change” should Saakashvili prove to be an impediment to Washington’s designs in the region.

A picture emerged during the Senate subcommittee hearing of Georgia as a virtual US dependency, with Washington training its military and police, meeting the cost of the country’s public obligations, such as state pensions, rebuilding its infrastructure, and

dictating its foreign policy. Almost twenty years after seceding from the Soviet Union, Georgia enjoys independence in name only—but now with Washington calling the shots rather than Moscow.

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