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## **Bush's Dangerous Game in the South Caucasus** **by Sheldon Richman**

The Parties agree that an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all and consequently they agree that, if such an armed attack occurs, each of them, in exercise of the right of individual or collective self-defence recognised by Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations, will assist the Party or Parties so attacked by taking forthwith, individually and in concert with the other Parties, such action as it deems necessary, including the use of armed force, to restore and maintain the security of the North Atlantic area.

—Article 5, North Atlantic Treaty

It's a good thing the nation of Georgia was not a member of NATO when Russian troops attacked in August. The United States might be at war with Russia today. President Bush has been vigorously pushing membership for years. Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, has been lobbying hard. Both still favor membership despite the events of August, which demonstrate the danger of having the anti-Soviet military alliance incorporate former Soviet republics and satellites even though the Soviet Union ceased to exist in 1991.

But lessons aren't always learned. While Russian troops were still in Georgia, the British foreign secretary was saying that the south Caucasus nation had been given a "route map to membership" into the treaty organization. "In practical terms, Nato is offering close cooperation with the Georgian government and the Georgian military. That means helping the Georgians build up their capacity. It means building up proper interoperability with Nato, proper joint training. It also means ensuring the structures of cooperation ... are properly geared towards eventual membership. So this is a route map to membership," David Miliband told the *Guardian*.

This should make every American nervous, not to mention every European. Does the United States want to risk a war with Russia over who governs the breakaway regions of Georgia known as South Ossetia and Abkhazia? Is the U.S. policy of humiliating Russia and depriving it of its historic sphere of influence really worth the bloodshed and destruction that could result?

That first question helps put the matter into perspective. The immediate reason for the brief war between Russia and Georgia was the small republic's latest attempt to reassert control over South Ossetia on the Russian border. South Ossetia, like the other breakaway region, Abkhazia, has wanted to be free of Georgian rule for some time. The Russian government supports that secessionist aspiration and would like to see those areas as part of Russia. The ethnic Ossetians are sympathetic to Russia and have been issued Russian passports.

There has been bad blood between the Georgians and the Ossetians. South Ossetia was an autonomous district within part of the Soviet Union, but when the collapse came, Georgia was determined to retake control. The *Washington Post's* Michael Dobbs wrote in August,

It soon became clear to me that the Ossetians viewed Georgians in much the same way that Georgians view Russians: as aggressive bullies bent on taking away their independence. I was there in March 1991, shortly after the city was occupied by Georgian militia units loyal to Zviad Gamsakhurdia, the first freely elected leader of Georgia in seven decades. One of Gamsakhurdia's first acts as Georgian president was to cancel the political autonomy that the Stalinist constitution had granted the republic's 90,000-strong Ossetian minority.... I discovered that the town [Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia] had been ransacked by Gamsakhurdia's militia. The Georgians had trashed the Ossetian national theater, decapitated the statue of an Ossetian poet and pulled down monuments to Ossetians who had fought with Soviet troops in World War II. The Ossetians were responding in kind, firing on Georgian villages and forcing Georgian residents of Tskhinvali to flee their homes.

In early August, after some discussions about autonomy, the Georgia government launched a military assault on separatist activity in Tskhinvali. No doubt Ossetians had directed fire at ethnic Georgians. This is an old grudge, and there are scores to settle on both sides. But Georgia's military response was reported to be brutal. With Russian "peacekeepers" on the scene, the government, apparently still run by Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, responded. Russian troops, however, went beyond the defense of Tskhinvali. They poured into Georgia from South Ossetia and Abkhazia and occupied important points, including Stalin's birthplace, Gori, until their slow withdrawal later in the month. They'd gotten within 25 miles of Georgia's capital, Tbilisi.

### **Bush's response to the crisis**

The Bush administration ruled out a U.S. military response, but sent American troops to deliver humanitarian aid. "These regions are a part of Georgia," Bush said of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, "and the international community has repeatedly made clear that they will remain so. There's no room for debate on this matter."

Who is this “international community” and why should it have any say, much less the last word — “There’s no room for debate on this matter” — on who governs the Ossetians and Abkhazians?

At the Veterans of Foreign Wars convention, Bush elaborated:

The United States of America will continue to support Georgia’s democracy. Our military will continue to provide needed humanitarian aid to the Georgian people. South Ossetia and Abkhazia are part of Georgia. And the United States will work with our allies to ensure Georgia’s independence and territorial integrity.

The contradiction is plain. Why Georgian democracy, independence, and territorial integrity, but not South Ossetian and Abkhazian democracy, independence, and territorial integrity? Majorities in both areas have voted for independence. Unfortunately, the “international community” refuses to recognize those referenda as legitimate.

When it comes to separatist movements, the American and Russian governments have no principles whatever. They take whichever side advances their political interests at the moment. When ethnic Albanians in Kosovo sought to break from Yugoslavia, the Russians sided with ally Serbia and opposed independence, but the United States backed the separatists and unleashed its bombers. The Bush administration recently recognized Kosovo’s independence in defiance of Russia’s opposition. Yet when the Ossetians and Abkhazians want to be free of Georgia, the big-power roles are reversed.

If you hold your breath waiting for a sign of integrity from any government, you will turn blue.

### **NATO’s role in the crisis**

To fully understand the recent conflict, a fuller context must be kept in mind. Since the implosion of the Soviet Union, the U.S. government, under both major parties, has followed policies that could have no other effect than to humiliate Russia. These policies include extension of NATO membership to former Warsaw Pact nations in Eastern Europe and the Balkan states. It includes placing anti-missile batteries in Poland. It includes a military buildup in Georgia, with money, arms, and U.S. advisors. It includes cultivation of friendship with authoritarian regimes in the former Soviet republics in central Asia. And, very important, it includes moving Caspian Sea oil westward through Azerbaijan and Georgia, bypassing Russia, which once controlled those resources.

All this has sent Russia a threatening signal of encirclement and marginalization. At first Russia had little recourse because it was in bad economic shape. But with the rise in energy

prices, Russia, a major oil supplier to Europe, is flush with money and military power. It does not plan to take U.S. sand-kicking with equanimity.

None of this is meant to sanction Russia's brutality in Georgia or its cynical exploitation of the secessionist movements in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The point is only that the Bush administration is playing a dangerous game. Its ham-handed attempt to manipulate Russia's environs in its own interest has gotten the same reception that a similar Russian effort in the Western Hemisphere would have gotten from the U.S. government.

When will American presidents learn that George Washington was right?

The great rule of conduct for us, in regard to foreign nations, is in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little political connection as possible....

Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none, or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities.

Add "Asia" to that second sentence, and Washington's advice is brought up to date.

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