

The Washington Times

OP-ED

Confronting the aggression

By David L. Phillips

August 14, 2008

Russia's provocations of Georgia were calculated to create a conflict that would advance Russia's goals: undermine Georgia's pro-Western President Mikhail Saakashvili, scuttle Georgia's NATO prospects and control energy exports from the Caspian Sea to Western markets. Now Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin wants Mr. Saakashvili to stand trial for war crimes. Rather than settling scores, the first order of business is to provide for Georgia's war victims.

Georgia's crisis was driven as much by personalities as policy differences. Mr. Putin detested Mr. Saakashvili from the start.

Immediately following the 2003 Rose Revolution, Mr. Putin launched a propaganda and harassment campaign that sought to destabilize Georgia and delegitimize Mr. Saakashvili. To this end, Russia imposed sanctions suspending imports of Georgian wine, water, fruits and vegetables. Russia also cut off transport links, suspended postal service, and expelled thousands of ethnic Georgians working as labor migrants. Russia undermined Georgia's sovereignty by inciting separatists from Abkhazia and South Ossetia and providing diplomatic and military support.

Mr. Putin was incensed by Mr. Saakashvili's relentless pursuit of NATO membership. Not only does Russia view NATO as an existential threat.

It also fears that membership for Georgia and Ukraine would advance NATO's goal of encirclement and block Russia's neo-imperialist ambitions.

After NATO endorsed Georgia's eventual membership at its Bucharest Summit in April, Russia responded by withdrawing from the ban on military assistance to Abkhazia and South Ossetia imposed by the Commonwealth of Independent States. Russia established legal connections between its ministries and their counterparts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russian war planes repeatedly violated Georgian air space, shooting down an unarmed Georgian surveillance drone over Abkhazia. Russia also deployed elite paratroopers masquerading as peacekeepers but armed with offensive weapons.

The recent explosion of violence in South Ossetia followed a further series of provocations. No doubt Mr. Putin was pleased that Mr.

Saakashvili fell into the trap set by Russia. Mr. Saakashvili miscalculated by ordering Georgia's armed forces into South Ossetia, thus giving Russia the pretext for its assault.

With Georgia in ruins, today's top priority is providing large-scale humanitarian relief to injured, traumatized and displaced civilians victimized by the conflict. The International Committee of the Red Cross must have immediate and unfettered access in order to evaluate Russia's charges of ethnic cleansing and Georgia's claims of widespread summary executions.

International monitors - probably from European countries - will be required to ensure that Russia abides by the cease-fire, which it has already violated by burning Georgian villages to create a buffer zone around South Ossetia. Russian troops that invaded Georgia during the conflict should be withdrawn and international peacekeepers, including troops from European countries, deployed to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. If Russia blocks the United Nations Security Council, the United States and Europe should reaffirm Georgia's territorial integrity in order to pre-empt any Russian move to annex Abkhazia and South Ossetia or organize a sham referendum.

The passions of Abkhaz and South Ossetians were inflamed by recent events. They will not countenance talks with Tbilisi anytime soon.

After a cooling-off period, however, it may be possible to address the protracted conflicts. In 1992-93, Abkhaz and South Ossetians sought Russia's protection to assuage their fears of aggression by Georgia. The Abkhaz especially, however, have a long history of resisting Russian domination. They do not want to trade one overlord for another. Abkhaz I met last month in Sukhumi could be persuaded that their interests are better served in a loose Georgian confederation than by being absorbed by Russia. Talks and an agreement may yet be possible.

Tbilisi should reach out directly to the secessionist leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia with an offer for self-rule. For example, constitutional reform could redefine Georgia as a confederal union, including meaningful measures to protect and promote group and minority rights.

Concurrent steps are needed to consolidate Georgia's democracy.

Reforms should include limitations on executive power and measures to institutionalize accountability at all levels of government including greater parliamentary debate and public input into reform measures.

Georgians displaced in the 1990s may have a legal right to go home, but their return is unrealistic. Instead of keeping them in limbo, Georgia should resettle them. The international community can help by providing large-scale humanitarian assistance and compensation for properties lost or destroyed. In addition, donors should develop a Marshall Plan for relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction across Georgia.

A senior European official told me that supporting Georgia was a "righteous cause, but the Georgians are not always helpful." Georgia should focus on international assistance to preserve and rebuild the country. However, joining NATO has become a distant dream.

The fact is that most European countries were never keen on Georgia joining the alliance. Outside Poland and the Baltic States, the United States was the only country to enthusiastically support a membership action plan for Georgia.

The reluctance of some NATO members to embrace Georgia was confirmed by the recent crisis. After an early statement condemning Russia's aggression, the North Atlantic Council met this week and called on Russia to respect Georgia's territorial integrity. But there was little support beyond words, demonstrating that when it comes to Article 5 - the clause requiring the Alliance to defend its members in case of attack - NATO has little appetite for deepening ties with Georgia under the current circumstances. Mr. Saakashvili may have staked his presidency on NATO membership, but Georgia will have to wait.

Military defeat will be a bitter pill to swallow. Georgians are united today, but an increasing number will be asking how Georgia got into this mess. National reconciliation - especially with Abkhazia and South Ossetia - will require a different style of leadership focusing on what is possible rather than maximalist outcomes.

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