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Mad at the U.S., but Still Tied to It

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*After President Bush said today that he would begin a humanitarian aid mission to Georgia and send Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to try to resolve the crisis in the Caucasus, Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili quickly followed up by saying the U.S. was going to have a military presence at his country's ports. The Pentagon was equally quick to disavow that claim. **Lincoln A. Mitchell, a professor at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University and a specialist on Georgia, discusses the background of the strains and misunderstandings in the close U.S.-Georgia relationship. Professor Mitchell last visited the country in June and is the author of the forthcoming book, "Uncertain Democracy: U.S. Foreign Policy and Georgia's Rose Revolution."***

As we begin to examine the likely fallout of the conflict between Russia and Georgia, we should not overlook the issue of potentially changing views of the U.S. not only in Georgia, but in other small post-Soviet countries, most notably the Baltics, which, like Georgia, had until very recently viewed the U.S. and Europe as their protection against Russian aggression.

The alliance between Georgia and the U.S. has had a personal nature to it, given the friendship between Presidents Bush and Saakashvili forged by Georgian support for the war in Iraq, and the welcoming crowds for President Bush in Tbilisi and late nights of khachapuri (Georgia's national food) and Georgian folk dancing. It is probably true that the friendship between the two presidents has influenced U.S. policy in Georgia and Georgian views toward the U.S., raising expectations on both sides, and not always for the better.

But the relationship encompasses much more than this. Georgia and the U.S. have been allies since before either President Bush or Saakashvili came to power. Initially, it was during the tenures of President Clinton and the former Soviet foreign minister turned Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze when this relationship was built. At that time, Georgia was important to the U.S. as a transit corridor and received more than its share of attention because of the prominence of Shevardnadze on the global stage. By the mid-1990s, Georgia was viewed in the U.S. as a hope for democracy in the region, not for the last time, but those hopes quickly faded as Shevardnadze's government grew more corrupt and kleptocratic before finally collapsing in 2003.

For its part, Georgia needed a powerful friend to protect it against Russia, but the relationship has developed in more ways than that. During the Rose Revolution, for example, demonstrators waved American flags as they called for more democracy in their country. Anti-Russian feeling, although far from unambiguous, is strong in Georgia, and the U.S. is viewed not only as a source of security and balance but also as a relief from the constant Russian presence.

Georgian views toward the U.S., however, will almost certainly begin to change after this conflict. In fact, they already have begun to change. In the last year, during and immediately after the Georgian government's crackdown on peaceful demonstrations in the center of Tbilisi the U.S. strongly defended Saakashvili's

government and papered over the ample problems in the two national elections held in Georgia in 2008. Many Georgians were upset by this, believing that the U.S. supported Saakashvili more than democracy.

This led to a few demonstrations at the American embassy. Politicians whom I have known for years in Georgia began, in private discussions, to become more critical and raise questions about what they could expect from the U.S. The famous road from the airport to downtown Tbilisi named after President Bush had an egg splattered across the giant photo of his face when I was last there in June. Support for the U.S., and the view that Georgia's future lay with the West, began to weaken, but was still held by a majority.

With the recent events, Georgians have been forced to confront some harsh realities about the ability and willingness of the U.S. to protect them. It was striking to hear Georgia's president comment that while Senator McCain's words that "we are all Georgians now" were "cheering," now is the time for "deeds not words." And Saakashvili blamed the West for not intervening more forcefully. "Frankly, my people feel let down by the West," he said.

There will undoubtedly be an undercurrent of anger at the United States in Georgia, but this will be tempered because Georgia does not have a lot of good options on this question. Georgia still confronts the choice of aligning itself with the West and risking Russia's ire, or leaning toward Russia and risking Georgia's future. It is extremely unlikely that recent Russian activity in the region will make Georgia like Russia more, or fear it less. It is equally unlikely that Russia will walk away from Georgia, so Georgia will continue to need some outside power to offer them some assistance and protection, at least to some extent.

Nonetheless, will a tempering of Georgia's enthusiasm for the U.S. and of American enthusiasm for Georgia be good for both countries and allow a more realistic policy rather than one based the Georgian president's ability to impress President Bush with speeches, buzzwords and good Georgian food?