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The pawn of great powers: The East–West competition for Caucasia

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ABSTRACT

My argument in this paper is that Caucasia has become an area of contention, like much of post-Soviet Eurasia, between the East and West, particularly between Russia's Caucasian policy, which revolves around its long-term interest in re-establishing its regional hegemony in the so-called Near Abroad, and the United States' grander ambition for global hegemony. The South Caucasus has provided the first opportunity for Russia to demonstrate its will to prevent the United States, NATO, and the European Community from penetrating the southern tier of the former USSR. Russia's move is not a program of imperial control, but rather a determined effort to contain or even roll back the influence of other powers, most importantly, the United States and NATO in the regions closest to Russia's borders. The "southern tier" of the former Soviet Union – Caucasia and Central Asia – contains the most vulnerable regions in which other powers might intervene, and it is here where Russia will test its new policies. Up until August 2008 it used primarily "soft power" vigorously to prevent other powers from increasing their influence in the region. In August it demonstrated it was prepared, when pushed, to use "hard power." The Russo–Georgian War was a watershed in East–West relations with a more assertive Russia willing to take on its more powerful competitors.

Caucasia has been for Russians and Westerners a place marked by the exotic and savage, majestic beauty and legendary heroes, attractive because of its differences, dangers, and distance from metropolitan centers. For centuries Russians travelling in Caucasia have depicted that mountainous land as a mysterious, even enchanted, place where the locals are savage and noble, the terrain majestic and wild, and the rivers always turbulent. Exoticizing Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan even today has its dangerous effects in the occasional Russian demonization of Caucasians as bandits, terrorists, and cheats. Caucasia's most famous son, after all, was one of the greatest tyrants of the twentieth century, a global menace to Western values and its political and military hegemony – Joseph Stalin. But for Russians, and it turns out the West as well, the distances of the past have shrunk, and the allure of the exotic has largely been replaced by strategic concerns and the mundane politics of oil and gas. Caucasia has become a contested terrain, not only among the indigenous peoples, but also between its former imperial overlord, Russia, and ambitious new players, the United States, the European Union, and NATO. And an obscure conflict in a hitherto unknown place, South Ossetia, has led to a major rupture between the West and the revived "East."

For many in the Kremlin the White House appears to have an intense interest in Caucasia inexplicable except as a program of isolating and containing a resurgent Russia, while for many in the West Russia's heavy-handed interventions into Caucasian affairs smell like old-fashioned imperialism. The moves and countermoves of the two sides are discursively constructed (from the Russian

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side) as protecting besieged minorities from nationalist aggressors, and (from the Western side) as protecting brave little democracies or independent states from the primordial expansionism of a big northern neighbor. For political actors in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, the pull from North and West presents both opportunities and dangers now that they have become involved in global politics.

Until August 7, 2008, Russia could be described as a defeated power, a shrunken giant, with all the attendant emotions of humiliation, resentment, anxiety, and even revenge. But in the last decade, particularly since Vladimir Putin ascended to the presidency and world oil prices enriched the Russian elite and state, despondency, discontent, and despair gave way to greater confidence and ambitions for a return to a place in the sun – if not globally, at least in the countries closer to home. So far that new confidence has not been dimmed with the fall in world oil prices or the onset of the global crisis of capitalism. With the Baltic countries and most of East Central Europe in NATO, Ukraine flirting with membership, and American troops in several Central Asian countries, one of the last contested frontiers for Moscow is the Caucasian, a borderland that for hundreds of years has proven to be the most volatile and unstable of Russia's peripheries. At the moment there are an estimated 250,000 Russian troops stationed in the North Caucasus, with 70,000 in Chechnya alone. And Russian presence south of the mountains has increased to over 7000 troops. Looking from the mountains southward Moscow saw an opportunity that here at least it might test whether its limited resources can make a difference in the regional balance of power. The Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, gave the Kremlin its chance to change the nature of the post-Soviet world.

Let's ask first: what does Russia want in Caucasia? Are its ambitions legitimate and limited, or does it intend to re-establish hegemony, even empire, over the region it lost a decade and a half ago? Then, let's consider what the republics in South Caucasia want and how that might conform or conflict with Russian interests and aspirations. As we explore these questions, it is important to keep in mind that there are three different levels on which Russian–Caucasian relations operate. The most obvious are the local (Russians, Georgians, Abkhazians, Ossetians; Russia and Caucasia) and the global (the West versus Russia). But for Russia especially, there is a third level, the regional (Russia and the Near Abroad), and what Moscow does or does not do in Caucasia signals to other states in the former Soviet space what they might or might not do elsewhere.

My argument in this paper is that Russia's Caucasian policy revolves around its long-term interest in re-establishing its **regional hegemony** in the so-called Near Abroad, and the South Caucasus has provided the first opportunity to demonstrate its will. This is not a program of imperial control, however, but rather a determined effort to contain or even roll back the influence of other powers, most importantly, the United States and NATO in the regions closest to Russia's borders. The "southern tier" of the former Soviet Union – Caucasia and Central Asia – contains the most vulnerable regions in which other powers might intervene, and it is here where Russia will test its new policies. Up until August 2008 it used primarily "soft power" vigorously to prevent other powers from increasing their influence in the region. In August it demonstrated it was prepared, when pushed, to use "hard power."

1. Russia and Caucasia

Historians dispute the causes of imperial expansion, and Russia's extraordinary growth over six centuries has been explained by everything from the base interests of free-booters and fur traders to a mystical "urge to the sea" and Orthodox or Communist Messianism. The Caucasus historically was an insecure frontier that presented dangers from mountaineers to Russians settling the steppe and opportunities to take on and weaken Iran and Turkey. South Caucasia later became attractive as a "colony" to be exploited economically, an emporium for trading with the Middle East, and still later as a source of oil and gas. But in the post-Soviet decades, South Caucasia has been primarily a strategic concern for Moscow – in descending order of importance: as defense for the North Caucasus; as leverage to manage the newly independent South Caucasian states; and a bridge to deal with Iran, Turkey, and the Arab world.

The historic connections between Russia and Caucasia are indisputable and go back at least to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Actual imperial control dates from the early nineteenth century in the South Caucasus and the mid-nineteenth in the North Caucasus. But equally indisputable has been the repeated resistance, sometimes overt and armed, at other times passive, to the imposition of imperial rule. The history is contested: for nationalists, it is the tale of brave mountaineers holding off the foreigners from the North, resisting their alien culture, until they finally achieved independence at the beginning of the 1990s; for Russians it is the story of a civilizing wind from beyond the mountains that opened the way for greater peace and prosperity, enlightenment along European lines, and defense against the predatory power of Iran and Turkey, only to be rejected by the ungrateful beneficiaries. A more balanced historical account would credit Russia with both pacification and development as well as fundamentally shaping and limiting local evolution and expression. The seventy years of Soviet power transformed Caucasia more rapidly and radically than in the several previous centuries and consolidated ethnonational communities in more homogeneous territories that were given the attributes of statehood, if not sovereignty. Transnational ties with Russia, Russian culture and practices, and other Soviet peoples stamped Caucasia indelibly, no matter what claims post-Soviet nationalists make about the recovery of an ancient, authentic national culture that miraculously remained unadulterated through the twentieth century.[1]

Putin's repeated references to the "historic unity of people" in the former Soviet Union may be more ideological wishful thinking than fact, but it at least speaks to their shared experience that created affinities and some

[1] This is essentially the argument of Suny (1993).

affection, as well as distrust and hostility, among the post-Soviet nations. Many Georgians and Azerbaijanis have contempt for Russia and its rulers and see their problems through a dark glass of Russian intrigue, but hundreds of thousands of their countrymen and women migrate to Petersburg, Moscow, and other Russian cities to make a living that they cannot secure at home. And in Russia they find familiar ways of behaving and linguistic and cultural links that many regret were torn apart. The medium of a shared language, Russian, makes it possible to do business in a space more vast than their economically challenged homelands. But a phrase like "historic unity" hardly allows room for the hostilities of the host country for these often unwelcome guests. In Russia over the last fifteen years "Caucasian" has taken on the sinister symbolic sense of dangerous criminals, foreign exploiters of innocent, naïve Russians, and malicious manipulators of Slavic goodwill. For many Russians, distinctions between the rebellious Chechens, Georgian petty merchants, Russophile Armenians, and Muslim Azerbaijanis have been blurred into a common epithet of *litsa kavkazskoi natsional'nosti* (people of Caucasian nationalities).

In the political imaginary of Russia's elite the Caucasian frontier is the most volatile and vulnerable borderland. Putin's own rise to power and popularity were intimately linked to his swaggering confidence and personal vindictiveness in dealing with the Chechens. Primary among Russia's ambitions is full undisputed control of the North Caucasus, which is part of its sovereign territory. Yet Moscow's hold over the North Caucasus is contested. Although Russia's hold on the North Caucasus is not challenged by the international community, there is much dismay, even horror, at the brutal manner in which Russians both stimulated unintentionally the forces of separatism in Chechnya in the mid-1990s and then used clumsy but overwhelming military force to suppress the rebels (Tishkov, 2004). The incompetence, hamfistedness, and brutality of the Russian military campaigns in Chechnya revive in Western minds the most somber images of Soviet times and reinforce the view that Russia is fundamentally imperialist. Moreover, the Kremlin rules the region through local satraps, many of them without a popular base, and in the case of Chechnya maintaining power through applied terror.

Post-Soviet Russia's policies toward the South Caucasus, and the Near Abroad more generally, went through several distinct phases from the fall of the USSR to the present.[2] In its first year (1991–1992) the Yeltsin government pursued what might be called a "policy of neglect," working largely through the hastily created Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The Russian policy elite was divided as the country's leaders scurried to find a stable identity and sense of interests in the new world, and its policies toward the Near Abroad were confused and contradictory. Russia continued to subsidize trade among the states of the former Soviet Union, and at the same time deliberately rejected the Soviet past and any resort to fixed ideology. In the last years of the Soviet Union and the first years of the new Russian Federation, Russians were drawn into the Abkhaz, Ossetian, and Karabakh conflicts, in part simply as their soldiers were caught up in the local conflicts, in part as pawns in the plans of contending players in the Russian elite. Non-Georgians in Georgia preferred rule by Russia to remaining within the new, rabidly nationalist Georgian republic. Attempts by the Georgians under its first president Zviad Gamsakhurdia to end the autonomy of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and create a unitary "Georgia for the Georgians" led to ethnic and civil war, his own defeat and death, and the de facto separation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Russia supported the non-Georgians and eventually negotiated ceasefire agreements separating the combatants. For the last decade and a half Russian soldiers have ostensibly acted as peacekeepers, protecting the fragile de facto independence of the regions while their presence has kept the conflicts in Georgia frozen.

From January 1993 to June 1996, Russian policymakers more clearly articulated a sense that the Near Abroad was a "sphere of vital Russian interests" and saw the CIS border as Russia's security border that it had the right to defend. In late 1994 and early 1995, Yeltsin and his foreign minister, Andrei Kozyrev, publicly declared their support for the reintegration of the countries of the former Soviet Union, first economically, but then militarily and perhaps even politically. What might have been called the "Yeltsin doctrine" could be interpreted as recognition of the independence and sovereignty of the existing states (along with a paramount role for Russia in the southern tier), an explicit claim for dominance in the realm of security and, perhaps, a special role in protecting Russians and other minorities. Although Russia stated repeatedly that it did not wish the dismemberment of the South Caucasian republics, which could set "a most dangerous precedent" and lead to similar struggles in Russia, it was concerned about the bleeding over of unresolved ethnic conflicts into Russia. Although Yeltsin did not have plans to annex the states of South Caucasia and Central Asia, he promoted a greater military and political presence, even hinting that the United Nations should give Russia exclusive rights as gendarme in the area. He also underscored the desire for Russian partnership in the exploitation and development of the natural resources of the region, most important, the offshore oil in Azerbaijan. Moscow repeatedly claimed the right to protect rail lines in the South Caucasus, for the major link from Russia to Armenia passes through Abkhazia and Georgia, and the line to Baku passes through Chechnya.

This shift toward a more assertive foreign policy remained largely at the level of rhetoric. Russia was still too weak to be taken very seriously by the United States and the West. Closer to home, Russian hopes for fuller integration of the CIS (in April 1996 the Belorus–Russia Union Treaty was signed) met with resistance from most of the CIS countries. Georgia reluctantly rejoined the CIS under Russian pressure, as President Edvard Shevardnadze, known to his compatriots as *tetri melia* (the white fox), tried repeatedly and futilely to convince the Russians to push for a settlement of the conflicts in his country. But agreement between Abkhazia and South Ossetia, on the

[2] Much of what follows is indebted to the fine review of Russian policies in Ria Laenen's dissertation, "Russia's 'Near Abroad' Policy and its Compatriots (1991–2001): A Former Empire in search of a New Identity" (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, 2008).

one hand, and Georgia on the other proved impossible, and the only force preventing all out warfare was Russian. The Georgians were ready to concede a degree of autonomy to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, but these unrecognized "states" favored full independence or integration into Russia. Moscow prudently stopped short of annexing the regions or recognizing their independence. The status quo so unsatisfactory to Georgia, and even Abkhazia and South Ossetia, was an acceptable alternative to the other choices – open conflict, annexation, or independence – for the Russians.

From roughly June 1996 to the emergence of President Putin, Russia's policies took on what Ria Laenen characterizes as "pragmatic hegemony"(Laenen, 2008). Rhetorically Russia maintained that it was a "Great Power" (*Velikaia derzhava*) and promoted its *derzhavnost'* (Great Power status). But this muscle-flexing remained largely performative until roughly the second Putin term (2004–2008). More practically, Moscow gave up its program of reintegrating the CIS integration and promoted bilateral relations with the former Soviet states. At the same time Russia vigorously pursued integration into the globalized capitalist economy, raised prices for its oil to world market levels, and attempted to be accepted as a major economic player. All through these years, and into the early twenty-first century, Russians complained about the expansion of NATO into East Central Europe and the Baltic countries but were unable to do much about it. Frustrated by the West's lack of consultation with Russia over important foreign policy issues and angered by the Americans' unilateral abrogation of the ABM Treaty, Europe and the USA's recognition of the independence of Kosovo, they were resistant to Western efforts at "democratization." Moscow was very concerned about the so-called "colored revolutions" (Serbia, 2000; Georgia, 2003; Ukraine, 2004; and Kyrgyzstan, 2005), which they interpreted as manipulated by outside forces and aimed against Russia.

The sense that Russia was not being given its due, that it was not adequately respected by its European and American "partners" was reflected in President Putin's February 10, 2007 speech at the Munich Conference on Security Policy. Later referred to as an introduction to a new Cold War, the speech outlined in very frank terms Putin's opposition to what he believed was the USA's attempt to create a "unipolar world" with one great superpower, "one center of authority, one center of force, one center of decision-making." He rejected the notion that force could be used if sanctioned by NATO or the European Union and proposed instead that the only legitimation for armed force against another state was through the United Nations. He bristled at the idea that Russia could be lectured on democracy or that its internal affairs should be the concern of other states and called for greater respect for Russia's counsel.

> Russia is a country with a history that spans more than a thousand years and has practically always used the privilege to carry out an independent foreign policy. We are not going to change this tradition today. At the same time, we are well aware of how the world has changed and we have a realistic sense of our own opportunities and potential. And of course we would like to interact with responsible and independent partners with whom we could work together in constructing a fair and democratic world order that would ensure security and prosperity not only for a select few, but for all.[3]

Russia's new wealth, as well as the American overextension of its capabilities, enabled the Putin administration to embark on a more assertive policy independent of what the United States might prefer. Putin's policies were generally statist, realist, and nationalist, and in his view neither imperialist nor a reversion to Soviet expansionism. He even chided Lenin for his lack of concern for Russia and lack of realism: "Lenin said he didn't care about Russia. What was important for him was achieving a world socialist system. The Russian people didn't expect this. They were deceived…. Russia today has no intention of repeating the tsarist experience or what happened in Soviet times … I hope no missionary ideas get into state policy. We should be true to ourselves, respectful of others, and good partners"(Steele, 2007). His international policy was the corollary of his domestic policy: a stronger state, preservation of the present internal distribution of power, economic prosperity (though with too little investment in the future), stability, and continuity. Whether one calls the system "bureaucratic authoritarianism" (Grigorii Iavlinskii) or "instrumental democracy" (Irina Khakamada) or "sovereign democracy" (Vladislav Surkov) – I prefer the term "façade democracy" – Putin's internal and external policies are about Russia going its own way. As Jonathan Steele put it, Putin

> has created the foundation for a political and social system that does not require western fear or favour to survive. He is pursuing a foreign policy that is not dominated by what Washington or indeed Europe expects him to do. Russia is neither competing with the west nor confronting it – nor, at the other extreme, is it desperately trying to join the western club. It prefers its relations with the west to be good rather than bad, but if the west wants a new cold war, Russia will choose either to ignore it or respond in kind (Steele, 2007).

Putin's call for multipolarity can justifiably be seen as a reversion to a Yalta-type spheres of influence view of the world.

Toward the South Caucasus, Russian leaders in the Putin–Medvedev years, in contrast to the early Yeltsin years, think and act as classic realists: they use their relatively greater economic and military power to re-establish Russia's uncontested hegemony in the region and prevent any other international actor – the United States, Europe, NATO, Iran, or Turkey – from having significant influence. Russian leaders feel particularly aggrieved at Georgia's aim to join NATO and Azerbaijan's sometime flirtation with the alliance. Its only ally in the south, Armenia, has also at times tried to play the Western or American card against the Russian, but its strategic and energy dependence have

[3] Vladimir Putin, "Speech at the 43rd Munich Conference on Security Policy," <http://www.securityconference.de/konferenzen/rede.php?sprache=en&id=179>.

compelled it to align itself ever more closely with Russia. While some Western analysts believe that Russia's increasingly authoritarian government opposes the emergence of democratic states on its borders, as realists the Kremlin decision-makers are prepared to do business with any government as long as it is "on their side" and does not threaten Russian interests. Putin and Medvedev have no qualms about dealing with democracies in Europe or the Baltic region or with the repressive regime in Uzbekistan, although like other great powers they prefer governments that are willing to adjust to their own vision of security.

2. Enter, the United States

Russian realism contrasts with – and had to live with – the "liberal internationalism" (and often "liberal interventionism") of the American government for the last two decades. While Russia aims for a regional hegemony in the so-called "Near Abroad," the United States, most forcefully under the George W. Bush administration, has promoted its own ambitions for **global hegemony** and the active prevention of any rival hegemon from rising and establishing its influence over some region. While the Bush policies had their roots in earlier administrations, both Democratic and Republican, and can be traced back at least to the early years of the Cold war, its neo-conservative version that combined liberal internationalist rhetoric with realist exercises of force escalated into military interventions far from home without the kinds of direct threats to American security evident in earlier years. American foreign policy has long been highly ideological, driven by a vision of the world in which security can only be achieved by creating a benign world of democratic, capitalist states with Western values of tolerance, civil rights, and economic individualism. American leaders believe that the United States has a special positive role to play in world affairs that privileges its freedom of action, for American interests are seen to be magically consonant with those of other peace-loving states. In this vision Russia is constructed as materialistic, venal, self-interested, anti-democratic, naturally authoritarian and expansionist – an international mischief maker. Even when its forces are attacked, as in the recent Russo–Georgian war, and Russia might have been seen as the victim of Georgian aggression, it was portrayed in much of the American media as the perpetrator, while Georgia, the perpetrator, was portrayed as the victim. A regrettable corollary to this construction is that Russia has perceived democratization as an American-inspired project, self-interested and directed against Russia.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, the United States proposed a "New World Order" in which new democratic states, along with the old developed democracies, would preserve peace and prevent war. American ambitions included the export of capitalism and democracy to all parts of the globe, including most immediately the former Communist states. With no serious military rival in the world, the United States now dominated the international environment. The preponderance of US power and the American rejection of the old notion of spheres of influence essentially opened the way to the possibility of American global hegemony. Nine Eleven accelerated the American claims to security interests anywhere and everywhere on the planet – and even in outer space.

While Russian leaders insist that Western leaders had promised Gorbachev that there would be no expansion of NATO beyond Germany, that promise was either denied or soon forgotten by the West, and a central thrust of American policy was aimed at the extension of NATO into Eastern Europe, the Baltic countries, Ukraine, and Georgia. All this while the US was deeply committed militarily in Iraq, Afghanistan, and (through its surrogate, Ethiopia) in Somalia, occasionally threatening war on Iran and Syria, and supporting Israel in its war against Hezbollah in Lebanon and its continued occupation of Palestinian territories. Truly an ambitious global policy, only possible because of the military weakness of other powers (the US possesses a larger military than all other countries in the world combined) and the strength of the American economy (US economy before the current crash was larger than the next three economies combined Japan, Germany, China), America is in fact the one superpower (some would say, the only Great Power) in what is effectively a unipolar world. The USA generates more than a quarter of the world's GDP, has a defense budget ten times either of its nearest rivals (Britain and China), with Russia spending a mere 7 percent of what the United States spends on defense. The United States, in the phrase of Barry Posen, has "command of the commons," effective military primacy in land, sea, air, and space (Posen, 2003).

But unipolarity has its problems. The unipower may be the only state that can project its power globally, that is unconstrained by the desires of others, but it is not a universal empire (controlling every aspect of the domestic and foreign policy of every other country if it so desires) nor actually a global hegemon (controlling foreign policies of other states). Those theorists who expected that unipolarity would lead to peace must now be very disappointed, for in the last two decades in which the USA has achieved unipolar dominance, conflict in the world has been rife. While battle deaths since the end of the Cold War have declined, the United States has been involved in wars with Iraq (1992, 2002–present), Somalia (1993), Bosnia (1995), Serbia and Kosovo (1999), and Afghanistan (2001–present)Lacina & Geditsch, 2005). Conflict develops because of the tension between the superpower's ability to project its power everywhere but its inability to become a truly global hegemon or world empire.[4]

Unipolarity encourages imperial over-reach, stimulates other states to develop nuclear weapons to stand up against the superpower, and discourages building an international system of rules and institutions to govern international relations and prevent wars. A few countries, very few, are willing to confront US hegemony (among them, Russia, Iran, Venezuela, and North Korea), but they pay a cost for that – as Russia is likely to discover.

[4] These formulations are not identical to but owe much to Monteiro (2008).

3. Tactics and objectives: "soft power" versus "hard power"

The current crisis in Georgian–Russian relations has highlighted the ways in which Moscow can exert its influence and power in South Caucasia. Before August 7, Moscow did not require war or military confrontation to achieve influence in South Caucasia. It had enough problems in the North Caucasus, and with its undisciplined and ill-equipped army there is little incentive to launch an offensive on another front. Before August 2008, the Russians were willing to use all means short of war – economic sanctions, restrictions on travel, and bans on imports of wine and water, prevention of money transfers, deportation of Georgian immigrants – to force Georgia to cooperate and to negotiate their differences over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Repeatedly provoked, they refused to give in to Saakashvili's probes. Russia's ties with the beleaguered leaders of these "autonomous republics" both placed obligations on the Russians that restrained their choices (there is a domestic constituency of hardliners who want full annexation of these republics into Russia) and presented opportunities for extracting concessions from Tbilisi.

Some observers argue that Russia aims at imperial dominion – full control of Caucasian foreign and domestic policy as in Soviet times and means to achieve this "if not by tanks, then by banks."[5] But I believe this is a misreading. Why take over a country like Georgia, which would be a costly liability, would engender active resistance, and earn Russia additional international opprobrium, when turning the screws from outside can force the country to give in? Russia benefitted from the exercise of limited influence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, enveloping them in Moscow's orbit through the extension of citizenship, the ruble zone, and welfare payments. Such influence over Georgia's rebellious peripheries gave Russia a foothold on the Black Sea (in Abkhazia) and allowed it to pose as the defender of Ossetian national "reunification." The age of empire is over; the international community no longer tolerates the physical conquest and incorporation of other states or their territories; and in an age of nationalism and nation-states the burdens of conquering and controlling the territories of other peoples is extraordinarily difficult and usually doomed to failure.

Russia, as Fiona Hill and Andrei Tsygankov have argued, was primarily invested in exercising "soft power" rather than depending on its unreliable military to achieve its ends.[6] Russia talked hard but generally acted soft (except in Chechnya), which was understandable given its weaknesses and its interest in pursuing integrationist economic policies with the capitalist world. Russians were living in a world in which the language of international politics at the time – particularly after 9/11 and the American invasion of Iraq –involved an extension of soft into hard power, justified by the deployment of anti-terrorism rhetoric. The struggle against terrorism as a war everywhere and without end was used to justify Russian repression of Chechnya; Uzbek arrests, torture, and murder of dissidents; Israeli military responses to the resistance to the occupation of Palestine, sanctions against and the isolation of the elected Hamas government, the continuing blockade of Gaza; and the curtailing of civil and human rights, secret renditions of prisoners to secret prisons in foreign lands and torture by the United States. Russia had to consider its interests and limited opportunities at a time when the United States was as powerful militarily as all other countries combined and was approaching, if it had not already achieved, first-strike nuclear capabilities.

Russia lives in a dangerous neighborhood with hostile or at least unfriendly states on its borders. Putin was as president both careful not to antagonize the United States or Europe while asserting his own claims to dominance in much of the former Soviet space, particularly in its southern tier. To some this may be seen as "soft power imperialism," but to others it appears to be a reasonable response to a bad situation.

> Russia cannot be denied its own political, military, and economic interests in the post-Soviet world, and Moscow's policies can be interpreted as an effort to preserve existing influence in the region for the purpose of its greater stabilisation, rather than imperial control… The Kremlin's approach is mainly driven by considerations of security and stability.[7]

If soft power is more about cooptation than coercion, creating economic dependence, and promoting shared cultural values, Russia's particular form of soft power falls toward the coercive end. The inescapable reality of Russian–Caucasian relations is the huge disparity in wealth, influence, and power of the former vis-à-vis the latter. Russian GDP almost tripled between 1999 and 2005 and continues to grow at 4–6 percent annually before the 2008 crisis. Average salaries in Russia in 2004 were triple those in Armenia and Georgia and 2.5 times higher than in Azerbaijan.[8] After fifteen years of independence South Caucasia has failed to become, as some once dreamed, a Singapore, Hong Kong, or Taiwan. While their economies have improved markedly over the last few years, Georgia and Armenia remain highly dependent on foreign aid, and Azerbaijan, flooded with oil revenues reflected in new construction everywhere in the capital, suffers from the disease of many oil-soaked but undemocratic states – inequitable distribution, corrupting concentrations of wealth, and an unresponsive, authoritarian regime. Russia has steadily taken over the energy sectors in the region, controlling Georgian electricity and Armenian nuclear power and gas transport. As it has repeatedly demonstrated, Russia can severely damage these economies by closing its frontier to travel and trade.

[5] Tsygankov (2006). In this clear-headed and sober article, Tsygankov argues that Putin is a "stabilizer" willing to use "soft power" to achieve limited goals, rather than a "Westernizer" or an "imperialist.".

[6] Joseph Nye's notion of soft power was employed by Hill (2004) and in the article by Tsygankov cited above.

[7] Tsygankov, "If not by Tanks, then by Banks?" pp. 1080–1081.

[8] Tsygankov, "If not by Tanks, then by Banks?", p. 1092; Korobkov and Zaichonkovskaia (2004).

Illustrative of Russia's use of his economic muscle was its "ultimatum" early in 2006 to Armenia, its ally in South Caucasia. The year before Armenia had celebrated the year of Russia in Armenia, complete with a visit from President Putin to Erevan, and in 2006 President Robert Kocharian arrived in Moscow on a two-day visit to open the Year of Armenia in Russia. There he was confronted with a demand that Armenia either pay $110 for 1000 m^3 of gas instead of the former $54, or transfer a 45 % stake in the Iran–Armenia gas pipeline under construction to Russia and hand over the fifth power unit of the Razdanskaia thermoelectric power station and the republic's gas transportation system as a payment for cheap gas. Despite the Kremlin reception and the presence of the Armenian French singer Charles Aznavour and composer Michel Legrand, serious economic differences threatened the relatively harmonious relations between allies because of the new demands to shift gas policy to a market basis. Russia was negotiating to enter the World Trade Organization, and WTO demanded that gas be sold to the former Soviet states at the same price as Russian gas was sold to European countries. There could be no more favoritism along political lines: Armenia, in other words, was to be treated in the same way as Russophobic Georgia or Ukraine. The proposed gas price was considered impossible for Armenia. After a month's consideration, Kocharian accepted the terms imposed by the Kremlin. This whole episode took place at the same time as an explosion in the gas pipeline from Russia to Georgia disrupted the flow of gas to South Caucasia.

Moscow's relations with the South Caucasus are profoundly affected by its problems in the North Caucasus. Ossetians and Lezgins live on both sides of the border, and movements of Chechens into and out of eastern Georgia led to dangerous confrontations between Russia and Georgia. The psychological fallout of war against Muslims and the consequent anti-Islamic rhetoric in Russia has a long half life south of the border. Yet Russia's imperial past has not only had negative effects on non-Russians in the region. Abkhaz and Ossetians in Georgia have indicated that they would prefer Russian citizenship to Georgian, and even a majority of Chechens have expressed a preference for remaining in the Russian Federation rather than becoming independent. Life is simply better in Russia than in Caucasia. The estimated numbers of South Caucasians working in Russia run from two million Azerbaijanis, one million Armenians to half a million Georgians. Their remittances fuel the smoldering economies of their home countries. The massive migration of Armenians and others to the North Caucasus and the southern steppes of Russia has led to tensions, clashes, and killings by Russians (Cossacks) of Armenians. Yet Putin has encouraged immigration, which he sees as essential for the economic development of Russia and a quick fix for its demographic crisis.

For most of his presidential term Putin usually acted as a "stabilizer" and a mediator in South Caucasian conflicts.[9] Rather than respond to those "imperialists" at home who called for immediate integration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russia, and recognition of the independence of Nagorno–Karabakh, Putin worked to expand Russian influence gradually – extend citizenship, mediate contested elections, and maintain uneasy truces. As the United States appeared to move toward supporting independence for Kosovo, Putin warned against the consequences of such a precedent. The debate over Kosovo cuts two ways for Russia – legitimizing the breakup of a state like Georgia but also justifying the secession of Chechnya and other ethnic areas. Although Putin's government had been more interventionist in Georgia than anywhere else in the former Soviet Union, it did not hinder Saakashvili's reintegration of Ajara into Georgia. Moscow restrained from supporting secession in eastern Ukraine, Crimea, or northern Kazakhstan, where Russian or Russian-speaking populations are relatively compact, and it has abandoned any encouragement of the Russians in the Baltic republics who simultaneously experience discrimination from the Latvian and Estonian governments but have no desire to move to Russia or have Russia move on them. The crises in Georgian–Russian relations that led up to the August 2008, as well as the war itself, it can be credibly argued, can be blamed on both sides but the major escalations have been initiated by the actions of the Georgian president rather than the Russian.

Putin and Medvedev are not adverse to using pressure, and Russia has enormous capacity to squeeze the countries of the former Soviet Union, as has been demonstrated most acutely in Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova. The embargo on Georgian and Moldovan wines was a low-level form of coercion, a hard example of soft power, and it had enormous effect and served as an example to others (Azerbaijan, for example) of what to expect from a non-cooperative policy toward Russia. Such muscle-flexing, however, was not completely cost-free, for it presented Russia as an international bully and risked condemnation by the West. Reputation matters in international relations. The emotional valence attached to friend and foe, the fears and anxieties that accompany the unpredictability of other powers, the very way that one side perceives threats from the other all shape a state's understanding of its interests and appropriate behavior. I would argue that both Putin and Medvedev are centrists, at least in the fragmented and often polarized politics of the Russian elite. They are more patriots than nationalists, state consolidators rather than state expanders, and pragmatists rather than ideologues. They are more interested in Russian hegemony than a revival of empire. As part of establishing that hegemony, Putin promoted "continuing the civilizational role of the Russian nation in Eurasia."[10] He and the putative president seek both greater integration with the West *and* a renewal and recognition of Russia's great power status. Putin specifically renounced his country's former "imperialist ambitions" and promoted Russia as a normal nation-state in the European mode *but* with special interests in the

[9] "Stabilizer," "Imperialist," and "Westernizer" are Tsygankov's terms to describe the three major schools of foreign policy thinking in the Russian elite.

[10] Vladimir Putin, "Address to the Federation Council, March 30, 2005; http://www.kremlin.ru; cited in Tsygankov, "If not by Tanks, then by Banks?" p. 1088.

region closest to Russia. His view, for Russia to survive, even within its established borders, conforms to those of most Russians, nostalgic about the late, lost Soviet Union (60 percent) but realistic enough to know it will not be restored (12 percent) or should not be restored (31 percent).[11] Internal recovery, strengthening the state – which increasingly looks authoritarian – developing the domestic economy and integrating further into the global economy, rather than imperial pretensions, mark the duumvirate of Medvedev and Putin. Russian objectives – stability, security, order, and predictability – stem from a political and economic elite that is rather self-interested, conservative and feels its own vulnerabilities, domestically and internationally. Whereas in the Yeltsin years, the Kremlin made concessions and remained subordinated to the West, as 2010 begins, it appears that Russia will try to realize its objectives by vigorously asserting its claims and deploying force when it feel compelled to. An ominous development for the United States is that Russia now believes it has learned a bitter lesson about dealing with the West since the Gorbachev period and no longer is willing to tolerate an enhanced American presence in the Near Abroad. In specific cases Moscow's actions will depend both on Russian appraisal of the opportunities and costs of specific behavior and of the West's willingness or reluctance to recognize Russia's sense of its own interests.

4. What about the Caucasians?

Like Russia, all three regimes may be described as "façade democracies" with all the trappings of contested elections and a somewhat independent media. Georgia is the most democratic, while Armenian and Azerbaijan remain in the hands of the same elite that has held the state for a decade or more. Russia as political example provides a model, not for further democratization as during the Gorbachev and Yeltsin years, but for authoritarian state consolidation and capitalist accumulation in the hands of a few. In none of these countries, with the possible personal exceptions of Mikheil Saakashvili himself and a few around them, does there seem to be any consistent, concerted effort at promoting the public good. Saakashvili emerged first as a dynamic young reformer, led a popular "revolution" against his predecessor at the end of 2004, and brought his fiery rhetoric and unrestrained energy into the Georgian government. The hopes of the Rose Revolution were high after all that Georgia had gone through since 1991 – chauvinistic authoritarianism, civil war, restoration under Shevardnadze followed by stagnation and decline under Shevardnadze. But by year three and four, Georgians had become soberly disappointed with their president's erratic rule.

Ilham Aliev is the son of the late Heidar Aliev, the long-time Communist boss of Azerbaijan, who paved the way for his heir to take power once illness and death in 2003 removed him from the scene. Azerbaijan remains a sultanist successor to a Communist dynasty, a regime with little legitimate authority but fortunately for its survival bathed in oil and faced by a weak and divided opposition. Serzh Sargsian succeeded Robert Kocharian, both of them natives of Karabakh and successors to Armenia's first president, Levon Ter Petrosian. Their regime came to power in a "constitutional coup d'état in 1998 and held on despite a disputed election in 2003, protest demonstrations, and general discontent with the government. Sargsian's, "victory" in a second disputed election in 2008 was followed by shootings and fatalities in the streets of Erevan. Armenia is a kind of mafia-state in which politicians and plutocrats share the spoils of a privatized economy and are confident enough to use force and low-level terror to restrain their opponents

Each of the South Caucasian republics has a distinct and different relationship with Russia. Armenia is an ally; Azerbaijan is wary, cautious, and pragmatic; and Georgia is openly confrontational.

5. Armenia: Russia's Israel

Armenia is dependent on Russia both for security and for energy. Yet it has tried at times to travel its own road. At NATO's Prague summit in 2002, the idea of Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) were developed for countries from the South Caucasus and Central Asia, setting out practical steps by which they could converge with NATO standards. Armenia flirted with NATO membership, and in June 2003, played host to NATO's so-called "Cooperative Best Effort 03" military exercise, which was hailed as a success. In February 2004, Erevan sent peacekeeping troops to join the international presence in Kosovo. At a meeting in Brussels in early June 10, 2005, then Armenia's defense minister, Serzh Sargsian, and NATO secretary general, Jaap de Hoop Scheffer, came to an agreement that many at the time saw as proof of a new strategic shift by Armenia towards the West. Sargsian formally presented de Hoop Scheffer with his country's so-called Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) as well as a personal letter from President Kocharian. This was a genuine breakthrough in relations between Armenia and NATO, which had at times been very cool.

At the time Armenia experienced a slight cooling of relations with Russia, and with the American push into the South Caucasus the Armenians faced a difficult choice. Overtures from the West and the NATO aspirations of neighboring Georgia and Azerbaijan presented a future of potential isolation in the region for Armenia. When President Bush visited Georgia in May 2005, he made it clear that he welcomed the idea of Georgia joining the alliance. Armenian foreign minister Vartan Oskanian much earlier had expressed fears that "if it turns out that Georgia and Azerbaijan eventually become members of NATO and Armenia does not, then obviously this will lead to new lines of division in the Caucasus." Later Sargsian stated, "After we set ourselves the goal of joining the European family, we must have close relations with NATO and be responsible for guaranteeing security in Europe." Caught between its membership of the Russian-led Collective Security Pact of the Commonwealth of Independent States and its interest in some relationship with NATO, the Armenian leaders

[11] *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, April 7, 2006; cited in Tsygankov, "If not by Tanks, then by Banks?" p. 1089.

believed that Armenia could cooperate with both alliances "until cooperation with one organization is in conflict with cooperation with the other." But that possibility was not very long-lived.

Membership in NATO comes with costs: revision of many of its military structures and democratic civilian control over the military. NATO in many ways now identifies itself as a political as much as a military organization, meaning that post-Soviet states would have to implement democratic reforms to achieve a closer relationship with the organization. NATO has historically been uninterested in the security problems of the South Caucasus, and this view was reinforced by Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer in his statement that NATO is content to leave the Karabakh problem to other international mediators. On the other hand, the United States has been most energetic in promoting Caucasian accession to NATO.

The Putin administration feared that the balance of forces in the South Caucasus was shifting away from Russia toward NATO. Russian troops left their Georgian military bases. Robert Simmons, the special representative of NATO to the South Caucasus and Asia, stated that if Armenia did not want Russian military bases to remain on its territory, NATO would be happy to assist. Russia indicated its irritation with the "increased attention that NATO was paying to the South Caucasus and Central Asia." Russian analysts were concerned that the United States is making a major effort to pull Armenia away from its alliance with Russia.[12] While some Russian analysts suggested that Moscow would improve its position in the Caucasus by developing a closer relationship with Baku, Armenians were heartened by the unequivocal support that liberal Westernizers in Russia gave to the alliance with Armenia. Armenia is Russia's Israel in the Caucasus. Aleksei Arbatov, head of the Russian Academy of Sciences Institute for the World Economy and International Relations, for example, told the newspaper *Trud*, "Armenia is our only classic military-political ally…. Armenia will not survive without Russia and, without Armenia, Russia will lose all its important positions in the Caucasus…. Even though Armenia is a small country, it is our forepost in the South Caucasus. I would say that Armenia is more important to us than Israel is to the Americans."[13] Other commentators, however, have expressed Armenian frustration with the inaction of Russian authorities when Armenians in Russia are threatened. Xenophobic extremism sometimes targets darker-skinned immigrants from the Caucasus and Central Asia, and Russian authorities often fail to solve the vast majority of those crimes. Such acts of hatred and indifference toward such crimes by officials have contributed to the erosion of the traditionally strong pro-Russian sentiment in Armenia.

The United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) were for a time increasingly popular in Armenia, according to a survey by the Armenian Center for National and International Studies (ACNIS), just as Erevan's relations continue to expand with both. Sixty-two percent thought that the U.S. plays a positive role in Armenia's economic development, 60 percent in provision of security and 56 percent in the country's democratic development. Attitudes toward NATO are related to feelings about the United States. US Ambassador to Armenia, John Evans, benefited from his public declaration (which he was later forced to rescind) that the massacres and deportations of 1915 had been a genocide.[14] While Armenians grew more supportive of NATO membership, they remained split on the issue. The poll found close to 35 percent of respondents in support of membership, 34 percent opposed and the remaining 31 percent undecided. A poll held in October 2005 found that 29 percent of respondents preferred NATO as Armenia's main security partner. A majority of membership supporters felt that "NATO is the most effective system for ensuring security" (43 percent) and that it would be expedient for all Caucasus states to be part of a common security system (34). Respondents opposed to NATO membership argued for a closer military alliance with Russia (53) and believed that Armenia's NATO integration is hindered by hostile policies of Turkey, an alliance member (25).

With the withdrawal of Russian bases from Georgia, there was some pressure to remove the Russian base in Armenia, the last major installation that Moscow has in the South Caucasus (not counting its presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia). Addressing a NATO-sponsored conference in Erevan in 2005, Defense Minister Sargsian said the presence of Russian bases in Armenia has no relation to the Karabakh conflict and Armenian–Azeri relations. Rather, Russian troops are in Armenia at the request of Armenia and "are a component of our national security and their presence is contingent on Armenia's relations with Turkey which is still hostile to us." Sargsian said Armenia would agree to radically reform its defense system given the final regulation of the Karabakh conflict and given Azerbaijan's accord to carry out similar reforms under the supervision of international inspectors." Yet in April 2006, President Kocharian clarified the Armenian position. "Armenia is not

[12] Professor at the Russian Foreign Ministry Diplomatic Academy Igor Panarin, for example, wrote in 2005 that the trend towards consolidation of the Armenian–American relations can hamper the development of the Armenian–Russian cooperation. "Russia is worried by the recent visit of the Armenian defense minister to the USA under the initiative of the American ambassador," said Panarin, who called significant the fact that "the current Armenian president has not officially visited the United States yet." The United States, he went on, has increased its activities in Armenia since the start of construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. "Transnational British–American capital has started taking root actively in the region, and its task is to force Russia out of the region," said Panarin. This effort is led by the US ambassador in Armenia, John Evans, who introduced a package of documents to prepare elections in 2007–2008. The US Congress has already adopted financial proposals worth $6 million for Armenia. "The country, aiming to strengthen its positions in Transcaucasus, is trying to destabilize the political situation in Armenia." Panarin went on to note, "The new building of the US Embassy in Erevan is one of the biggest in the world…. The fact that instead of the 40 marines that are able to secure the building, 400 are planned to be stationed there." Such a force "can easily destabilize the situation in Erevan if necessary."

[13] *Trud*, no. 52, March 26, 2005.

[14] Evans was awarded the Christian A. Herter award by the American Foreign Service association for "constructive dissent" after making his statement, but under pressure from the State Department, the reward was later taken back.

going to join NATO," he told the former Communist newspaper, *Golos Armenii*. He responded to the remarks of Armenian Speaker of the Parliament Artur Baghdassaryan's statement to the *Frankfurter Allgemaine* that "EU and NATO are the future of Armenia" and "Russia should not be on the way to the Europe." Kocharian stated that "Armenia's foreign policy line remains unchanged. Within the NATO-Armenia Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) our country is expanding the cooperation with the North-Atlantic Alliance, as a key European security organization. We expect effective cooperation, especially in reform of the Armed Forces and peacekeeping. However, Armenia is not going to join NATO. Participation in the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the high level of military and technical cooperation with Russia properly solve security issues."

While Armenia is ready to engage in closer cooperation with the EU within the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP), neither NATO nor the European Union is in Armenia's future. "As the Armenian newspaper *Aravot* [Morning] put it, 'If Armenia's president declares tomorrow that we have an intention to join NATO, then the next day Russia will avenge our audacity and encourage an Azerbaijani attack on Karabakh by moral and military means,' writes 'Aravot.' "At this point there seem to be no guarantees that the West would provide us with sufficient resources to cope with those moral and military dangers. It appears that our goal seems to be the creation of such guarantees in a restrained and calm manner, without drastic statements, without a Saakashvili-style bravado. Unfortunately, our leadership is moving in the exactly opposite direction, further deepening our dependence on Russia." (June 2006) Long before the Russo–Georgian War of August 2008, Armenians, perhaps reluctantly, made a pragmatic choice: once straddling West and East became impossible, they sided with the Russians.

6. Azerbaijan: betwixt and between

Baku has been highly suspicious of Russian aims in the Caucasus. Its concerns center, not only on resolving the conflict in Karabakh, but on the economics of oil. Azerbaijan, Georgia, and the United States have built their own oil pipeline through Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean and are in the process of completing a gas pipeline as well. Russia would prefer controlling the supply of oil from the former USSR and does what it can to hinder alternative sources. But its oil wealth gives Azerbaijan room to play in global politics that is not available to Armenia, which is more vulnerable geopolitically and less rich in natural resources. It is said that what oil is to Azerbaijan, the Armenian diaspora, particularly Armenians in America, are to Armenia, a powerful incentive to aid Armenia. But the good will of potential voters, while hardly negligible, does not always trump the oil card.

Azerbaijan considered NATO membership, but its impact on the resolution of the Karabakh conflict was not clear. In February 2006, on a visit to Baku, Putin indicated that he was interested in mediating discussions between the Armenian president and Aliev on the Karabakh problem. Resolving this issue would provide Putin with the clearest sign that Russia plays an irenic role in the region and has the political capital to bring warring parties together. Since the ceasefire of 1994, negotiated by the Russians, neither side had moved very much. The Armenians occupy a large part of Azerbaijani territory outside of Karabakh and have turned tens of thousands of Azerbaijanis into internally displaced persons. Since the death of Heidar Aliev, the Azerbaijani leadership has had neither the political will nor popular support to make concessions on Karabakh. Ilham Aliev repeatedly told his nation that Azerbaijan could launch a new war in Karabakh: "At any moment we must be able to liberate our territories by military means. To achieve this we have everything." Aliev predicted that Azerbaijan would soon become an economically strong state, while its military "superiority" would increase further. "Under these circumstances we cannot react positively to those calling us to compromise."[15] Armenians have watched warily as Azerbaijan has increased its military spending to more than $217 million, buying more tanks, artillery, and aircraft, and solidifying its relations with Russia.

Defense Minister General Safar Abiyev spoke a few years ago in a particularly provocative manner: "Armenia must always remember that what Azerbaijan accepted yesterday will not be accepted today and tomorrow. Azerbaijan will not want to have a separated state, meaning Nakhichevan, cut from the mainland Azerbaijan. This issue will be raised tomorrow." Asked if the Azeri army is ready "to go to Yerevan," the general answered, "We can go even farther." "The Armenian state was created on the occupied Azeri lands with the area of 29,000 square kilometers."[16] The Azerbaijani Defense Ministry spokesman Col. Ramiz Melikov was even more extreme: "In the next 25–30 years there will be no Armenian state in the South Caucasus. This nation has been a nuisance for its neighbors and has no right to live in this region. Present-day Armenia was built on historical Azerbaijani lands. I believe that in 25–30 years these territories will once again come under Azerbaijan's jurisdiction."[17] An elaborate coffee table book was published in Azerbaijan showing the monuments of "Western Azerbaijan," i.e., present-day Armenia.

In March 2006, in a speech to a "world congress of Azeris" in Baku Aliev warned Armenia not to delay seeking a negotiated resolution of the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict. He threatened to pull out of peace talks with Armenia unless there is progress in the mediation effort since "we have been holding peace talks for the last twelve years…", "this process cannot last forever and the patience of the Azerbaijani people and of the Azerbaijani government is running out." Aliev added that Azerbaijan's roughly $600 million military budget is "increasing year by year" and that he considers it his duty "to make our military expenditure equal [to] Armenia's entire budget" so that "Armenia will never be able to compete with us."[18] The Azerbaijanis

[15] *Zerkalo*, July 23, 2004.

[16] *Ekho*, May 16, 2003; Azerbaijan News Service via BBC Monitoring, March 22, 2002; ANS.az, December 7, 2001.

[17] *Zerkalo*, August 4, 2004.

[18] RFE/RL Newsline, March 15, 2006.

must sense that time is on their side, given their oil riches and the resource restraints on the Armenians.

The rhetoric of the Azerbaijanis is noted and repeated by Armenians, though it seems primarily directed at the domestic audience in an effort to find patriotic backing for the regime. When Georgia appeared to be effectively defying Russia in the first days of the August 2008 war, Azerbaijanis were excited about the possibilities of changing the balance of forces in the South Caucasus and possibly recovering Karabakh. But once the Russians entered South Ossetia, drove back the Georgians, and destroyed its American-trained army, it was clear that the balance of forces had changed in favor of Russia and, by extension, Armenia. Baku is dependent on the pipelines through Georgia for export of much of its oil and gas to the West. Though the war did not damage the pipelines – the Russians assiduously avoided that – it may have had a baleful effect on those who might finance expansion of these pipelines in the future.

Baku's calculus seems to be that there is no need to antagonize Russia unnecessarily, that NATO membership would lead to the same kind of confrontation that Georgia faced, and that a more nuanced policy toward Russia might bring more satisfactory closure to the Karabakh problem.

7. Georgia: chronic crisis

The ingredients for a clash between Georgia and Russia were in place long before the August 2008 war. The United States and Europe were well aware of the possibility of an outbreak of armed warfare and worked to keep the two countries from an open fight. Russia was willing to accept the status quo. From the Kremlin's viewpoint, South Ossetia was a dangerous flashpoint on Russia's most vulnerable border, the North Caucasian. Ossetians live on both sides of the mountains, and their own citizens in the North Caucasus were sympathetic to the struggles of the mountain peoples to the south of the Caucasus Mountains. The status quo irritated Georgia, made NATO accession more difficult, and gave Russia the aura of protecting the non-Georgian nationalities in Georgia. Gradually, over the last decade and a half, Russia integrated the two enclaves into their own sphere of influence, granting locals Russian passports, welfare payments, and other privileges. Saakashvili was determined to change the status quo and win back those lands that Georgians consider part of their historical patrimony. Early in his administration (May 2004), he was able to oust the bandit-boss of another enclave, Ajara, and the Russians quietly accepted the fait accompli. Soon after, they withdrew their last soldiers from all parts of Georgia – except Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

After promising autonomy for the region, Saakashvili gradually and fully integrated Ajara into Georgia, effectively eliminating its special status. The European Union cautioned Georgia that a meaningful Ajarian autonomy could work as a beacon that might attract the other enclaves. Instead Ajara turned into a missed opportunity and a perverse example of possible futures for Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and even Karabakh. Saakashvili made it clear that his top policy priority was the re-establishment of Georgian sovereignty over the whole territory of Georgia. After Ajara, South Ossetia appeared to be the next domino to fall. Poor and not very densely populated, a zone for smugglers and opportunistic entrepreneurs, with a mixed population of Georgians and Ossetians, it lies close to the major Russian–Georgian pipeline, and the principal highway between the two countries, the Transcaucasian Highway (TransKAM) runs through it. One-third of its roughly sixty thousand people were Georgian, the other two-thirds Ossetian and others.

Saakashvili made efforts to win over the Ossetians by launching Ossetian-language television broadcasts and distributing "humanitarian aid" to the province. He guaranteed South Ossetia autonomy within Georgia equivalent to that which North Ossetia has within the Russian Federation. Yet, while stating that Georgians and Ossetians are "brothers," Saakashvili attacked South Ossetia's elected leader, Eduard Kokoiti, and unnamed "imperialistic" forces in Russia for driving a wedge between the two nations. He repeatedly claimed that he was committed to a peaceful settlement of the conflict, yet at the same time, Georgia sent additional security forces to the area, which the Russian peacekeepers argued was in violation of the 1992 cease fire. When some thousand volunteers from Russia, particularly from North Ossetia and Abkhazia reportedly arrived in Tskhinvali following Kokoiti's call to join in defense of South Ossetia, Saakashvili, in apparent reference to these volunteers, said, "their blood… will flow. We will kill them off without mercy." The Georgian president spoke of regaining control of South Ossetia "within a year" and sought support for his policies in Western capitals.

Five months after Saakashvili's election, on the morning of May 31, 2004, several Georgian interior ministry units landed by helicopter in the villages of Tkviavi, Pkvenisi, Nikozi and Eredvi, ethnic Georgian villages but located in the southern part of South Ossetia. The units – which belonged to the ministry's financial crime squad – proceeded to set up roadblocks in the villages. The Georgian interior ministry later explained that their sudden intervention was a "measure to halt smuggling coming from Tskhinvali." In mid-June, Saakashvili's government shut down the huge Ergneti market on the outskirts of Tskhinvali, which they said was an economic black hole into which vast amounts of Russian contraband fuel, cigarettes, alcohol and wheat flour were pouring – robbing Georgia of revenues and propping up the breakaway region. In July Georgians and Ossetians began shooting at each other after twelve years of relative peace, and the killing continued into August when nineteen Georgians and an unknown number of Ossetians lost their lives. Negotiations between Kokoiti and Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania finally brought the crisis to an end in November.

When he came to power Saakashvili was the youngest head of government in all of Europe. Confident and brash at times, he is known to be a man of strong views who "does what he himself considers is best." He talks to a few advisers, reads the Western press, and then acts. His style of governance and his attitude toward Russia stood in deliberate contrast to his predecessor. Whereas Shevardnadze "had been careful to brief Vladimir Putin in advance about his invitation of United States troops to Georgia for the

"anti-terrorist" Georgia Train and Equip Programme (GTEP)," Saakashvili adopted a confrontational pose.[19] Immediately after his first election, Saakashvili traveled to Moscow, and towering over the Lilliputian Putin he appeared willing to work with the Kremlin. But he soon began to act much more aggressively.

Just as the quick victory in Ajara had encouraged further bold moves, the failure of his 2004 move against South Ossetia was said to have sobered the Georgian president somewhat. At the conclusion of that conflict Saakashvili argued that the impasse with South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the tensions between Georgia and Russia required international mediation. "The point with South Ossetia and Abkhazia," he said, "is that they are regions under the control of Russia, so we want more international participation because this is our territory and we want better cooperation between Georgia and Russia…. Stability here will generate stability in Russia, and the stability of Russia is in the interest of the South Caucasus. Our plan for our relations with Russia is based on the fact that we have common interests in the stability of the region. We'll achieve it if we do our part of the job and you do your part of the job…. It's been a tough dialogue." (November 2004).

Saakashvili kept the pressure on South Ossetia and made a determined effort to increase the military capacity of the Georgian army. American advisors had been training Georgian troops since 2002 as part of the "war on terror" (in this case, directed against Chechens in the Pankisi Gorge) and were expected to leave in March 2004. Saakashvili requested that they remain, and the US Ambassador Richard Miles announced that American trainers would stay. Both Georgia and the United States pushed Russia to remove its last remaining troops from Georgia. Since the death of Zhvania in February 2004, a man who appeared more willing to compromise than Saakashvili, the president had fewer restraints on his more aggressive tendencies. Saakashvili was considered a man of great intelligence and fervent Georgian patriotism, who despite his occasional impulsiveness, was also able to think shrewdly and strategically about when and how to apply pressure to unfreeze the frozen conflicts. "We will not put up with preserving the conflicts in a frozen state," he stated on July 10, 2005 at a conference held in Batumi on the South Ossetian conflict, "and we cannot wait for the solution of these problems for a hundred years, so we will be very aggressive in searching for peace." Clashes and accusations continued between Tbilisi and Tskhinval.

The Ossetian leader, Edward Kokoiti, made a proposal in December 2005 for joint negotiations. Some believe that this proposal originated in Moscow. But a month later, two explosions in the night of January 22, 2006, south of the North Ossetian capital, Vladikavkaz, as well as on a high-voltage electricity line in Karachai–Cherkessia carrying Russian electricity supplies to Georgia, cut off energy supplies to Georgia. Saakashvili blamed Moscow for the loss of power supplies to his country: "This is an unprecedented act of vandalism – stopping energy supplies in the middle of winter." He said the explosions were an attempt to force Georgia to hand over control of its gas pipeline and infrastructure to the Russians. Interior minister Vano Merabishvili called the incident "a well-organized act of sabotage, and a case – unique in world history – where one country secretly carries out acts of sabotage against another."

The explosions marked the beginning of a year of intense conflict that culminated in the fall of 2006. On February 15, the Georgian parliament called for the replacement of Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia by an international force. The Russian foreign ministry reacted angrily: "The decision by the Georgian lawmakers points to the fact that Georgia may take the path leading to the destabilization of the entire region." A visa regime was imposed by both Russia and Georgia on people traveling between the countries. Putin hinted that Russia might recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia if Kosovo is given its independence. The Abkhaz leader, Sergei Bagapsh, also raised the example of Kosovo to reiterate Abkhazia's claim to independence. In early March the NATO assessment team visited Georgia. In April Russia embargoed Georgian wine and water. In July Georgian troops moved into the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia to rid the region of the rebel commander Emzar Kvitsiani and restore Georgian control over the area. The Georgians moved the Abkhaz government-in-exile from Tbilisi into the Kodori Gorge, the one part of Abkhazia held by the Georgians. "The legitimate government of Abkhazia has no business being in Tbilisi," Saakashvili said in a July 27 address. "Now the government is to have its seat in Kodori. The Kodori gorge will temporarily be the legitimate administrative centre of Abkhazia." It appeared that the United States backed Saakashvili's move, angering the authorities in Sukhumi.

From South Ossetia there was fear that the removal of Georgia's conflict resolution minister, Giorgi Khaindrava, signaled a more aggressive policy. Boris Chochiev, South Ossetia's chief negotiator in the talks with Georgia, commented, "The 'party of war' in the Georgian leadership is taking the lead. The resignation of Giorgi Khaindrava is a continuation of the program devised by defense minister Irakli Okruashvili and it is aimed at resolving the conflict by force." On September 3, Okrushavili's helicopter was fired upon from South Ossetian territory. Three days later, twenty-nine members of "Justice," a party founded by the fugitive former security chief Igor Giorgadze, and other related parties were arrested and accused of involvement in a plot to overthrow the government. Events escalated fairly rapidly in the next weeks.

South Ossetia, which is much more important strategically and economically to Georgia than to Russia, took on enormous symbolic status among Russians who have venomous feelings about Georgians. "With a touching degree of intellectual naivety," wrote Russian commentator Andrei Piontkovskii, "the absolute majority of Russian politicians and mass media outlets view the decade-old war in Chechnya only in terms of territorial integrity, and the conflict in South Ossetia solely within the context of the Ossetian people's right to self-determination." Russian

[19] Tom de Waal reports that "Putin was not happy but publicly endorsed the programme." ["Georgia and Russia, again," January 30, 2009; www.opendemocracy.net/article/georgia-and-russia-again].

media depicted Saakashvili as a demonic figure. Russians remembered that the Georgian president had refused to attend the celebrations in May 2005 marking the Soviet victory over fascism.

On September 21, 2006, NATO announced "Intensified Dialogue" on Georgian Membership. The next day Saakashvili, speaking at the United Nations in New York, called for replacing Russian peacekeepers in South Caucasia with an international force. That same day the Russian Foreign Minister termed NATO's decision as part of "the expansion of military-political alliances created during the Cold War." Russia opposed the NATO initiative and reinforced its military presence on Georgia's eastern borders. Saakashvili spoke confidently of 2008 as the date for Georgia's joining NATO.

On September, he appeared at the Kodori Gorge and spoke of "the start of the return of Abkhazia." That day Georgian police arrested four Russian military officers and eleven Georgians for espionage. Saakashvili declared, "It is high time for everyone to remember that we have an effective state apparatus. Giga Bokeria, a member of parliament from the president's National Movement Party, said Russia "is implementing a large-scale aggression against Georgia." "The crisis did not begin yesterday. It began as soon as Russia failed to accept Georgia's independence and sovereignty." The Georgian government attempted to turn the question of the secessionist regions within Georgia primarily into a conflict between Russia and Georgia, a construction that both would appeal to nationalist Georgians for whom Russia is the source of many of their woes and would bring the United States into the conflict. No longer willing to wait for the unsatisfactory status quo to change and prepared to "unfreeze" the frozen conflict by provoking the Russians, the Saakashvili government was testing Russia's willingness to escalate the crisis.

Putin did not want to be provoked into a war, which would have damaged his standing with the United States and Europe, but he raised the level of his rhetoric. On October 1, he called the arrests "state terrorism with hostage-taking." "It is a sign of the heritage of Lavrenti Pavlovich Beria both inside the country and in the institutional arena." "It is absolutely clear that there are attempts to pinch Russia as painfully as possible, to provoke it. This should be obvious to everyone. These people think that they can feel comfortable and secure under the roof of their foreign sponsors." In their public rhetoric Russian government officials connected the events in Georgia to the larger context of American and Western interference in the former Soviet sphere. For many Russians "democratization" and the "electoral revolutions" of the last few years had in their view been more about the extension of American power and influence than about popular government. Saakashvili, on the other hand, argued that the Russians "have become hostages of their own propaganda. Some people could consider our action as something that has been coordinated by Washington. This is not true. The US State Department made it very clear that this is a bilateral issue between Georgian and Russia."

Early in October Putin spoke to Secretary of State Rice and to President Bush about the Georgian crisis, and on October 2, the Georgians released the four Russian officers. Saakashvili indicated that the handover of the Russians was "a good gesture toward Georgia's western friends." The Russians, however, cut off traffic to Georgia and deported over a hundred Georgian immigrants. The immediate crisis was over, but the underlying tensions and conflicts remained. With even the slightest incident the possibility of escalating the "frozen conflict" into a hot war remained real. In November the South Ossetians voted for independence. Russia took no action.

A year later, in the fall of 2007, Saakashvili faced his own political crisis. His former defense minister, Erekle Okruashvili, who had broken with the president, accused him of corruption and plotting a murder. Okruashvili was arrested and eventually withdrew his accusations. In November, the president suffered an embarrassing defeat when he attempted to close down the popular *imedi* television studio and impose censorship on certain media. Crowds protested; the police broke up the demonstrations with force, sending many to the hospital; and Saakashvili's image as democrat and reformer was severely tarnished. The president was forced to apologize for the government's actions. He held a snap election in January 2008, which he won easily (52–27%) against his opponent, Levon Gachachiladze. But the bloom had faded from the Rose Revolution, and Saakashvili had become unpopular, a figure now seen as moving away from his democratic promise toward authoritarianism. His standing at an all-time low, he may have calculated that he needed some great achievement to retain and consolidate his power.

Early the next year, far from the Caucasus, another crisis established yet another precedent that favored moves toward independence or annexation and away from autonomy. The United Nations had been governing an unstable Kosovo since the end of the Serbian-Kosovar-NATO war in 1999, and desperate for a way out, special UN envoy Martti Ahtisaari of Finland worked out a plan for Kosovo's independence – without the usual approval of the home government (Belgrade). Partition of Kosovo was rejected as a solution, as was autonomy within Serbia. Russia's opposition had no effect on Western governments; Kosovo declared itself independent on February 17, 2008; and to date some 54 countries have recognized independent Kosovo. The West reiterated that Kosovo was not a precedent for other separatist movements but a singular case, but Putin ominously formalized Russia's relations with South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Although the United Nations was intimately involved in Kosovo, ironically the move toward independence was made outside the UN to avoid a Russian veto. This reliance on NATO and the EU makes the West's calls for respecting the authority of Security Council resolutions far less credible than they might have been.

The day after Kosovo declared itself independent, Saakashvili made a stark declaration:

> I've heard threats made in this [Kosovo] context against Georgia's territorial integrity more than once in the last few years. Today the situation is very serious. It is expected that Kosovo will be recognized by many states today and tomorrow, and I know some are talking about

> Georgia's [secessionist] territories [in this respect]…. I want our people, as well as the international community, to understand that we can and we have the power to undertake effective action in response to the moves directed against Georgia in this [Kosovo] context…. We will meet any provocation and we will respond with appropriate measures. I do not advise anyone to poke their nose into this issue or escalate tension. We want to resolve all the issues peacefully – we do not need any unrest now – but Georgia will not step back.[20]

Don't play with fire, warned the Georgian president. The Abkhaz leadership reacted quite differently, hoping publically: "After the recognition of Kosovo's independent by a large number of Western states, the geopolitical situation has changed significantly."[21] Putin was particularly brusque. "the Kosovo precedent is a terrifying precedent. It in essence is breaking open the entire system of international relations that have prevailed not just for decades but for centuries. And it without a doubt will bring on itself an entire chain of unforeseen consequences."[22]

The status quo in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, so satisfactory to the Russians, was increasingly intolerable for the Georgians. As a nationalist, the Georgian president was anxious to reunite his country. Even though he had been warned by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice not to react to Russian provocations, Saakashvili may have been influenced in another direction by his powerful friends in the United States, Vice President Richard Cheney and Republican presidential candidate John McCain, and believed that the United States would come to his aid. The war of words grew hotter; Russians shot down a Georgian drone aircraft; bombs went off in Abkhazia and South Ossetia; Russian aircraft flew over the disputed parts of Georgia. Saakashvili took the bait. Just as Napoleon III in 1870 had been lured by Bismarck into foolishly initiating a war with Prussia, so Saakashvili reacted to the growing violence along the Georgian–Ossetian border and launched a massive attack, escalating the conflict from sporadic shootings into a major international war. [23]

8. The August war and the new Post-Soviet world

The first casualty of war, they say, is truth. As bombs fell and rockets flew in South Ossetia at the end of the first week of August 2008, the rhetoric on both the Russian and Georgian sides soared. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and proxy president of Russia Dmitrii Medvedev claimed that Georgian military action in the tiny enclave of South Ossetia was akin to ethnic cleansing and genocide. President Saakashvili compared the Russian advance to Soviet invasions of Finland in 1940, Czechoslovakia in 1968, and Afghanistan in 1979, insisting that the West should come to the aid of an allied democratic state holding its own against an aggressive imperial power. The words escalated as a Russian bombing campaign reached outside the enclave to Gori, Sighnaghi, and Poti. Russia's navy blockaded Georgia's Black Sea ports. Calls by the Georgian side for a ceasefire went unheeded, as Russian troops maneuvered to secure advantageous positions in both South Ossetia and in Abkhazia, the other breakaway enclave within Georgia,. Russian troops meant to seriously punish Georgia for its actions and show to the Americans and Europe that Russia had the capacity to act in its self-designated sphere of influence and the West did not.

For the first time in the Georgian conflicts one side used heavy weaponry against civilians, indeed against people it considered citizens of its own country, members of the "Georgian" nation. The American-trained Georgian troops quickly overran much of the enclave, nearly taking the city. Observers reported that tanks fired into the basements of buildings where civilians sought refuge. The goal appears to have been that a rapid occupation would result in a flight of Ossetians and convince the Russians not to counterattack. Indeed tens of thousands of Ossetians fled north, and those left behind faced the hostility of the invading Georgians. But the Russians returned with a ferocious counterattack, retaking the capital and upping the ante with bombing outside of South Ossetia. Atrocities followed, almost exclusively committed by Ossetians against Georgians, whom the Russians did little to constrain. Although there was a seemingly gratuitous bombing of civilian buildings in Gori and massive deliberate destruction of property, weapons, and ships in Poti and elsewhere, the Russians in general acted with restraint. They did not damage the Baku-Tbilisi-Cehan pipeline, and despite some calls for the forceful removal of Saakashvili, Moscow decided not to go that far.

What could Saakashvili have been thinking? Did he really expect to beat the Russians, or force the hand of the West to come to his aid? Perhaps he calculated that he could hold off the Russian counterattack long enough for international pressure to force the Russians to retreat.[24] At other similar moments the Bush administration has made it clear that as much as it values its relationship with Georgia, the United States is not willing to jeopardize its important working relationship with Russia. Saakashvili's policies from the beginning of his presidency were confrontational toward Russia. As the Shevardnadze years had demonstrated, very little seemed to be gained from cooperation and negotiation. His power in Georgia was based in large part on his promises to democratize the country, fight corruption, and bring the secessionist regions back under Georgian sovereignty. He accepted the risks of war and likely Russian retaliation because the "peace" was no longer tolerable.

[20] *Civil Georgia*, "Saakashvili Warns Against Kosovo Precedent," February 18, 2008. [http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17143].

[21] *Civil Georgia*, "Abkhazia Calls for International Recognition," March 7, 2008. [http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17289&search=Kosovo].

[22] *The Associated Press*, "Putin warns Kovoso will 'come back to knock' the West, as NATO envoy lashes out," February 22, 2008. [http://www.iht.com/articles/ap/2008/02/22/Europe/EU-GEN-Russia-Kosovo.php] I am grateful to Vicken Cheterian for these last references; see his paper, "International Recognition of Kosovo and its Impact on the Caucasus Conflicts," presented at the "After Kosovo, Whither Karabakh?" workshop, University of Michigan, January 30, 2009.

[23] There is much controversy over which side started the war and whether the Russians had provoked the Georgians to attack. The best account to date is Chivers and Barry (2008).

[24] A suggested reading by Ben Graham.

Saakashvili's gamble failed, and the Georgian president suffered a disastrous defeat. And as American and Israeli leaders know, a defeat in a war that you have initiated seriously weakens the leader who took the risk. Already suffering from disillusionment with his domestic and foreign policies and his suppression of demonstrations in Tbilisi the year before, the catastrophic outcome of the war threatened his political survival. Saakashvili was saved, at least for a while, by the weakness of a divided opposition and sympathy and support he received from Europe and the United States. The consequences of his miscalculation were disastrous for Georgia and for the president personally, but even more consequential for the international balance of power in the post-Soviet world.

The outcome of the one-week war was extraordinarily significant. In the short run it worsened relations between Russia and the West. But more importantly, Russia's victory meant that Russia was back; it had demonstrated it could carry out a competent military campaign; it had signaled the states of the Near Abroad that it would not tolerate further expansion of NATO (this message was particularly directed at Ukraine); and it indicated that Russia was more concerned with strategic gains on the ground than elusive advantages like reputation. For the first time in the post-Soviet period, Russia had forcefully thwarted American preferences. The international game had changed, and Russia had to be reckoned with. With the Americans consumed by the presidential campaign and their wars in the Middle East and Central Asia, and Europe unwilling to take as hard a line toward Russia as the hawks in the Bush administration, Russia had successfully exploited a rare moment to assert its independence in foreign policy. A brief window of opportunity had opened. If over the next few years the United States managed to extricate itself from Iraq, its ability to use its power in other parts of the world would increase. Georgia gave Russia the opportunity to reassert itself before that window closed.

Yet Russia overplayed its hand by recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. The Kremlin probably made this move to gain support in the North Caucasus and among nationalist forces in Russia. Andranik Migranyan argues that Russia is operating by the principle of the *svedskii stol*, that is take what you can, an à la carte foreign policy. But outside of Russia only Nicaragua and Hamas recognized this fait accompli. It now appears that the Kosovo case, as the West maintained, will not be a precedent but an exception. The old international norms will hold, and secessionist movements will need to acquire sanction from their home government, as Eritrea did in its struggle against Ethiopia.[25]

[25] Mikulas Fabry in his forthcoming book *Recognizing States: International Society and the Establishment of New States Since 1776* (Oxford University Press) argues that before World War II the right of revolution, formulated by the American founders, allowed de facto states that could control their territory and win allegiance of their people to acquire recognition, but this decolonization paradigm was abandoned in the wake of the end of European empires. Since most states fear secession, the international norms against recognition of such movements will prevail. Not even Armenia has recognized South Ossetia, Abkhazia, or even Karabakh as independent states. Russia's move to recognize Kosovo as a precedent has failed.

Moscow had created a new security dilemma in the region, raising anxieties in Ukraine and in East Central Europe. The Poles reacted immediately by agreeing to the Bush administration's request for defensive missiles to be placed on Polish territory. As the days of the Busheviks ran down, the United States remained in a kind of limbo, rhetorically continuing its policy of expanding NATO but realizing privately that the alliance was in no position to carry out its obligations in Georgia or Ukraine. At the moment of the handoff, the baton being passed to Barak Obama was treacherously slippery.

9. Concluding thoughts

Russia's Caucasian policy revolves around its long-term interest in re-establishing its hegemony, not imperial control, over the "southern tier" of the former Soviet Union. August 2008 offered the opportunity to shift from using primarily "soft power" to prevent other powers from increasing their influence in the region to demonstrate that Russia was prepared, when pushed, to use "hard power." What began as a very local conflict, between Georgians and South Ossetians, was from its inception connected to larger regional issues – Russia's place and policy in the Near Abroad – and the global competition between the ambitions of a regional hegemon, Russia, and the global hegemonic ambitions of the United States, in part to be realized through the expansion of NATO. The Russian–Georgian War showed the limits beyond which even the greatest of superpowers is unwilling or unable to move. August 2008 showed that the West cannot or will not defend Georgia against Russia, though it can use diplomatic and economic sanctions to pressure Russia to rethink its ultimate aims in Caucasia. Yet the European Union has made it clear that it does not want confrontation with Russia, that it remains dependent on Russian oil and gas, and that it is not prepared to go as far in opposing Russia as hardliners in the United States. The Obama administration has signaled Moscow that it wishes to "hit the reset button" marked relations with Russia, and it is likely that there will be some quiet accommodation with Russia's sense of its own security interests short of recognizing a sphere of influence in the Near Abroad. Other states as well have learned the lesson of the war. Israel, for example, has clarified its position. While it was a supplier of arms to Georgia, it has indicated that it will hold off in the future, with the expectation that Russia will reciprocate by limiting its arming of Syria. Turkey and Russia have been negotiating about access for warships to the Black Sea, and Ankara has launched its own Caucasian Security and Cooperation Platform (CSCP) to bring the parties toward a resolution. President Abdullah Gűl visited Erevan on September 6 on the occasion of a Turkey–Armenia soccer match before moving on to Baku.

Left on the sidelines are Armenia and Azerbaijan. What Georgia began, they are forced to ponder and accept. Russia is once again the most powerful player in the South Caucasus, though Europe and the United States are not yet ready to leave the region to Moscow's whims. Locked as they are in their own scorpion-like embrace over Karabakh, these two small countries have no real alternative but to

face the new reality that the almost two decade retreat of Russia is over and that Moscow's favor could very well be decisive in the dangerous game that they have been playing With enough problems closer to home, Russia might very well be interested in creating stability through mediation of the Karabakh issue.

The United States has its own interests – strategic (Iran, Russia, support of its Georgian ally), political (the promotion of democracy), and economic (pipelines and sources of energy) – in the South Caucasus. It must calculate if these interests are better served in confrontation with Russia or in seeking grounds of common interest. The United States has several options: to continue to oppose Russian regional hegemony and promote NATO enlargement; to recognize Russian regional hegemony and work to make it as benign as possible; or to shift gears entirely and bring Russia into the larger security framework of the West, perhaps turning NATO into a collective security pact and in that way eliminate the need for spheres of influence. But this would mean that the Americans would have to constrain their global hegemonic ambitions and turn toward reliance on international organizations and common rules of the international game. In this last scenario resolution of the region's most serious problems would be the result of joint American–Russian efforts rather than the unpredictable results of rivalries among Great Power players.

The United States is unlikely, even under President Obama, to give up, or even acknowledge, its global hegemonic ambitions. For one thing, others, even considerable powers like Britain, do not want the Americans to give it up. But being a more benign, less self-interested global hegemon would mean taking more seriously the interests and preferences of others – the new leftist governments in Central and South America, the Iranians in the Middle East and Central Asia – and act more like an honest broker than *parti pris* usually taking the side of the most conservative forces. It would mean no more ultimata, less stringent preconditions before negotiations, no more preventive wars or calls for regime change with states with which you are trying to deal, and no more calling the opponent of American policies appeasers or imperialists or terrorists. Less bellicose rhetoric and more openhanded diplomacy will likely enhance American, and international, security than the swaggering, boastful policies of the previous administration.

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