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The Caucasian conflict in the context of world politics

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South Ossetia is once again on the brink of war. Alarming reports are coming from Abkhazia, and Russian-Georgian relations continue to be tense.

Why have these two unresolved conflicts on Georgian territory grown so markedly worse? Their indefinite status is by definition volatile, and sometimes a minor event can turn a frozen conflict into a hot one. In this case, however, we are seeing a major change that reflects a fundamental process.

Kosovo's unilateral proclamation of independence from Serbia last February played a key role in these developments. There may be endless disputes over whether this has created a legal precedent or not, but realpolitik takes its course regardless.

Moscow and quite a few other capitals considered the move a serious step toward the degradation of international law and the triumph of arbitrary approaches to the resolution of global problems.

Nonetheless, Russia has chosen a course of compromise. Russia's leaders could not ignore what happened in the Balkans, but they chose not to respond by recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, even though they believe that after Kosovo was proclaimed independent they had every right to do so.

Reluctant to complicate an already difficult situation, Russia is ready to continue recognizing Georgia's formal territorial integrity. But it has opted for fully-fledged relations with both of the breakaway territories. This approach is manifest in Moscow's decision to withdraw from sanctions against Abkhazia and the Russian president's April decree on practical aid to the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Tbilisi understands that after Kosovo the prospect of restoring Georgia's territorial integrity has become even vaguer. If the status taking shape after Russia's move is accepted and everything is left as it is, it will soon be pointless to talk about re-integration even in theory. Abkhazia will become an element of an enormous economic project called "the Sochi Olympics." South Ossetia is already de facto a subsidized region of the Russian Federation.

Tbilisi must show resolve if it wants to break this trend. It can make diplomatic initiatives, exert military pressure and attract the attention of its Western allies by escalating tensions. Georgia's leaders believe that closer relations with NATO and



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future membership in the bloc will help secure their territorial integrity. Washington shares this view. According to this logic, NATO's failure to welcome Georgia and Ukraine into a Membership Action Plan in April was a sign of weakness that prompted Russia to step up its actions toward "annexing" the territories. If Moscow is told in no uncertain terms that the decision will be made, this will ostensibly promote stabilization.

But Russia's position on this issue is just the opposite. The closer Georgia is to NATO, the more resolute steps Moscow will take toward recognizing the territories which Georgia no longer controls, because Tbilisi could see some of NATO's formal commitments as a chance to resolve the conflicts militarily.

The United States has been contributing to the tension. Six months before the end of his presidency, George W. Bush badly needs some international success, if he does not want to be remembered for a chain of failures. Approval of the Membership Action Plan for Ukraine and Georgia (or at least one of them) at NATO's ministerial meeting next December is fast becoming his only chance to leave a tangible achievement.

This is why Washington is being more vocal in its support for Georgia and bringing more pressure to bear on those of its European allies who question the wisdom of such a course. One example is the recent visit to Tbilisi by U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Needless to say, Georgia perceives Washington's unequivocal position as a green light to take more active steps.

Tensions are likely to reach a peak in late fall. In December, the current U.S. administration will make its last attempt to push through the Membership Action Plan. As a prelude to this, Washington will sharply step up its political activities, thereby increasing the risk of armed conflicts in the region.

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