



# KOSOVO

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## In Georgia Clash, a Lesson on U.S. Need for Russia

By Helene Cooper, New York Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/10/world/europe/10dipl.html?ref=asia>

The image of President Bush smiling and chatting with Prime Minister Vladimir V. Putin of Russia from the stands of the Beijing Olympics even as Russian aircraft were shelling Georgia outlines the reality of America's Russia policy. While America considers Georgia its strongest ally in the bloc of former Soviet countries, Washington needs Russia too much on big issues like Iran to risk it all to defend Georgia.

And State Department officials made it clear on Saturday that there was no chance the United States would intervene militarily.

Mr. Bush did use tough language, demanding that Russia stop bombing. And Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice demanded that Russia "respect Georgia's territorial integrity."

What did Mr. Putin do? First, he repudiated President Nicolas Sarkozy of France in Beijing, refusing to budge when Mr. Sarkozy tried to dissuade Russia from its military operation. "It was a very, very tough meeting," a senior Western official said afterward. "Putin was saying, 'We are going to make them pay. We are going to make justice.'"

Then, Mr. Putin flew from Beijing to a region that borders South Ossetia, arriving after an announcement that Georgia was pulling its troops out of the capital of the breakaway region. He appeared ostensibly to coordinate assistance to refugees who had fled South Ossetia into Russia, but the Russian message was clear: This is our sphere of influence; others stay out.

"What the Russians just did is, for the first time since the fall of the Soviet Union, they have taken a decisive military action and imposed a military reality," said George Friedman, chief executive of Stratfor, a geopolitical analysis and intelligence company. "They've done it unilaterally, and all of the countries that have been looking to the West to intimidate the Russians are now forced into a position to consider what just happened."

And Bush administration officials acknowledged that the outside world, and the United States in particular, had little leverage over Russian actions.

"There is no possibility of drawing NATO or the international community into this," said a senior State Department official in a conference call with reporters.



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The unfolding conflict in Georgia set off a flurry of diplomacy. Ms. Rice and other officials at the State Department and the Pentagon have been on the telephone with Russia's foreign minister, Sergey V. Lavrov, and other Russian counterparts, as well as with officials in Georgia, urging both sides to return to peace talks.

The European Union — and Germany, in particular, with its strong ties to Russia — called on both sides to stand down and scheduled meetings to press their concerns. At the United Nations, members of the Security Council met informally to discuss a possible response, but one Security Council diplomat said it remained uncertain whether much could be done.

“Strategically, the Russians have been sending signals that they really wanted to flex their muscles, and they're upset about Kosovo,” the diplomat said. He was alluding to Russia's anger at the West for recognizing Kosovo's independence from Serbia.

Indeed, the decision by the United States and Europe to recognize Kosovo may well have paved the way for Russia's lightning-fast decision to send troops to back the separatists in South Ossetia. During one meeting on Kosovo in Brussels this year, Mr. Lavrov, the foreign minister, warned Ms. Rice and European diplomats that if they recognized Kosovo, they would be setting a precedent for South Ossetia and other breakaway provinces.

For the Bush administration, the choice now becomes whether backing Georgia — which, more than any other former Soviet republic has allied with the United States — on the South Ossetia issue is worth alienating Russia at a time when getting Russia's help to rein in Iran's nuclear ambitions is at the top of the United States' foreign policy agenda.

One United Nations diplomat joked on Saturday that “if someone went to the Russians and said, ‘OK, Kosovo for Iran,’ we'd have a deal.”

That might be hyperbole, but there is a growing feeling among some officials in the Bush administration that perhaps the United States cannot have it all, and may have to choose its priorities, particularly when it comes to Russia.

The Bush administration's strong support for Georgia — including the training of Georgia's military and arms support — came, in part, as a reward for its support of the United States in Iraq. The United States has held Georgia up as a beacon of democracy in the former Soviet Union; it was supposed to be an example to other former Soviet republics of the benefits of tilting to the West.

But that, along with America and Europe's actions on Kosovo, left Russia feeling threatened, encircled and more convinced that it had to take aggressive measures to



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restore its power, dignity and influence in a region it considers its strategic back yard, foreign policy experts said.

Russia's emerging aggressiveness is now also timed with America's preoccupation with Iraq and Afghanistan, and the looming confrontation with Iran. These counterbalancing considerations mean that Moscow is in the driver's seat, administration officials acknowledged.

"We've placed ourselves in a position that globally we don't have the wherewithal to do anything," Mr. Friedman of Stratfor said. "One would think under those circumstances, we'd shut up."

One senior administration official, when told of that quote, laughed. "Well, maybe we're learning to shut up now," he said. He asked that his name not be used because he was not authorized to speak publicly on the issue.