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August 15, 2008

Washington's Laughable Lack of Self-Awareness

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<http://www.antiwar.com/bandow/?articleid=13300>

The remarks by Zalmay Khalilzad, America's UN ambassador, denouncing Russian aggression against that paragon of democratic virtue, the Republic of Georgia, are almost too funny to quote. U.S. government hypocrisy obviously is not new, but Washington's inconsistency on this occasion is more spectacular than usual.

Proving yet again that history has not ended, last week Georgia launched a blitzkrieg against the autonomous territory of South Ossetia in an attempt to coerce its inhabitants back under Tbilisi's control. In a response foreseen by everyone except, apparently, Georgia's narcissistic president, Mikheil Saakashvili, Russia responded with overwhelming military force, pushing back the Georgian troops – who had killed and destroyed freely when attacking South Ossetia – and seizing parts of Georgia. Tbilisi essentially sued for peace, and a cease-fire has been agreed to.

This is a fight in which the U.S. has no stake. Georgia was part of the Soviet Union for 70 years. Not once did Washington worry about the strategic implications of Soviet control of the Caucasus. It need not worry about Russian influence in the Caucasus today. Admittedly, the Bush administration had dreams of dominating Russia along its borders through NATO, just as the administration hopes to continue dominating China along its borders, through alliances with Japan and South Korea, an informal compact with Taiwan, and U.S. naval superiority. But Washington's imperial pretensions are not the same as America's genuine, let alone vital, security interests.

If the U.S. could survive, even prosper, while the Soviet Union controlled the same piece of real estate, the U.S. can survive, even prosper, while Russia influences Georgia. The fact that President George W. Bush, would-be president John McCain, and their neocon camp followers want Washington to run the world doesn't justify forcing the American people to take the risk and waste the money attempting to do so.

Nevertheless, the U.S. government found itself, rather like Captain Renault in *Casablanca*, to be shocked, shocked at the notion that a major power might take military action against a small neighbor in violation of international law to advance its perceived national interests. At a fractious United Nations session last weekend, Ambassador Khalilzad represented a shocked America desperately attempting to save the world from militarism, aggression, and war.

He complained of Russian "aggression," especially the fact that "there has been an intensification of Russian military activity in the South Ossetian region" and that "Military operations against Georgian forces in the conflict zone have escalated dramatically." Further, "Russia has been attacking villages and cities elsewhere in



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Georgia, including threatening the Zug Didi region and air attacks against Tbilisi's airport. Russian military attacks have also destroyed critical Georgian infrastructure, including seaports, airports, and other facilities."

Khalilzad pointed to the conflict's dire consequences: "[T]he result of this escalation against a sovereign state that has not posed direct threat to Russia, has increased casualties and humanitarian suffering for the people of Georgia, including in South Ossetia and Abkhazia." But Moscow was "intransigent" and refused "to stop the violence" even though Georgia "offered a cease-fire and restoration of the status quo." Moreover, "Russia continues to resist efforts by the international community to mediate this conflict."

Finally, there was the issue of national sovereignty. Explained Khalilzad, "[W]e must condemn the Russian military assault in [sic] the sovereign state of Georgia, the violation of the countries [sic] sovereignty and territorial integrity including the targeting of civilians and the campaign of terror against the Georgian population. Similarly, we need to condemn the destruction of Georgian infrastructure and violations of the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity." Ambassador Khalilzad asked, "Was Russia's objective regime change in Georgia, the overthrow of the democratically elected government of that country?" After all, he contended, the bad old days of tossing out governments of other nations were over.

Khalilzad's remarks have been echoed by others. For instance, the White House expressed its support for Georgia's "territorial integrity." Vice President Richard Cheney denounced "this threat to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity." President George W. Bush said that Moscow's tactics were "unacceptable in the 21st century." Administration officials pointed to the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia and the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan as Soviet precedents for Russia's actions.

Bill Clinton's old political consultant Dick Morris claimed that Russia's attack on Georgia was akin to Adolf Hitler's campaign to acquire the Sudetenland in Czechoslovakia. James Robbins of the American Foreign Policy Council also pointed to Nazi Germany's use of ethnic Germans as a justification for its aggression.

Khalilzad's remarks, so full of moral outrage and personal umbrage, are almost a perfect parody of statesmanship, representing what a hypocritical, self-important, morally blind, arrogant, even hubristic, government would say when another power follows its example. My God! Can you imagine! Aggression! Attacks on civilians! Humanitarian suffering! Violations of national sovereignty! Regime change! No one does that anymore.

Except the U.S., of course.

Let's see. How far back should we go? There was the CIA-supported coup against Iran's (elected) government in 1953 that brought the shah to power. In 1963



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Washington greenlighted the coup against South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, which resulted in his execution. Of course, in those days, there were lots of back-room plots – some of which worked, some of which didn't – against lots of nations. But one effort continues to this day: For nearly a half century Washington has been attempting to overthrow Fidel Castro.

In the 1980s the Reagan administration funded and armed a guerrilla force in an attempt to oust the Nicaraguan government. In 1983 the U.S. invaded Grenada to remove a government viewed as inimical to American interests. Six years later the U.S. invaded Panama to arrest its head of state. In Somalia in 1993 Washington decided to arrest local warlords – the de facto government – whom it disliked.

In 1994 the U.S. not only ousted the existing Haitian government, but put a new regime in its place. A decade later the U.S. intervened to oust the same (elected) leader. In 1999 the U.S. and NATO launched a war against Serbia to give autonomy, and ultimately independence, to the territory of Kosovo, supporting a violent secessionist movement which then ethnically cleansed hundreds of thousands of Serbs. The U.S. backed an unsuccessful coup in 2002 against Venezuela's (elected) President Hugo Chavez.

That same year President George W. Bush simultaneously targeted Iraq, Iran, and North Korea for regime change, terming them members of the "Axis of Evil." A year later he invaded Iraq and ousted Saddam Hussein. Even now, the administration is attempting to browbeat the (elected) government in Baghdad to accept scores of bases and a long-term troop presence for use against other countries in the region. Moreover, Washington has spent freely – directly, through "foreign aid," as well as indirectly, through subsidies to nominally independent institutes and other NGOs – to replace existing regimes with pro-American governments in Georgia in 2003 and Ukraine in 2004.

My goodness, who would have imagined a big power using its military to violate the sovereignty of other nations and cause civilian casualties, just to advance its own interests? How could a government consider attempting to oust a smaller country's ruling regime? It's just not done anymore. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov asserted that "it is not a part of our political culture or foreign policy to topple anyone or put someone on a throne." But it is part of America's political culture and foreign policy to do so. The Russians just don't understand the rules.

Washington's hypocrisy is particularly glaring when one considers the 1999 NATO attack on Serbia. It was, indisputably, a war of aggression against a nation that had done nothing against America or the Europeans. There had been no threats, let alone hostile acts. Rather, Serbia was engaged in the traditional, though brutal, business of suppressing an armed insurgency. Ask Great Britain about the Irish. Ask the Spanish about the Basques. Ask Turkey about the Kurds. Ask the Americans about the Confederacy.



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However, outraged by the spectacle of some 2,000 deaths over the preceding year or two, the Western alliance acted – without the sanction of international law, let alone the approval of the United Nations – to violate Serbia's "sovereignty and territorial integrity," in Khalilzad's words. Not only did the U.S. (which was responsible for most of the military action) bomb Serbian military forces in Kosovo, but it also attacked civilian targets and destroyed civilian infrastructure in Serbia, well outside of the nominal combat zone. The assaults cost the lives of thousands (even NATO admits 1,500) of noncombatants in Kosovo and Serbia, while the Serbian authorities retaliated by driving out hundreds of thousands of ethnic Albanians, causing enormous "humanitarian suffering," as Khalilzad put it.

The allies rejected any idea of a compromise, since they viewed the status quo as unacceptable. They were not interested in outside (meaning Russian) mediation to end the conflict until they feared that Belgrade's refusal to surrender might force them to initiate a ground war. Only then was some compromise acceptable. Earlier this year the U.S. and the Europeans acted to formally amputate Kosovo from Serbia, seizing roughly 15 percent of that nation's territory, with nary a thought about the consequences for the tens of thousands of ethnic Serbs still living in Kosovo.

The Russians responded to allied support for Kosovo's independence by observing that the precedent had wide applications, including in the Caucasus. Russia's UN Ambassador Vitaly Churkin countered Khalilzad, observing, "This statement, ambassador, is completely unacceptable, particularly from the lips of the permanent representative of a country whose actions we are aware of, including with regard to the civilian populations in Iraq and Afghanistan and Serbia." Washington set the example, several times over.

So the Bush administration and its neocon Greek chorus now is filled with moral outrage because Russia intervened in a hostile bordering state that is carrying out a violent campaign against secessionists who have strong ties with Russia. Can anyone take Washington's supposed concerns seriously?

Obviously, one can argue about the legitimacy of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian campaigns for self-determination, but they go back decades, if not centuries, and are far more than Russian creations. There's no doubt that Moscow has cheerfully used these controversies as an opportunity to apply brutal, deadly force to humble an obnoxious opponent, but Georgia is no international innocent.

The country is an authoritarian democracy, with demagogic President Saakashvili playing the nationalist card to win political support and abusing his power to crack down on opposition media and politicians. He sent troops to Afghanistan and Iraq to win American support, not to selflessly battle the global menace of "Islamofascist" terrorism.



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Moreover, his attack on South Ossetia ended up, whether planned that way or not, as an attack on civilians. Although one should be wary of Russian claims of 1,400 South Ossetian civilians killed in the initial Georgian assault on the city of Tskhinvali, South Ossetia's capital – after all, the U.S. government shamelessly circulated fake atrocity stories during both the first Gulf War and the attack on Serbia – using artillery and rocket launchers against urban areas was no surgical strike. Tens of thousands of South Ossetians have become refugees as well. The gratitude of South Ossetians toward Moscow appears genuine – and, frankly, well-founded.

The war is still bad for the same reason that all wars are bad: they visit death and destruction upon the innocent and guilty alike, and usually set in motion unpredictable forces that often generate even more death and destruction, sometimes years down the line. But the war may have a salutary effect if it convinces the West that it can no longer bulldoze Russia, ignoring Moscow's legitimate security and other interests.

Expanding NATO up to Russia's borders, working to accomplish regime change in former constituent parts of the Soviet Union, and treating Moscow as of no account when changing borders in the Balkans might not be the conscious policy of encirclement as seen from Russia, but it's easy to understand why Moscow views America's policies with suspicion. In any case, these were not wise tactics to use to win Russia's assistance in, say, confronting Iran. The days of America as the unipower, global colossus, and master of the universe are over. It turns out there are consequences to actions, and the U.S. – as well as Georgia – is paying the price for having forgotten that reality.

Is the war in the Caucasus tragic? Certainly. Should the U.S. encourage peaceful resolutions of the Russia-Georgia-South Ossetia conflicts? Surely. Should Washington promote the fantasy that Georgia is a democratic exemplar upholding its natural right to rule South Ossetia while holding off a dangerous revanchist Russia? No. And should U.S. government officials pretend that Moscow is the only aggressive, threatening, self-interested actor on the international stage? Not on your life. It's time for Washington's interventionist elite to take a good, hard look in the mirror.