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The precedent was set in the Balkans

By Peter Erlinder, Minneapolis Star-Tribune

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In April 1999, just after the United States and NATO launched their air war to punish Yugoslavia for sending troops into Kosovo, its independence-minded province, the Star Tribune published my op-ed piece under the headline "NATO action unwisely undercuts U.N."

The article warned that the well-established principles of national sovereignty, upon which the U.N. Charter and international law are based, were too important to be set aside when it suits powerful nations, no matter how well-intended. All powerful nations can protect their own sovereignty; it is smaller, weaker nations that need its protection. The article warned that U.S. and NATO aggression against Yugoslavia established a precedent that "regional super-powers" could (and would) use to invade their neighbors, notwithstanding the U.N. system.

Russia's response to Georgia's invasion of its own independence-minded province, South Ossetia, shows that Russia learned the lesson taught by the U.S./NATO precedent in Yugoslavia.

The Georgian provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have chafed under the rule of Georgia's central government, not unlike Kosovo's uneasy relationship with the Yugoslavian central government. Most of the people of both provinces rebelled against Georgia's declaration of independence from Russia and have carried Russian passports. Many "South" Ossetians believe they have more in common with their cousins in Russia's province of "North" Ossetia than they do with Georgia -- a country with a different language and culture. Abkhazia has Islamic roots, while Georgia was one of the first Christian countries.

Americans also need to remember that the most recent crisis was triggered by the U.S.-trained and financed Georgian army's invasion of South Ossetia, which resembled nothing so much as Yugoslavia's invasion of Kosovo, which triggered U.S./NATO attacks -- but only after Yugoslavia rejected U.S. demands to permit U.S. military occupation of the country.

The Russians have done in a few days using ground troops what it took U.S. and NATO forces to accomplish from the air with 90 days of bombing, which included civilian targets, as well as the Chinese embassy.



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The American people must think twice before we permit our leaders from either party to draw us back into another Cold War against what John McCain calls the "Russian Empire," which is being added to the so-called "Long War" against a nonentity called terrorism. Americans must remember that in other parts of the world, the United States is a far more dangerous "imperial power" than any threat that might come from Moscow.

After all, Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia are all on Russia's borders, not thousands of miles away on another continent, like Yugoslavia and Kosovo. And U.S. efforts to bring Georgia into NATO (which requires the United States to go to war if one of its members is attacked) is a little like Mexico being made an ally of Russia.

The inescapable fact is that the rest of the world will learn from the example set by its most powerful nation. That's true whether the example is the treatment of prisoners in Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib or the use of military power to attack other nations -- even for the most compelling of reasons, such as to protect human rights, or because of a threat from "weapons of mass destruction."

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