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Kosovo comes back to bite the US

By Ali Gharib, Asia Times

http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/JH21Ag02.html

With the conflict between Georgia and Russia lowered to a simmer after the signing of a ceasefire agreement, questions still remain about the United States role and positions on the start of the conflict as well as where it stands moving forward towards a resolution.

Ten days ago, a full-scale war broke out when Russian and Georgian forces clashed over the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia.

The US role during the beginning of the conflict on August 7 is unclear, but a Washington Post article this weekend revealed that Matthew Bryza, a deputy assistant secretary of state and a US special envoy to the Caucasus, was aware of the Georgian military operations before they started.

At a press conference Tuesday in Washington, and in line with the Georgian position, Bryza said the Georgian military movements were a response to attacks from Ossetian separatists and initial large-scale Russian movements into South Ossetia.

"Who shot whom first?" said Bryza at the Foreign Press Center. "I don't know if we'll ever know the answer to that question," he continued, before going on to call the answer "irrelevant" because "Russia has escalated so brutally" that the international community turned against it.

Moscow has denied the Georgian and US timeline, but did not provide the Washington Post with a Russian timeline of the military movements.

Speaking at a forum at the Atlantic Council for the United States, the immediate former secretary of state for political affairs, R Nicholas Burns, said he blamed Russia completely for the conflict and that the Russian incursions were the "most disappointing" turn Russia has taken since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Burns, toeing a line pushed strongly by the US representative to the UN, Zalmay Khalizad, last week - and strongly denied by the Russian representative - said the Russian actions were a response to increasing freedom and democracy in Europe since the end of the Cold War.

"Russia has put this at risk," Burns said.

Responding to criticisms that unflinching US support for Georgia may have



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emboldened Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili to make the misstep of a military move into South Ossetia, a generally pro-Russian province that has been pushing for independence since the early 1990s, Burns said that the charges were unfounded.

Those "pointing the finger" at Georgia and the US were wrong, and Russia was solely to blame for the conflict, he said.

"I don't think the US is to blame for what's happening in Georgia," Burns reiterated to IPS after the Atlantic Council conference. "I think Russia is to blame."

But Paul Saunders, the executive director of the Nixon Center and a specialist on Russia and US-Russia relations, told IPS that he was not surprised that the US and Georgia don't blame themselves.

"Burns is a person who, as undersecretary of state until recently, was part of forming the US policy towards Georgia," he said, making it unlikely for him to find fault with those very policies.

As for the US siding with Georgia, a democratic, pro-Western ally, over South Ossetia and its Russian backers, Burns said the US should not take a role in deciding the borders of European countries.

"We must not be part of the redrawing of lines in Europe," Burns told the wider audience at the Atlantic Council event.

When asked later in the day by IPS if Burns' comment mirrored the US position, Bryza said that he wasn't sure exactly what Burns was talking about. But he was willing to confirm Burns' general message as an appropriate position for the unique case of the Georgian conflict.

"We should not allow this current situation to draw new lines in Europe and prevent a democratically elected government to join NATO if they want," he told IPS.

Many commentators have noted that Russian ambitions to realize independence for South Ossetia and another pro-Russian breakaway region in Georgia, Abkhazia, were greatly bolstered by US support for the independence of Kosovo, which Serbia still considers part of its territory.

But many US officials and their defenders have strongly denied that US support of Kosovo - which came swiftly after its declaration of independence - created a legitimate precedent for Russia to support the independence of the Georgian breakaway regions.

In questions after the conference, Burns told IPS that the Kosovar independence and South Ossetian and Abkhazian independence are "fundamentally different".



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"We were right to support the right of independence for Kosovo," Burns said, explaining that the fundamental difference was UN control over Serbia since the war there in late the 1990s sparked by what Burns called Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic's "savage attack" on Kosovo.

But some commentators have said that the US should have understood when Kosovo declared independence six months ago that the issue of forming an international precedent is not as simple as declaring it as such or not.

"[The US] tried very hard and assertively to support Kosovo's independence, but [to not make it] a precedent," Saunders said. "What the administration doesn't understand is that what's a precedent is in the eyes of the beholder."

"We don't get to decide how other people react to what we do," he said. "Other people get to decide."

Looking forward to a final resolution of the conflict, Bryza said that Russia and Georgia would be the main players because of their democratically elected leadership, which the US views as legitimate.

"We support Georgia's territorial integrity," Bryza said. "That means that the leaders of the Abkhaz and South Ossetians are not on the same legal grounds as the democratically elected leaders of Georgia or the leader of Russia."

South Ossetia and Abkhazia, lacking independence, do not have internationally recognized de jure governments. However, both regions do have de facto independently operating governments with leaders.

Moreover, with the US constantly citing Georgia's status as a democracy as a strong reason to back it, many are left curious by the absence of talk of a 2006 referendum in South Ossetia when residents unanimously voted for independence. Whether the leaders of the breakaway region were democratically elected by international standards or not, their leaders certainly and legitimately represent this view.

"If you asked the people in those two regions where they want to live [in terms of independence or under the Georgian state], it's quite clear that the leadership is representative of that," said Saunders.

But if the US continues to ignore that reality, it could further dilute the US's international standing as an advocate of democracy and self-determination.

"People start to wonder why we are taking these positions," said Saunders. "It gets a lot harder to say we are standing on principle."