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Georgia and Kosovo: A Single Interwined Crisis

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The Russo-Georgian war was rooted in broad geopolitical processes. In large part it was simply the result of the cyclical reassertion of Russian power. The Russian empire — czarist and Soviet — expanded to its borders in the 17th and 19th centuries. It collapsed in 1992. The Western powers wanted to make the disintegration permanent. It was inevitable that Russia would, in due course, want to reassert its claims. That it happened in Georgia was simply the result of circumstance.

There is, however, another context within which to view this, the context of Russian perceptions of U.S. and European intentions and of U.S. and European perceptions of Russian capabilities. This context shaped the policies that led to the Russo-Georgian war. And those attitudes can only be understood if we trace the question of Kosovo, because the Russo-Georgian war was forged over the last decade over the Kosovo question.

Yugoslavia broke up into its component republics in the early 1990s. The borders of the republics did not cohere to the distribution of nationalities. Many — Serbs, Croats, Bosnians and so on — found themselves citizens of republics where the majorities were not of their ethnicities and disliked the minorities intensely for historical reasons. Wars were fought between Croatia and Serbia (still calling itself Yugoslavia because Montenegro was part of it), Bosnia and Serbia and Bosnia and Croatia. Other countries in the region became involved as well.

One conflict became particularly brutal. Bosnia had a large area dominated by Serbs. This region wanted to secede from Bosnia and rejoin Serbia. The Bosnians objected and an internal war in Bosnia took place, with the Serbian government involved. This war involved the single greatest bloodletting of the bloody Balkan wars, the mass murder by Serbs of Bosnians.

Here we must pause and define some terms that are very casually thrown around. Genocide is the crime of trying to annihilate an entire people. War crimes are actions that violate the rules of war. If a soldier shoots a prisoner, he has committed a war crime. Then there is a class called “crimes against humanity.” It is intended to denote those crimes that are too vast to be included in normal charges of murder or rape. They may not involve genocide, in that the annihilation of a race or nation is not at stake, but they may also go well beyond war crimes, which are much lesser offenses. The events in Bosnia were reasonably deemed crimes against humanity. They did not constitute genocide and they were more than war crimes.

At the time, the Americans and Europeans did nothing about these crimes, which became an internal political issue as the magnitude of the Serbian crimes became clear. In this context, the Clinton administration helped negotiate the Dayton Accords, which were intended to end the Balkan wars and indeed managed to go quite far in achieving this. The Dayton Accords were built around the principle that there could be no adjustment in the borders of the former Yugoslav republics. Ethnic Serbs would live under Bosnian rule. The principle that existing borders were sacrosanct was embedded in the Dayton Accords.

In the late 1990s, a crisis began to develop in the Serbian province of Kosovo. Over the years, Albanians had moved into the province in a broad migration. By 1997, the province was overwhelmingly Albanian, although it had not only been historically part of Serbia but also its historical foundation. Nevertheless, the Albanians showed significant intentions of moving toward either a separate state or unification with Albania. Serbia moved to resist this, increasing its military forces and indicating an intention to crush the Albanian resistance.

There were many claims that the Serbians were repeating the crimes against humanity that were committed in Bosnia. The Americans and Europeans, burned by Bosnia, were eager to demonstrate their will. Arguing that something between crimes against humanity and genocide was under way — and citing reports that between 10,000 and 100,000 Kosovo Albanians were missing or had been killed — NATO launched a campaign designed to stop the killings. In fact, while some killings had taken place, the claims by NATO of the number already killed were false. NATO might have prevented mass murder in Kosovo. That is not provable. They did not, however, find that mass murder on the order of the numbers claimed had taken place. The war could be defended as a preventive measure, but the atmosphere under which the war was carried out overstated what had happened.

The campaign was carried out without U.N. sanction because of Russian and Chinese opposition. The Russians were particularly opposed, arguing that major crimes were not being committed and that Serbia was an ally of Russia and that the air assault was not warranted by the evidence. The United States and other European powers disregarded the Russian position. Far more important, they established the precedent that U.N. sanction was not needed to launch a war (a precedent used by George W. Bush in Iraq). Rather — and this is the vital point — they argued that NATO support legitimized the war.

This transformed NATO from a military alliance into a quasi-United Nations. What happened in Kosovo was that NATO took on the role of peacemaker, empowered to determine if intervention was necessary, allowed to make the military intervention, and empowered to determine the outcome. Conceptually, NATO was transformed from a military force into a regional multinational grouping with responsibility for maintenance of regional order, even within the borders of states that are not members. If the United Nations wouldn't support the action, the NATO Council was sufficient.

Since Russia was not a member of NATO, and since Russia denied the urgency of war, and since Russia was overruled, the bombing campaign against Kosovo created a crisis in relations with Russia. The Russians saw the attack as a unilateral attack by an anti-Russian alliance on a Russian ally, without sound justification. Then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin was not prepared to make this into a major confrontation, nor was he in a position to. The Russians did not so much acquiesce as concede they had no options.

The war did not go as well as history records. The bombing campaign did not force capitulation and NATO was not prepared to invade Kosovo. The air campaign continued inconclusively as the West turned to the Russians to negotiate an end. The Russians sent an envoy who negotiated an agreement consisting of three parts. First, the West would halt the bombing campaign. Second, Serbian army forces would withdraw and be replaced by a multinational force including Russian troops. Third, implicit in the agreement, the Russian troops would be there to guarantee Serbian interests and sovereignty.

As soon as the agreement was signed, the Russians rushed troops to the Pristina airport to take up their duties in the multinational force — as they had in the Bosnian peacekeeping force. In part because of deliberate maneuvers and in part because no one took the Russians seriously, the Russians never played the role they believed had been negotiated. They were never seen as part of the peacekeeping operation or as part of the decision-making system over Kosovo. The Russians felt doubly betrayed, first by the war itself, then by the peace arrangements.

The Kosovo war directly effected the fall of Yeltsin and the rise of Vladimir Putin. The faction around Putin saw Yeltsin as an incompetent bungler who allowed Russia to be doubly betrayed. The Russian perception of the war directly led to the massive reversal in Russian policy we see today. The installation of Putin and Russian nationalists from the former KGB had a number of roots. But fundamentally it was rooted in the events in Kosovo. Most of all it was driven by the perception that NATO had now shifted from being a military alliance to seeing itself as a substitute for the United Nations, arbitrating regional politics. Russia had no vote or say in NATO decisions, so NATO's new role was seen as a direct challenge to Russian interests.

Thus, the ongoing expansion of NATO into the former Soviet Union and the promise to include Ukraine and Georgia into NATO were seen in terms of the Kosovo war. From the Russian point of view, NATO expansion meant a further exclusion of Russia from decision-making, and implied that NATO reserved the right to repeat Kosovo if it felt that human rights or political issues required it. The United Nations was no longer the prime multinational peacekeeping entity. NATO assumed that role in the region and now it was going to expand all around Russia.

Then came Kosovo's independence. Yugoslavia broke apart into its constituent entities, but the borders of its nations didn't change. Then, for the first time since

World War II, the decision was made to change Serbia's borders, in opposition to Serbian and Russian wishes, with the authorizing body, in effect, being NATO. It was a decision avidly supported by the Americans.

The initial attempt to resolve Kosovo's status was the round of negotiations led by former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari that officially began in February 2006 but had been in the works since 2005. This round of negotiations was actually started under U.S. urging and closely supervised from Washington. In charge of keeping Ahtisaari's negotiations running smoothly was Frank G. Wisner, a diplomat during the Clinton administration. Also very important to the U.S. effort was Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Daniel Fried, another leftover from the Clinton administration and a specialist in Soviet and Polish affairs.

In the summer of 2007, when it was obvious that the negotiations were going nowhere, the Bush administration decided the talks were over and that it was time for independence. On June 10, 2007, Bush said that the end result of negotiations must be "certain independence." In July 2007, Daniel Fried said that independence was "inevitable" even if the talks failed. Finally, in September 2007, Condoleezza Rice put it succinctly: "There's going to be an independent Kosovo. We're dedicated to that." Europeans took cues from this line.

How and when independence was brought about was really a European problem. The Americans set the debate and the Europeans implemented it. Among Europeans, the most enthusiastic about Kosovo independence were the British and the French. The British followed the American line while the French were led by their foreign minister, Bernard Kouchner, who had also served as the U.N. Kosovo administrator. The Germans were more cautiously supportive.

On Feb. 17, 2008, Kosovo declared independence and was recognized rapidly by a small number of European states and countries allied with the United States. Even before the declaration, the Europeans had created an administrative body to administer Kosovo. The Europeans, through the European Union, micromanaged the date of the declaration.

On May 15, during a conference in Ekaterinburg, the foreign ministers of India, Russia and China made a joint statement regarding Kosovo. It was read by the Russian host minister, Sergei Lavrov, and it said: "In our statement, we recorded our fundamental position that the unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo contradicts Resolution 1244. Russia, India and China encourage Belgrade and Pristina to resume talks within the framework of international law and hope they reach an agreement on all problems of that Serbian territory."

The Europeans and Americans rejected this request as they had rejected all Russian arguments on Kosovo. The argument here was that the Kosovo situation was one of a kind because of atrocities that had been committed. The Russians argued that the level

of atrocity was unclear and that, in any case, the government that committed them was long gone from Belgrade. More to the point, the Russians let it be clearly known that they would not accept the idea that Kosovo independence was a one-of-a-kind situation and that they would regard it, instead, as a new precedent for all to follow.

The problem was not that the Europeans and the Americans didn't hear the Russians. The problem was that they simply didn't believe them — they didn't take the Russians seriously. They had heard the Russians say things for many years. They did not understand three things. First, that the Russians had reached the end of their rope. Second, that Russian military capability was not what it had been in 1999. Third, and most important, NATO, the Americans and the Europeans did not recognize that they were making political decisions that they could not support militarily.

For the Russians, the transformation of NATO from a military alliance into a regional United Nations was the problem. The West argued that NATO was no longer just a military alliance but a political arbitrator for the region. If NATO does not like Serbian policies in Kosovo, it can — at its option and in opposition to U.N. rulings — intervene. It could intervene in Serbia and it intended to expand deep into the former Soviet Union. NATO thought that because it was now a political arbiter encouraging regimes to reform and not just a war-fighting system, Russian fears would actually be assuaged. To the contrary, it was Russia's worst nightmare. Compensating for all this was the fact that NATO had neglected its own military power. Now, Russia could do something about it.

At the beginning of this discourse, we explained that the underlying issues behind the Russo-Georgian war went deep into geopolitics and that it could not be understood without understanding Kosovo. It wasn't everything, but it was the single most significant event behind all of this. The war of 1999 was the framework that created the war of 2008.

The problem for NATO was that it was expanding its political reach and claims while contracting its military muscle. The Russians were expanding their military capability (after 1999 they had no place to go but up) and the West didn't notice. In 1999, the Americans and Europeans made political decisions backed by military force. In 2008, in Kosovo, they made political decisions without sufficient military force to stop a Russian response. Either they underestimated their adversary or — even more amazingly — they did not see the Russians as adversaries despite absolutely clear statements the Russians had made. No matter what warning the Russians gave, or what the history of the situation was, the West couldn't take the Russians seriously.

It began in 1999 with war in Kosovo and it ended in 2008 with the independence of Kosovo. When we study the history of the coming period, the war in Kosovo will stand out as a turning point. Whatever the humanitarian justification and the apparent ease of victory, it set the stage for the rise of Putin and the current and future crises.