



# KOSOVO

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## Payback time as Kosovo chickens come home to roost

By Sir Ivor Roberts, Independent, Ireland

<http://www.independent.ie/world-news/europe/payback-time-as-kosovo-chickens-come-home-to-roost-1466346.html>

Behind the war of words over the conflict in South Ossetia and the threat of a new Cold War lies a key strategic issue which should not have caught Western policymakers napping in their August somnolence.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia are among those frozen conflicts which Russia warned of if the West persisted in redrawing boundaries in the Balkans by recognising Kosovo's declaration of independence. The cases are two sides of the same coin in Russian minds.

If the West was prepared to support Kosovo's secession from Serbia and disregard internationally recognised borders, then Russia could do the same in respect of Georgia by recognising the borders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as those of independent states. Russia's strategy is brutally simple. Keep South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent buffers, and discourage its neighbours who aspire to Nato membership.

The Russians' dislike of encirclement is profound and historical. More recently, it has been fuelled by enlargement of Nato to take in the Eastern European countries formerly members of the Warsaw Pact. Georgian and Ukrainian ambitions for Nato membership -- discussed but not agreed at the Nato summit in April this year, despite enormous US pressure -- only added to the Russian anger.

Putin, who had been invited to the summit, made his position clear. Russia viewed "the appearance of a powerful military bloc" on its borders as a direct threat. Despite Bush's famous claim after his first meeting with Putin that he could look into his eyes and see his soul, he failed to read Russian red lines.

The US-educated Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, has, since he came to power in 2004 by toppling former Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze, played a clever game in Washington: endearing himself to the foreign policy hawks around Vice-President Cheney, who saw in the Georgian leader a model for the kind of pro-democracy movement which the hawks believe is waiting to spring up worldwide.

Naturally, Saakashvili's supporters in the US included the Republican candidate for the US presidency, John McCain. By contrast, the doves in the US foreign policy establishment were not keen on upsetting the Russians in their own backyard and --



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like some of the European leaders -- took a more critical view of the Georgian President, particularly after his crackdown on the opposition last year and imposition of a state of emergency before this January's contested presidential elections.

Saakashvili visited Bush in the White House only a few months ago and -- despite Bush officials' protestations to the contrary -- appears to have taken away the impression that supportive rhetoric translated into active military support.

Why else did Saakashvili feel strong enough to provoke the Russians by attempting forcibly to integrate South Ossetia into Georgia when Russian armed forces are more than 30 times the size of Georgia's?

Part of the answer may lie in Saakashvili's own personality, which has been described as part neo-con, part-Georgian nationalist and part post-Communist party politician. But the other part lies surely in Saakashvili's belief that, by providing reinforced troop contributions for Iraq, he was building up military credit which could be drawn down to deal with his separatists.

Many anonymous US administration officials are now claiming that they consistently warned Georgia off a fight it could not win, and for which it would not receive US military backing beyond the training they already provide. Perhaps Saakashvili, as a political chancer, believed he could drag the US and Nato into the conflict in the same way that the Kosovo Liberation Army successfully brought in Nato as their air force against the Serbs in 1999.

Indeed, Russia's aggressive response to Saakashvili was partly a reaction to its sense of impotence over Nato action in Yugoslavia, and partly an assertion of Russian power. As if to say that the years of humiliation after the break-up of the Soviet Union are over.

It is now the West which looks humiliated and disoriented. Georgians are asking where the US and Nato were when they were needed. The sense of let-down is palpable. It seems distant days when George W Bush was greeted by 150,000 people as he visited Tbilisi in 2005 (the road to the airport is named after him).

Yet the Republicans, in the shape of McCain, may paradoxically gain from the crisis. He has emerged with a stronger line in rhetoric ("We are all Georgians now") in denouncing Russia than Obama. McCain will proclaim his virtues as the candidate with the weight and experience to deal with such international crises.

It may well, however, have been McCain and the neo-cons around Cheney with their uncritical support for Georgia which encouraged Saakashvili to embark on his rash adventure.



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McCain, though, hit the nail on the head when he called the Russians' devastating over-reaction an attempt in part "to intimidate other neighbours such as Ukraine for choosing to associate with the West".

The West's reaction has been rhetorically robust -- much talk of the severe consequences Russia will face as a result of its action, though whether Russia will be too fazed by its exclusion from the G8 or the WTO is debatable -- but, militarily, Nato looks as impotent as Russia did over Kosovo's declaration of independence.

The shock which greeted Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia's independence can only be cosmetic. This was payback time for Kosovo in identical coinage.

Western politicians maintain that Russia's recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia violates the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia and is contrary to UN Security Council Resolutions. Quite.

Now substitute the West for Russia and Kosovo for South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the inconsistency and double standards of the West's position are clear.

How can the West talk of the need to maintain an independent state's territorial integrity and to refuse to countenance forcible changes of borders when that is exactly what the US and most of the EU countries condoned in recognising Kosovo -- against Serbia's will, and in the absence of any Security Council Resolution allowing it? To argue that Kosovo is unique is facile. Each potential secession is special, with its own often violent history.

Europe's increasing dependence on Russia as an energy supplier weakens its position further. Most of the economic measures which the West might take against the Russians will only hurt the Western Europeans more.

What is needed at this time is cool heads. A ratcheting down of the temperature; fewer mercy dashes to Tbilisi and Kiev, and a toning down of the megaphone diplomacy (however tempting it is to deploy with a domestic audience); more direct engagement with the Russians to bolster the message that a new Cold War harms East and West, and that Nato -- despite some of its recent activity -- is a defensive alliance.

Isolating Russia may make Western politicians feel better, but the sensible course is to engage the Russians in security discussions and to get them to understand that, as spheres of influence are last century's diplomatic vocabulary, what Russia needs is stable, prosperous neighbours who have no hostile intentions.

Unfortunately, Georgia under its current president has not proved an ideal exemplar.

Is Russia not playing a neo-imperialist game?



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Perhaps, but we are clearly no longer in a uni-polar world. The rush to Nato membership by its former satellites and the foolhardy activity of Washington pets like Saakashvili make a traditionally paranoiac Russia distinctly unsettled and unpredictable.

Talking of a new Cold War and building "coalitions against Russian aggression", however, risks being self fulfilling. Engaging with, not isolating, Russia is the path to avoiding further confrontation. Be careful what you wish for, says the old adage.

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