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Georgia shows Canada was rash on Kosovo

By Scott Taylor, The Chronicle Herald

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Back on March 18 when Prime Minister Stephen Harper announced that Canada would recognize Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence many decried this decision as a violation of the United Nations charter.

It was without a UN mandate that NATO had intervened in the clash between Serbian security forces and Albanian separatist guerrillas in 1999. However, it was UN Resolution 1244 that brought a ceasefire to the disputed province, and although NATO troops were to replace Serb forces in providing security, Kosovo was to remain the sovereign territory of Serbia.

It was obvious that Harper's Conservatives understood the implications of recognizing the secession of a province based on a unilateral declaration of independence by an ethnic majority of that territory, as it took a full month for Canada to concede to recognition of the new state.

The U.S. and the British had been the primary pilots steering Kosovo towards independence in this manner, as they knew that Russia and China would block any further efforts to achieve a consensus on this issue through official United Nations channels.

Under tremendous pressure from the U.S. State Department, Harper finally buckled and joined the small number of nations that had already recognized Kosovo's independence. At that juncture some three dozen countries had followed the American lead, and despite George Bush's best efforts, that number has topped out at just 46.

A similar number of nations have rejected Kosovo's independence outright and the remaining 100 UN members continue to sit on the fence.

At the time that Harper reluctantly agree to the recognition of Kosovo, he claimed that this particular Balkan province was a "unique case" and therefore violating the UN charter, which deems national sovereignty to be inviolate, would not set any sort of precedent.

As witnessed by recent events in the Republic of Georgia, the breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have wasted little time in proving Harper wrong. When the Soviet Union collapsed in the early 1990s, three new countries" Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Armenia " emerged in the strategically important region known as the Caucasus.



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While much of the western media's attention was focused on events in the violent breakup of Yugoslavia, an equally brutal series of wars was being conducted in this region. The end result was a number of unresolved frozen conflicts with sovereign territories occupied by belligerent nations "such as the Nagorno-Karabakh region of Azerbaijan, which is still being held by Armenian troops " and regions such as South Ossetia and Abkhazia that refused to join Georgia when it separated from Russia.

Armed with U.S. assurances and military aid, American-educated Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili decided on Aug. 7 to flex his muscles and attempt to exert control by force over South Ossetia. The Russians were not caught napping and they responded immediately and forcefully.

The Georgian troops were hurled out of South Ossetia back into Georgian territory and Saakashvili immediately took to the airwaves to call upon the international community to save him from Russian aggression.

Back in April at the NATO summit in Bucharest, it had been Canada and the U.S. who had pushed forcefully for Georgia's inclusion into the alliance. Thankfully, the central European nations rejected both Georgia and Ukraine's admission to NATO as it could unnecessarily provoke the Russians.

Had Canada and the U.S. been successful, as a NATO member, Saakashvili's cry for support would have plunged the alliance into a military showdown with Russia.

It has now become clear that the Russian bear may be reawakening in terms of military might, but its intention in the Caucasus seems limited to recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as separate states not reoccupying all of Georgia.

What is hypocritical beyond belief is Bush and Condoleezza Rice claiming that by recognizing these two small states as independent, Russia is setting a dangerous precedent for others to ignore the UN charter.

That would be the same UN charter that the U.S. ignored when it bombed Serbia in 1999, when they invaded Afghanistan in 2001 and when they invaded Iraq in 2003.

Canada made a grave mistake in the recognition of Kosovo, and we should not be so quick to leap on board the Bush bandwagon when it comes to determining a policy on the Georgian crisis.

Like the Americans, we no longer have the moral authority to denounce Russia's present actions.