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Georgia Marks End of US Unipolar Moment

By Ash Narain Roy, Mainstream, India

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William Hazlitt, one of the greatest English prose writers, once wrote: "If your enemies can't find a flaw in your reasoning, they will quickly find one in your reputation." The Georgian forces' assault on Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, masterminded by the melodramatic President, Mikheil Saakashvili, took everyone, including Russia and the West, by surprise. On hindsight, it appears the military misadventure was intended to frame Russia as an aggressor through lies and deception as also to outmanoeuvre Moscow militarily through stealth.

Malicious propaganda like "Tbilisi on the verge of occupation" and "Russia using weapons of mass destruction" was used by Saakashvili to mislead the world. Saakashvili knew that Russia would retaliate but he was hoping to turn the tables on Moscow by blaming it for excesses and sufferings of the people. The Georgian leader's deceptive statements prompted many Western news agencies and TV channels to proclaim Russia as an aggressor at least initially.

Triumphalism seems to be second nature to Saakashvili. While his Army fled from Gori even without Russians firing a shot, the Quixotic Saakashvili held a victory rally in Tbilisi, promising never to surrender. Surprisingly, when he began beating his drum saying Georgia's fate was the fate of the free world, Republican presidential hopeful John McCain lapped it up and said: "We are all Georgians." This was reminiscent of Ronald Reagan's claim at the height of Nicaragua's counter-revolutionary war: "I am a Contra".

Saakashvili had apparently done the homework and planned the offensive to coincide with the Olympics opening. Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was in Beijing. The Georgian President thought a swift blitzkrieg into South Ossetia would quickly bring the breakaway republic under Georgian control. President Saakashvili had the confidence that his troops would defend their position against Russia's counter-offensive. His calculation was that Georgia's Western patrons, the US in particular, would exert pressure on Moscow to remain neutral and, if need be, even come to the defence of Georgia. After all, the UN, the European Union and NATO had all along sided with Georgia in the disputes over South Ossetia. Such an expectation was naïve and downright foolish.

The offensive was doomed to fail. Saakashvili ended up in bleeding his nose. What is worse, he may have lost South Ossetia and Abkhazia forever. Worse still, he will have to live down the image of cowering on the ground to duck a Russian plane over the town of Gori if he survives long in power. Jonathan Steele of The Guardian very aptly



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says that the "foolish adventure" turned Saakashvili's bravado into "humiliation" for Georgia. According to Mikhail Gorbachev, "Russia did not want this crisis. The Russian leadership is in a strong position domestically; it did not need a little victorious war. Russia was dragged into the fray by the recklessness of the Georgian President." Gorbachev further explains that President Saakashvili "would not have dared to attack without outside support. Once he did, Russia could not afford inaction."

Saakashvili doesn't seem to have learnt from Georgia's own history which is a history of submission to mighty Russia. Faced with the danger of being gobbled up by the Persian Empire, Georgians formally accepted the protection of Russia in 1783. It is true that Georgians were never comfortable with Russia and never fully accepted Soviet identity. Once the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgia broke away from Russia. Saakashvili often compared Georgia to Czechoslovakia in 1938, trusting the West to save it from Russia. This time around, with so much push from the US to get Georgia into the NATO and eventually the EU, the Georgian leader was hoping the West would back him to the hilt. To his dismay, by recognising the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia may have blocked Georgia's entry into the NATO forever.

SOUTH OSSETIA and Kosovo are a single intertwined crisis. In fact, South Ossetia is Kosovo revisited. It is Moscow's payback to West's folly in Kosovo. As far as Russia is concerned, Kosovo changed the rules of the game. By recognising Kosovo, the West shot itself in the foot and it must now be prepared to face the consequence.

In February 2008, Kosovo declared independence and was recognised rapidly by a small number of European states and countries allied with the US. The West rejected all Russian arguments. Moscow had then argued that the level of atrocities in Kosovo by Serbia was unclear and that, in any case, the government that committed them was long gone. Now President Dmitry Medvedev has used a similar argument to justify Russia's recognition of the breakaway republics. As he said, "This is not an easy choice, but it is the only way to save the lives of people." Georgian bombardments devastated the capital city and killed thousands of people. Such collective punishment was meted out to South Ossetians for overwhelmingly voting for independence in a referendum in 2006. Will the West press for Saakashvili's trial for genocide the way it is hounding out Sudanese President O. Bashir?

German Chancellor Angela Merkel has said that Russian recognition of independence for South Ossetia and Abkhazia "contradicts the principle of territorial integrity, a principle based on the international law of nations and for this reason it is unacceptable". This is precisely what Russia said when it opposed Kosovo's independence. The message conveyed by President Medvedev is loud and clear: Moscow will no longer tolerate NATO's and Western encroachment on its sphere of influence. He has also said that he is not afraid of a new Cold War. For some time Russia has seen, much to its consternation, the NATO spreading its wings into the



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former Soviet Union. The attempts to include Ukraine and Georgia into the NATO are taking the NATO to the doorstep of Russia. Another disconcerting development is the fact that the UN no longer plays the role of a peace-maker. The NATO has increasingly taken over that role. The transformation of the NATO from a military alliance into a quasi-UN has created an anomalous situation.

THE establishment of a middle defence shield in Eastern Europe is another act of grave provocation. Russia has every reason to see this development as a direct threat to its interests in the region. Russia's strong response in Georgia is also a warning to other former Soviet republics about their flirtations with the West at the cost of Moscow's strategic interests. Last July the US, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine conducted a joint military exercise codenamed 'Immediate Response 2008' much to the annoyance of Moscow. President Medvedev's forceful response to Georgia's misadventure has left the US, EU and NATO powerless to overturn the situation on the ground and humiliated them just as Russia felt in Kosovo.

The extension of the NATO to countries that were once part of the Soviet Union is clearly intended to humiliate Russia. As Russian General Aleksandr Lebed, who applied military toughness to politics, wrote a decade ago, "Territories and armies come and go. But humiliation of a nation's dignity remains in the minds of the people." The consequences of such humiliation could be far more damaging than what the NATO enthusiasts imagine.

But Russian declaration of independence for the breakaway republics is not without problems. China and India and many others who opposed Kosovo's independence may not be favourably disposed towards the new states for reasons not hard to discern. China and India have their own share of separatist movements. Hence they will be wary of supporting the Russian move. Elsewhere, if Kurds are fighting for independence from Turkey, the Armenian enclave wants to secede from Azerbaijan. Many analysts maintain that the breakaway republics will ultimately join the Russian Federation.

Georgia lies at the heart of the Caucasus, a volatile region through which oil and gas flow from Asia to Europe. The US interest in Georgia too is because of the Caspian pipeline that runs via Tbilisi.

Some Western commentators are blaming Moscow for initiating a new Cold War. But it is the US which, in order to retain its pre-eminent role in world politics, is preventing other states from challenging Washington's leadership. Washington has begun to realise that its arrogance of power has severe constraints. Its policy of deterring potential competitors from even aspiring to a larger regional or global role has miserably failed. Kosovo and South Ossetia have opened up a new Pandora's Box.

When is a movement ripe enough to merit independence? The world is yet to find an ideal formula. There is still no consensus on what constitutes well-defined borders,



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respect for minority and ethnic rights or the ideal barometer to judge if the population genuinely wants independence without manipulation or interference from a hostile neighbour or regional power. Till that happens, there will be an element of ad hocism and arbitrariness in supporting a movement for independence. Each case will therefore be treated as special.

All said, with Georgian President Saakashvili scoring a self-goal in South Ossetia, President Medvedev has marked an end to America's unipolar moment. Russia, the world's first energy superpower, has drawn a red line no one dare cross, not even the US, the world's only superpower.

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