



# KOSOVO

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September 8, 2008

### **Kosovo 1999 to Georgia 2008**

By David Owen, International Herald Tribune

<http://www.iht.com/articles/2008/09/05/opinion/edowen.php?page=1>

The present crisis over South Ossetia has virtually no parallels with the Cold War which it historically predates.

To understand its nature it is better to train our binoculars on the last 10 years - not to seek out villains, but to piece together a series of interlinked decisions. Most of these were understandable at the time but have cumulatively produced a dangerous gulf of incomprehension between Washington and Moscow.

From the invasion of Kosovo in 1999 to the invasion of Georgia in 2008, a series of misunderstandings and a refusal to sufficiently respect each others' national interest has led to a political divide, fed by a polarized presentation in each country's media.

After the fall of the Berlin Wall, there was virtual unanimity in Moscow and Washington that everything possible should be done to avoid changing historic national boundaries in Europe.

Though Russia disliked the Clinton administration's decision to extend NATO membership to some of the newly independent states, the policy worked in part because the West respected Russia's sensitivity to NATO membership for Ukraine and Georgia.

Russia also cooperated extensively with NATO in the dismantling of the former Yugoslavia. It was only in 1998, as the situation in Kosovo deteriorated, that a real difference began to develop between Russia and NATO in the Balkans.

In a sense, this was inevitable as Slobodan Milosevic had no intention of restoring the autonomy that he had removed from Kosovo in 1989. As the American line hardened, Russia could see that NATO was likely to intervene and that Kosovo would secede from Serbia, so it distanced itself from the West's policies.

Despite this history of cooperation and mutual respect, President George W. Bush and Vice President Dick Cheney all along wanted to offer Georgia early NATO membership, not calculating the practical reality that NATO would be obliged to come to Georgia's defense under the NATO Charter.

It was always on the cards that the Georgian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, would decide - as he did - to "restore constitutional order" to the separatist province of South



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Ossetia. Had Georgia been a member of NATO on Aug. 7, when Georgia launched missiles and tanks against South Ossetia, NATO would have suffered a devastating blow had it not responded to Russia's counterattack.

President Nicolas Sarkozy was right not to commit either NATO or the EU to restoring the territorial integrity of Georgia as part of the EU cease-fire initiative.

In the Western democracies, our politicians and press now talk only of the Russian invasion and ignore the Georgian military attack. To liken South Ossetia to the Soviet Union's military action in Hungary in 1956 or Czechoslovakia in 1968 is neither serious history nor realistic politics.

There are sound reasons why NATO membership cannot be handed out to any country that asks. A would-be member's democracy first has to be proven, and its foreign policy must be stable and aligned with that of the other member states. And wherever possible, the national boundaries of a new member should be accepted by its neighbors.

For some years it has been clear that the wise course has been to put EU membership for Georgia and Ukraine ahead of their membership in NATO. The first lesson from the fighting in Georgia is to speed up EU membership for both, and not to advance NATO membership so long as boundary disputes remain.

The other key lesson is to make EU membership for Turkey a priority. Turkey is the one country which can help the EU seriously diversify its gas and oil supply. Turkey, along its entire length, can and should have a gas and oil pipeline to supply Europe - not just from the Caspian Sea and the countries surrounding it, but eventually from Iraq and Iran as well.

Turkey must be a partner in this EU energy enterprise and it will be far more committed to the project when it sees that objections to its EU entry from France and to a lesser extent Germany have been put to rest and that there is a reliable timetable for entry into the Union.

This is not an anti-Russian proposal. Diversity of energy is a national interest for Russia as well as European nations - a diversity of customers for Russia, a diversity of suppliers for Europe.

Russia is building an oil pipeline to the Far East, with very substantial financial funding from Japan. A gas pipeline will eventually follow. Russia is also pledged to build an oil pipeline into China and it is moving into shipping liquefied natural gas.

There is much hard diplomacy ahead for Moscow, Washington and Brussels over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which will probably have to await a new U.S. president. It will have to be based on realpolitik - Washington and Moscow will have to halt



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mutual recriminations and accept that exceptional, though different, circumstances in Serbia and Georgia have led both countries to invade others without UN sanction.

A settlement of these issues will not be easy, but it is an international interest that it be achieved in 2009.

*David Owen, chancellor of the University of Liverpool, was Britain's foreign secretary in 1977-79 and a European Union peace negotiator in the former Yugoslavia 1992-95. This article was adapted from Lord Owen's address to the M100 Sanssouci Colloquium in Potsdam, Germany.*