



KOSOVO

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Your daily-updated analyses, charts and solution plug-ins for the Kosovo crisis.

October 2, 2008

Casus Belli or Modus Vivendi

By David Paul, Huffington Post

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-paul/casus-belli-or-modus-vive_b_130620.html

Since early August, when Russian tanks pierced the mountain passes of South Ossetia and rumbled into the Georgian heartland, we have found ourselves in an oddly familiar place. It is like one of those moments when you return to your old neighborhood after decades away. As you walk the streets, there is a warm feeling of familiarity. A sense of comfort, of a time when life was simpler and the rules were clear.

Oh, for the Cold War and the remembrances of things past. It was a time moral clarity, when partisanship ended at the water's edge, of the Marlboro Man and enemies in black hats.

If the Cold War ended one evening in December 1991--when then-Russian President Boris Yeltsin and his compatriots conspired to topple the Soviet state--perhaps the uni-polar world of American power that ensued ended this month. This is not to say that Russia has reemerged as a counterweight to American power, but rather that Russia's willingness to push back against the West's determined policy of encirclement has illuminated the limits of American power, and perhaps of American judgment.

The emergence of our new conflict with Russia has come with breathtaking swiftness and the verbal invective has been startling. Condi Rice publicly mocked Vladimir Putin and labeled Russian behavior bizarre. Zbigniew Brzezinski likened the Russian aggression to Hitler's Germany. Across the political and media class we are assured that we are witnessing unwarranted and irrational aggression. Russian conduct has undermined US-Russian relations and threatens to plunge the world into a new Cold War.

But if there is a surprise here, it is that there is such surprise here. After all, Putin has decried NATO expansion for several years and his concerns have been largely ignored. When Russian tanks rolled into Georgia, Putin's objective was not territorial aggression, but rather to waken the West--and America in particular--to Russia's anger at the continuing policies of encirclement. Ironically, Putin's objective was not to get into a debate about the future of Georgia and South Ossetia, but rather--no doubt clumsily--to elevate bi-lateral discussions to the strategic level.

But as the crisis deepens, as American politicians of all stripes pile on, and as Russia deepens her diplomatic isolation, one has to ask if this is the direction that we want



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go. Is it really in our interest to play a game of chicken with a nuclear-armed and paranoid adversary?

It did not have to come to this. In the wake of 9/11, the event that was supposed to change everything, Putin made his case for a grand alliance with America. After the planes hit, Putin was the first international leader to call George Bush and pledge his nation's solidarity and support. Russia provided critical support to US efforts in Afghanistan--where the US had few intelligence assets on the ground--including helping the CIA build critical alliances in Afghanistan and supporting the development of US bases in the former Soviet states in Central Asia. Beyond Afghanistan, Russia proposed to be a partner in dealing with Iran, whose radical Islamism was a vital threat to Russia, within and without.

For Russia's part, Putin asked that we recognize Russian strategic concerns along with our own. First, he asked that we temper our response to Russia's internal struggles with Chechen terrorists. Second, he asked that we curtail the expansion of NATO into Georgia, and particularly into Ukraine. Finally, he asked that we not locate missile defense systems in Eastern Europe.

Russia's fears of America were not irrational, despite our political and media consensus to the contrary. After all, in the wake of the dismantling of the Soviet Union, American policy remained overtly hostile to Russia. Despite assurances to the contrary from Presidents Reagan and Bush, the US supported NATO expansion to Russia's borders; Neoconservatives targeted Russia and Putin for regime change; and mainstream policy advisors argued that US policy must now promote the dismemberment of the Russia.

Putin, it should be noted, was and remains immensely popular in Russia. He has brought stability and pride to the Russian people, after the pain that ensued with the dismemberment of the Soviet empire as Russian people lived through debasement at the hands of their archrival; the destruction of their currency, personal saving and standard of living; environmental degradation through chemical and nuclear contamination; a dramatic decline in mortality; years of internal bombings and terrorism in the nation's capital at the hands of national separatists; and the plundering of national wealth at the hands of their elected leadership.

Intelligence analyst George Friedman argues that the defining provocation by the West was the Kosovo conflict in 1999. That action--heralded as a success in the West--was implemented under the auspices of NATO after Russia blocked UN action. That event marked the ascendancy of NATO--an organization in which Russia has no voice--as an international body empowered to act in support of separatist movements without preexisting legal authority to do so. That authority was vested in the United Nations, which embodied two principles. First, that borders were defined and frozen. Second, that action to change borders could not be undertaken without UN sanction.



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For Russia, a country with literally hundreds of ethnic groups, regions and languages, the Kosovo issue and the negation of UN authority threatened to undermine its control of its own borders and state. The West's support of Kosovo's declaration of independence earlier this year marked the final step in the undermining of international institutions and rules governing international relations, borders and sovereignty. From the Russian perspective, with Kosovo, the West had laid the legal groundwork for actions not simply to contain Russia, but to begin to break it apart.

When Georgia launched its assault on South Ossetia, Putin seized the moment to raise the question: What rules are going to govern international law and sovereignty in the years ahead? Will the UN rules and the notion of fixed borders apply, as his neighbor to the Georgia claimed in justifying its invasion, or were we going to live under the new Kosovo rules, that the Americans and the West had now embraced, when might would replace right? If NATO could usurp UN authority and christen Kosovo a state, Russia could do the same.

When American Secretary of Defense Robert Gates promptly announced that under no circumstances would America come to Georgia's aid militarily, he was simply affirming what Putin knew to be the case: In the wake of two long wars and a debased currency, the US has become long on hubris and short on stick, and would not come to Georgia's defense. The era of American uni-polar authority was pronounced to be a dead letter.

Seven years ago, when we were stronger and Russia was weaker, Putin proposed a partnership with America, but we demurred.

Yet today, as we face a hostile and expansionist Iran, and a resurgent Taliban, Russia continues to share our interests in controlling Iran and Jihadism. Today, as before, Russia's cooperation is critical to our efforts in Afghanistan. And today, Russia has become a critical source of energy to Europe and a true partner in the world economy. Today, the logic of US policy that seeks to further destabilize Russia is not apparent. Perhaps, given the challenges we face in the world, and the real threats to our national and economic security, we should consider setting aside our animus toward Russia, just for a little while.

The irony is that Putin does not want the Kosovo rules or a war with the West. The Russian leader knows well that a new arms race will undermine Russia's future and ability to build a real economy. Sending Russian tanks into Georgia was not a provocation. Quite the contrary. Vladimir Putin was just trying to get our attention.

Perhaps it is time that someone listens.