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# US–Russia Relations after the Events of August 2008

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The US relationship with Russia – in steady decline since Russian ‘disillusionment’ over lack of reciprocal cooperation after 11 September 2001 – is now in a state of flux, following the Georgia crisis of August 2008.

There are three reasons:

- a lame-duck US administration, with a focus elsewhere: the November presidential election and US entanglements in Iraq and Afghanistan.
- irritation at Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili’s unpredictability and rashness.
- genuine concern over the intentions of the current Russian regime, mixed with uncertainty over the most effective counter-policy.

This commentary will examine the last two reasons and then offer a brief analysis of Russian views of US policy.

The public face of US support for Georgia since the Rose Revolution has been as unequivocal as it has been unbalanced. US President George W. Bush’s visit to Tbilisi in 2005 and numerous visits by other senior US politicians have signalled that Georgia is America’s favoured country in the region, with the possible exception of Ukraine. And, Ukraine aside, it is also the country in the region with the best democratic credentials and prospects, though the benchmark is low. But there has been deeper suspicion of President Mikheil Saakashvili at lower, but still senior, levels of US government. He and his young government have exasperated the US on more than one occasion by the immaturity of their foreign policy decision making. The events of August 2008 have entrenched this view.

That the US did not have some suspicions about Saakashvili’s intentions before 7 August – and of the high probability of a massive Russian counter-attack – beggars belief in the face of the huge militarization beyond the northern and southern borders of South Ossetia in the days and weeks before the conflict. True, a huge failure of US intelligence cannot be discounted, but it is more likely that analysts did pick it up – and interpreted it correctly. Matthew J. Bryza, the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State who coordinates diplomacy in the Caucasus, and a known Georgia champion, has said that(‘under instructions’, though he does not say whose) he urged Georgia not to engage Russia militarily on 7 August.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [New York Times, 15 September 2008](#)

Given such ‘insubordination’, the US may take a fresh look at whether Georgia’s NATO membership will enhance or endanger US interests. It may also wonder if inviting Georgia to submit a Membership Action Plan (MAP) will further embolden a president who needs no more egging on. The dilemmas are far from easy to resolve: how to maintain support for Georgia without supporting the erratic Mr Saakashvili; how to distance US support from Saakashvili without giving ground to Russia, whose intentions arouse greater concern than the latter’s imprudence?

Joel Brenner, US counter-intelligence chief, claimed in June 2007 on American National Public Radio that Russian spying had reached ‘Cold War levels’.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it will not have escaped US notice that in July the UK’s security services reclassified Russia as the third largest security threat facing the UK (after Al Qaeda terrorism and Iranian nuclear proliferation).<sup>3</sup>

More specifically, the greatest US worry is that Russia might come to believe that US commitment to the South Caucasus, Central Asia and the western states of the former Soviet Union is weak and limited. Russia may correspondingly seek to expand its influence in any or all of these places. The unpalatable reality is that Russia’s interests in Georgia and other former Soviet states are both greater and more malign in nature than those of the United States – so great, in fact, that it is even willing to risk its relationship with the US.

However, the US, as a single nation, geographically far from the action and less dependent than Europe on Russian hydrocarbons, does not manifest the same disunity over its Russia policy as the EU. There is no American Berlusconi or Schröder, and after the Vice Presidential nominee of the Democratic Party, Joseph Biden, called for a \$1 bn aid package for Georgia, the Bush administration followed suit.

Despite this, some influential US political figures and experts have called for an ‘upgrade’ in US–Russia relations. As a global power, the US has important interests in maintaining cooperation with Russia. Together, the Russian Federation and the United States dispose of 90% of the world’s nuclear weapons. Russia’s relationships with Iran, Syria, North Korea and other problematic states, its geographical position straddling the Black Sea, Caspian and Central Asia, its ability to facilitate or hinder supply of NATO forces in Afghanistan all make its cooperation indispensable for a safer world

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=10785968>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/crime/article4265569.ece>

order.<sup>4</sup> The question of Iran looms particularly large. Russia may be disenchanted with Iran after the rejection of its offer to enrich uranium on Russian soil in March 2005, but there are worrying indications that its preoccupation with ‘asserting’ itself *vis-à-vis* the West trumps its fears over the erratic behaviour of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. These factors will have to be taken into account by US decision-makers when formulating Russia policy.

All of these concerns were in place before the conflict in Georgia started. The current crisis has given the Russia hawks in the US more ammunition. Recommendations made in the Council of Foreign Relations March 2006 paper, ‘Russia’s Wrong Direction’ are now being seriously considered.<sup>5</sup>

US policy towards Russia – not unlike the EU’s – has hitherto been reactive rather than pre-emptive. And, also as in the EU, support for a hard line towards Russia is proportional to the assertiveness and aggression of Russian actions. When Russian policy eases a little, so does US counter-policy. When Russian actions more flagrantly jeopardize Western interests, US (and cross-party) support for tougher counter-measures is more solid. Overall, however, the divisions are not as marked within the US as they are in the EU.

A final point here: well-financed US lobbies will continue to promote Russian interests in Washington, as they do inside the EU. This is nothing new, but there is an increasing interest in the direction, financing and transparency of these lobbies as well as their compliance with US law.

Prime Minister Putin has been careful not to blame President George W. Bush directly, in marked contrast to the personal vitriol heaped on the Georgian president. Nevertheless, he, President Medvedev and other senior figures in the Russian government have claimed that Saakashvili acted at US instigation. Whether the President or a coterie of ‘anti-Russian’ advisers in his administration is singled out for blame, this is a serious charge. Putin’s infamous Munich speech of February 2007 also stopped short of personal attacks, but this did not diminish the concerns it aroused.

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<sup>4</sup> Kuchins, Nikonov, Trenin, *US–Russia Relations: the Case for an Upgrade*, Carnegie Center for International Peace. January 2005.

<sup>5</sup> *Russia’s Wrong Direction*, Council on Foreign Relations, March 2006. Stephen Sestanovich, the Director of the Task Force which produced this publication, is a Russia adviser to democratic presidential candidate, Barack Obama. The publication was among the first to call for Russia’s ejection from the G8, for example.

A Rubicon has been crossed and both sides know it. Russia's re-emergence as a major player, a great power even, is something that a distracted US is learning to live with. That is America's problem. Russia's problem, however, is far greater. Buoyed by short-term tactical victory, territorial gain and the striking growth of its petro-dollar economy in recent years, it is currently sitting pretty. But the pinch is just beginning to be felt. As Philip Hanson's paper in this series argues, the long-term economic consequences for Russia are likely to be negative and exacerbated by recent events. What might we expect when investment contracts, resources fail to keep pace with social expectations and market demand, living standards decline and the brittle stability of the north Caucasus (and possibly some other regions) fractures? How will a still resentful and powerful, but less confident Russia act on the world stage once it fears that long-term trends are moving against it? This is the real challenge for US policy-makers.

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