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# Culpabilities and Consequences

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Culpability matters. We cannot be 'forward-looking' unless we know who we are dealing with, what is driving them and what they are capable of. We also need to know ourselves, particularly when we share culpabilities with others. Culpabilities are shared in this conflict, but they are different in scale and in nature.

The culpabilities of Georgia's President, Mikheil Saakashvili, are essentially those of temperament. He is ambitious, he is a gambler, and he wraps his ego around every problem. When he became President in January 2004, he set himself a priority: restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity; fatefully, he also set a deadline: the end of his first term. He totally misjudged the correlation of forces and, even less excusably, the mood of Russia. Although he understood that Russia had no respect for weakness, he wrongly and rashly assumed that it would respect toughness as a substitute for strength. Towards the aspirations and apprehensions of Georgia's *de jure* citizens in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, he showed even less understanding. Finally, though the culpability was not exclusively his, he had an existential faith in the backing of the United States, which he manipulated and stretched. But he did not provoke this conflict. He was provoked by those who knew how to do it.

The culpabilities of NATO were those of wishful thinking and bureaucratic formalism. It was not always so. After 1991, the Alliance understood that without integration, the ills and insecurities of Central Europe's immature, over-militarised, post-Communist democracies would pose threats to themselves and others. Although it grasped that the former USSR was more complex territory, it refused to treat it as forbidden territory, recognising that the restoration of 'zones of special interest' would have adverse consequences along Russia's periphery and inside Russia itself. These principles survived the events of 9/11, but the means of securing them diminished. The elaborate architecture of NATO-Russia 'cooperation' and the focus on 'programmes' and process substituted for negotiation, blunted warnings and marginalised analysis of Russian policies and plans. For 17 years, NATO almost completely ruled out the re-emergence of Russian military threats in Europe. Defence cooperation with Georgia advanced alongside an almost principled refusal to articulate a policy on its territorial conflicts or assess the dangers they posed.

The culpabilities of the United States lay in over-confidence and neglect. Once Saakashvili was inaugurated, he became anointed by Washington, as Shevardnadze once had been, and the trepidations and warnings of less favoured members of Georgia's elite were ignored (even after the November 2007 crisis bore them out). Command arrangements for the Sustainment and

Stability Operations Programme were inappropriate for a conflict zone.<sup>1</sup> Georgia's vulnerability and importance, its mercurial leadership, the presence of US forces and the precariousness of the post-Bucharest security environment called for high level coordination and direction. There was none. Instead, by summer 2007 there were a multiplicity of agencies, freelancers, 'signals' and back channels leading nowhere.

The culpabilities of the 'international community' were those of piety and impotence. Its leading institutions (the UN and OSCE) are deadlocked by the opposition of its leading members. Its mechanisms for conflict resolution institutionalise deadlock. It was never the territorial conflicts in Georgia, Azerbaijan, Armenia and Moldova that were frozen, only the mechanisms of 'resolution'. In practice, the mechanisms became the resolution, and it is not surprising that in 2004 Georgians elected a president who found this intolerable.

The culpability of the Russian Federation is overshadowed by the problem it poses. Seventeen years after the Soviet collapse, Russia continues to define its interests at the expense of its neighbours. In Yeltsin's time the right of these neighbours to develop according to their own models and with partners of their own choosing was disputed in principle but in practice conceded for a complex of reasons, of which weakness was only one. Any concessions during the early years of Putin's presidency were the product of weakness alone.<sup>2</sup> The threshold was crossed after 2004 thanks to the coloured revolutions and their evident failings, the West's further disregard of Russia's *kto-kovo* (zero-sum) scheme of interests (Kosovo, enlargement, missile defence) and the re-emergence of usable Russian power.

Russia's culpability lay in priming the mechanism for war. The calibrated sequence of measures, political and military, undertaken after NATO's Bucharest summit, the combat readiness of the 58<sup>th</sup> Army, the crescendo of provocations by South Ossetian forces peaking on 6-7 August and the presence of Russian 'peacekeepers' on the scene—not to say all the Russian 'studies' of Saakashvili's aims and character—belie official claims of 'disbelief'

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<sup>1</sup>Its predecessor, the 18-month Georgia Train and Equip Programme (GTEP) was established in 2002 in response to the crisis in the Pankisi gorge and, initially, with the endorsement of President Putin. Its successor, established in a far less friendly climate, was a small command (subordinate to a lieutenant colonel), providing training for unit level (as opposed to combined arms) 'crisis response operations' in multi-national peace-keeping operations rather than territorial defence.

<sup>2</sup> For analysis of Putin's strategic approach after 1999, see James Sherr, 'A New Regime? A New Russia?' in Anne Aldis, ed., [The Second Chechen War](#), (CSRC/SCSI: Camberley, August 2000) (available from author)

at news of the Georgian offensive.<sup>3</sup> The occupation of Georgian ports and cities and the cutting of its transport arteries, threats to the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, the extension of the conflict to Abkhazia and the ethnic cleansing of Georgians from South Ossetia also belie Russia's 'humanitarian' justification for intervention. Finally, the employment of components of the Black Sea Fleet, whilst supporting clear military objectives, followed a sequence of provocative statements (and, in Crimea, actions) regarding Ukraine since Bucharest and obliges us to consider the wider geopolitical purposes of the conflict.

## Where To?

Russia's Georgia operation appears to be an assiduously planned tactical step in pursuit of a strategic goal that lacks a strategy. Those who planned it judged correctly that Georgia's incapacity and the West's divisions would enable Russia to transform the political and military landscape in the south Caucasus and Black Sea Region without sanction or reprisal. Yet this does not mean there will be no long-term consequences for Russia. Neither does it mean that the West will agree to learn the lesson intended: in President Medvedev's words, that Russia 'will no longer tolerate' its 'behaviour' (or, by implication, influence) in Russia's 'regions of privileged interest'. It will hardly advance this narrowly conceived aim if the West adopts a less charitable assessment of Russia's intentions or if the latest application of 'firm good neighbourliness' destroys the residues of friendship on Russia's periphery. Russia's mood (resentment, vengefulness and the worship of power) has dominated reason, and so long as Russia is both bully and victim, it will draw errant and possibly dangerous conclusions whether others are meek or tough.

The Georgian conflict has dealt a powerful blow to Medvedev's liberal project, insofar as it existed, and handed Putin as much *de facto* power as he wishes

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<sup>3</sup> CW Blandy, *Russia and Georgia: A Further Deterioration in Relations*, Advanced Research & Assessment Group, UK Defence Academy, July 2008; Pavel Felgengauer, 'It was not a Spontaneous but a Planned War' [*Eto byla ne spontannaya a splanirovannaya voyna*], *Novaya Gazeta No 59*, 14 August 2008, Vladimir Ermolin, 'Military Mystery' [*Voennoye tainstvo*], <http://grani.ru/Politics/Russia/p.139995.html>, 13 August 2008; John Markoff, 'Before the Gunfire, Cyberattacks', *New York Times*, 12 August 2008. Spring 2006 saw the publication of *Mikhail Saakashvili: A Psychological Study* (republished in Edward Lucas's June 2006 *European Voice*) supposedly compiled with 'contributions' by seven European scientific institutions but translated in unmistakably Russian syntax in a format redolent of Soviet/Russian *dezinformatsia*. Despite its provenance, Georgians who are in no respects friendly to Russia praised the accuracy of the portrait.

to take. The political and psychological pressures on the former to be as strong as the latter can only incapacitate him. The need for 'strength' makes him hostage to constituencies that will never be his (defence industry and the armed forces), it undermines his power to stand up to 'national' capital (those who do not derive their wealth from integration into the global economy) or fight for those who do, and it deprives him of authority abroad. To invert Kissinger's question, 'when there is a problem with Russia, who do you call?' The conflict has unified the country, but in so doing it has made dissent more perilous and entrenched the positions of those who would be the first to suffer if a major and increasingly urgent reform of the bureaucracy, economy and energy sector took place.

Yet then comes the question: for how long? For how long will the neo-isolationists not see what the stock market collapse made obvious: Russia's dependency on the global economy? For how long will they ignore the economic and social costs of the country's 'legal nihilism'? For how long will Russia's *derzhavniki* (great power ideologists) disregard the implications of the South Ossetian/Abkhaz secession for 'national formations' in Russia itself? What will happen when those who see these things are no longer quiet? Will things get better, or will they get worse before they get better? Today it is hard to say.

Today it is also hard to say whether the West will recover its nerve or continue to neuter itself. Yet some changes are visible, and they are not entirely bad. It has become clear to all but the most besotted that the 1990's paradigm of 'partnership' has exhausted itself. Although many G7 leaders speak with conviction about the importance of maintaining cooperation with Russia, few will pretend that cooperation is enough. Fewer now doubt Russia's determination to resurrect its dominance over the former USSR, and whilst some would accommodate to this, virtually no one believes that a strong Russia is good for Europe.

By establishing the NATO-Georgia Commission, by mandating it to 'follow up the decisions taken at the Bucharest Summit' and by assessing the needs of the Georgian army, NATO has quietly let Russia know that the game is not over. The EU's agreement to conclude an association agreement with Ukraine in 2009 sent the same message: integration with Russia's neighbours (and the EU's own) will intensify rather than diminish. Prime Minister Putin might be right to ask 'what is the West?' Whatever it is, it is not leaving.

There would be much to lose if it did. The notion that spheres of influence, established at the expense of countries residing in them, will generate less

misery than they did before 1914 or prove any more stable is based on myth rather than realism. Our task is not to vindicate Russia's outmoded paradigm of security, but create the conditions that will induce Russians, in their own interests, to question it. That will not be done by symbolic and provocative steps (e.g., MAP), but it will require practical measures to strengthen the security of neighbours and restore their confidence in the West and themselves.