

# WebMemo



Published by The Heritage Foundation

No. 2017  
August 11, 2008

## The Russian–Georgian War: A Challenge for the U.S. and the World

*Ariel Cohen, Ph.D.*

As the Olympic Games opened, the tragic and ominous conflict between Georgia and Russia erupted as well. On Thursday of last week, South Ossetian separatists, supported by Moscow, escalated their machine gun and mortar fire attacks against neighboring Georgian villages. This past Thursday and Friday, Georgia attacked the separatist capital Tskhinvali with artillery to suppress fire. Tskhinvali suffered severe damage, thus providing the pretext for Moscow's long-planned invasion of Georgia.

As Russia responded with overwhelming force, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin flew from the Beijing Olympics to Vladikavkaz, taking control of the military operations. Putin sidelined his successor, Dmitry Medvedev, thereby leaving no doubt as to who is in charge. The 58th Russian Army of the North Caucasus Military District rolled into South Ossetia, reinforced by the 76th Airborne "Pskov" Division. Cossacks from the neighboring Russian territories moved in to combat the Georgians as well.

Russia is engaged in a classic combined arms operation. The Black Sea Fleet is blockading Georgia from the sea and likely preparing a landing, while Russian ballistic missiles and its air force are attacking Georgian military bases and cities. At the time of this writing, it looks as if Russian troops will not stop at the South Ossetian–Georgian border but may press their advantage further.

Russia's goals for the war with Georgia are far-reaching and include:

- Expulsion of Georgian troops and termination of Georgian sovereignty in South Ossetia and Abkhazia;
- "Regime change" by bringing down President Mikheil Saakashvili and installing a more pro-Russian leadership in Tbilisi;
- Preventing Georgia from joining NATO and sending a strong message to Ukraine that its insistence on NATO membership may lead to war and/or its dismemberment;
- Shifting control of the Caucasus, and especially over strategic energy pipelines, by controlling Georgia; and
- Recreating a 19th-century-style sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union, by the use of force if necessary.

**Post-Soviet Border Revisionism: The Challenge to Europe's Status Quo.** Russian relations with Georgia were the worst among the post-Soviet states. In addition to fanning the flames of separatism in South Ossetia since 1990, Russia militarily supported separatists in Abkhazia (1992–1993), which is also a part of Georgian territory. Russia also had a cantankerous relationship with then-

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
[www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/wm2017.cfm](http://www.heritage.org/Research/RussiaandEurasia/wm2017.cfm)

Produced by the Douglas and Sarah Allison  
Center for Foreign Policy Studies

Published by The Heritage Foundation  
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE  
Washington, DC 20002–4999  
(202) 546-4400 • [heritage.org](http://heritage.org)

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Soviet foreign minister, whom hardliners in Moscow blamed for the Soviet withdrawal from Central and Eastern Europe. In the 1990s, there were two assassination attempts against Shevardnadze, and elements of the Russian state, such as secret services or military intelligence, came under suspicion both times.

Russia has long prepared its aggression against Georgia's pro-Western President Mikheil Saakashvili, in order to undermine his rule and prevent Georgia from joining NATO. Despite claims about oppressed minority status, the separatist South Ossetian leadership is mostly ethnic Russians, many of whom served in the KGB, the Soviet secret police, the Russian military, or in the Soviet communist party.

In recent years, Moscow granted the majority of Abkhazs and South Ossetians Russian citizenship and moved to establish close economic and bureaucratic ties with the two separatist republics, effectively enacting a creeping annexation of both territories.

Use of Russian citizenship to create a "protected" population residing in a neighboring state to undermine its sovereignty is a slippery slope that is now leading to a redrawing of the former Soviet borders.

**Chilling Language, Strategic Actions.** Aggression against Georgia also sends a strong signal to Ukraine and Europe. Russia is playing a chess game of offense and intimidation. Former president and current Prime Minister Vladimir Putin spoke last spring about Russia "dismembering" Ukraine, another NATO candidate, and detaching the Crimea, a peninsula that was transferred from Russia to Ukraine in 1954, when both were integral parts of the Soviet Union.

Today, up to 50 percent of Ukrainian citizens speak Russian as their first language, and ethnic Russians comprise approximately one-fifth of Ukraine's population. With encouragement from Moscow, these people may be induced to follow South Ossetia and Abkhazia to Mother Russia's bosom. Yet Ukraine's pro-Western leaders, such as President Victor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko, have expressed a desire to join

NATO, while pro-Moscow Ukrainian Party of Regions effectively opposes membership. NATO opponents in Ukraine are greatly encouraged by Russia's action against Georgia.

Beyond this, Russia is demonstrating that it can sabotage American and European Union (EU) declarations about integrating Commonwealth of Independent States members into Western structures such as NATO. By attempting to accomplish regime change in Georgia, Moscow is also trying to gain control of the energy and transportation corridor—which connects Central Asia and Azerbaijan with the Black Sea and ocean routes overseas—for oil, gas and other commodities.

A pro-Russian regime in Georgia will also bring the strategic Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Erzurum (Turkey) gas pipeline under Moscow's control. Such a development would undermine any options of pro-Western orientation for Azerbaijan and Armenia, along with any chances of resolving their conflict based on diplomacy and Western-style cooperation.

**The West's Hour of Truth.** The United States and its European allies must take all available diplomatic measures to stop Russian aggression. The U.S. and its allies need to demand that Russia withdraw all its troops from the territory of Georgia and recognize its territorial integrity.

Furthermore, the U.S. and Europe need to internationalize the conflict. Russian desire to be viewed as upholder of international law needs to be turned against Moscow. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the EU and the United Nations should send other international observers to Georgia, while mediation efforts to withdraw Russian forces need to be expedited.

Talks need to start in a neutral forum, such as the OSCE, to finally settle the South Ossetian matter as well as future Abkhazian problems. This can be done by granting these territories full autonomy within the Georgian state, as Tbilisi has repeatedly suggested.

Beyond this, the United States, its allies, and other countries need to send a strong signal to Moscow that creating 19th-century-style spheres of influence and redrawing the borders of the former

Soviet Union is a danger to world peace. Moscow's plan cannot be accomplished without violation of international law and is likely to result in death and destruction—a price that neither the Russian people nor others should pay.

The U.S. and its European allies should communicate to Moscow that Russia has much to lose—including hosting the 2014 winter Olympics in the Black Sea resort of Sochi, membership in the G-8,

and access to Western markets—if the Georgian aggression is not stopped.

—Ariel Cohen, Ph.D., is Senior Research Fellow in Russian and Eurasian Studies and International Energy Security in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies at The Heritage Foundation.