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Olympic Invasion: China, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Russia's Aggression

John J. Tkacik, Jr.

Friday, August 8, was the holiest day in China's 2008 calendar. Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin and U.S. President George W. Bush were in Beijing (along with 54 other heads of state and 15 prime ministers) to watch the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games. Russia also invaded Georgia that day. China shrugged off the Russian desecration of the sacred date, but the invasion sent shudders through Russia's former Soviet republics.

Yet 20 days later, in the Tajik capital of Dushanbe, the heads of state of China, Russia, and four former Soviet Central Asian "Shanghai Cooperation Organization" (SCO) members pronounced their "support for Russia's active efforts in promoting peace and cooperation in that region." Their communiqué, known as the "Dushanbe Declaration,"¹ included language decrying the "use of armed force to resolve problems" and called for "respect of the basic tents of international law." But was it a veiled slap at Russia?

Not likely, given the signature of Russia's titular President Dmitri Medvedev on the document. The SCO operates by consensus and, if he had wanted, Medvedev could have aborted the whole thing. Of course, it is not clear exactly what happened. It could be that, for whatever reason, this was the best deal Medvedev could get. What is clear, however, is that in the end, it was enough for Medvedev to declare the backing of China and the other SCO states for Russia's intervention.² China has certainly not objected to his characterization.

The declaration is easily read as blaming the necessity for Russia's military intercession on those who failed "to respect every country's and every people's history and cultural traditions," an allusion to Georgia's disregard for the "history and cultural traditions" of its Abkhazian and South Ossetian minorities. More in sorrow than in anger, the declaration recalled that "not long ago, the members of this organization expressed deep concern about tensions generated in the situation surrounding South Ossetia, and called upon each relevant party to resolve peacefully current problems through dialogue."

Despite these sentiments, Beijing was not "concerned" by Moscow's muscular action on the day of the Olympics' opening ceremony. This much was obvious at the summit meeting the following day between Chinese President Hu Jintao and Russia's real strongman, Premier Vladimir Putin. Without a trace of irony, Hu praised China's relationship with its Russian "strategic cooperative partner" as "advancing across the board precisely in accordance with our commonly declared goals"³—a full-throated endorsement if ever there was one. Hu's comments were hardly unusual; in view of their interlocking bilateral and multilateral security treat-

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ties, the China-Russia relationship is what most would call an “alliance.”⁴ Tellingly, the unpleasantness in Georgia was not mentioned in the front-page banner-headlined *People’s Daily* report of the Hu-Putin summit.⁵ Xinhua’s lengthy report of the invasion, datelined Moscow, was relegated to page 17 of the *People’s Daily*, and it blamed Georgia’s oppression of the Ossetians for necessitating the Russian action.⁶

On Sunday, August 10, President Hu held another summit, this time with President Bush, who had just come from a state-sponsored Christian church service. Hu thanked Bush for his “support on many occasions for the Beijing Olympics,” praise that was reported on the front page of the *People’s Daily*, complete with banner headline.⁷ According to Chinese state media, the two discussed North Korea, Iran, Sudan, and Darfur. Yet the Chinese press again failed to mention that Bush raised the matter of Russia’s aggression against its small neighbor. While White House aides recalled that Bush

and Hu had a “discussion of the issue of Georgia,” apparently the Chinese state media viewed such dialogue as inconsequential.⁸

A few days later (with the Olympics well under way), the Georgian ambassador in Beijing sought China’s intercession with Russia. The Chinese foreign ministry stiff-armed the Georgians with the following non-response: “Our position on the South Ossetia issue is clear. We hope disputes can be resolved peacefully through dialogue so as to achieve regional peace and stability.”⁹

Despite the Foreign Ministry’s assurances, China’s current position on “the South Ossetian issue” is *not* clear. In April 2006, China persuaded Georgia to abjure official relations with Taiwan by, in turn, agreeing in a “Joint Statement of the two presidents” that “Abkhazia and South Ossetia are internal affairs of Georgia and should be properly handled through peaceful negotiations based on respect of Georgia’s state sovereignty and territorial integrity.”¹⁰

1. Xinhua News Agency, “Leaders of the member states of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Dushanbe Declaration—complete text,” August 28, 2008, at http://news.xinhuanet.com/world/2008-08/28/content_9731209.htm (September 3, 2008).
2. Richard Spencer, “Dmitry Medvedev Claims Diplomatic Victory for Russia,” *The Daily Telegraph*, August 29, 2008, at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/russia/2638792/Dmitry-Medvedev-claims-diplomatic-victory-for-Russia.html> (September 3, 2008).
3. In Chinese, the phrase reads: “Zhong E zhanlue xiezuo huoban guanxi zheng anzhao women gongtong quedingde mubiao quanmian xiang qian tuijin.” See “Hu Jintao meets Russian Premier Putin,” *Renmin Ribao*, August 10, 2008, p. 1, at http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2008-08/10/content_76859.htm (September 3, 2008).
4. Article 9 of the “Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation” reads: “When a situation arises in which one of the contracting parties deems that peace is being threatened and undermined or its security interests are involved or when it is confronted with the threat of aggression, the contracting parties shall immediately hold contacts and consultations in order to eliminate such threats.” A number of clauses mandating “military and military technology cooperation” are salted throughout the treaty. See “Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation,” signed July 16, 2001, issued in English on July 24, 2001, at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/2649/t15771.htm> (September 4, 2008).
5. *Ibid.*
6. The first sentence of the report reads: “Georgia’s large scale military operations in South Ossetia over the past several days have enraged Russia, and the latter is now in the process of increasing its troop strength in South Ossetia.” See Zhang Guangzheng, “Russia Sends Troops to South Ossetia, Georgia Declares Wartime Posture,” *Renmin Ribao*, August 10, 2008, p. 17, at http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2008-08/10/content_76820.htm (September 3, 2008).
7. Cao Pengcheng, “Hu Jintao meets U.S. President Bush,” *Renmin Ribao*, August 11, 2008, p. 1, at http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2008-08/11/content_77778.htm (September 3, 2008).
8. In a lengthy press briefing on the Bush-Hu meeting, aides mentioned Georgia only once in passing. See Press release, “Press Briefing by Press Secretary Dana Perino and Senior Director for East Asian Affairs Dennis Wilder and Deputy National Security Advisor Ambassador Jim Jeffrey,” Office of the Press Secretary, August 10, 2008, at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2008/08/20080810-4.html> (September 3, 2008).
9. Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Qin Gang’s regular press conference, August 13, 2008, at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/xwfw/s2510/t465781.htm> (September 3, 2008).

That “Joint Statement,” however, was only for foreigners—not Chinese—to see. At the time, the *People’s Daily* said nothing of Georgia’s territorial integrity, sovereignty, or anything “peaceful” in its article reporting the Joint Statement,¹¹ nor can one find the text of the Joint Statement on the Chinese Foreign Ministry’s Chinese language web page.¹²

Thus, on August 26, when Moscow announced its formal recognition of Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s independence from Georgia, the Chinese Foreign Ministry was only able to muster the following ambiguous statement:

The Chinese side expresses concern for the most recent changes in the developing situation in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. We understand the complicated history and the current situation of the South Ossetia and Abkhazia issue. At the same time, based on the Chinese side’s consistent principled position on this sort of issue, we hope that each of the relevant parties can satisfactorily resolve the issue through dialogue and consultation.¹³

Whatever China’s position is, *principled* is not a word to describe it. In marked contrast to the 2006 China-Georgia “Joint Statement,” this latest comment left out the words “peaceful,” “territorial integrity,” and “sovereignty,” as if the earlier communiqué was irrelevant.

Pointed Inquiry. On August 26, this writer asked Chinese diplomats why China’s rhetorical “adherence” to “principles” of “sovereignty,” “territorial integrity,” and “peaceful dialogue” had vanished as a helpless state was invaded by China’s military partner, Russia. The least China could have done, this writer suggested, was repeat the wording

of the China-Georgia “Joint Statement.” Would that have been so difficult?

In response, the Chinese diplomats did not betray the slightest “concern” that the independence of Georgia’s breakaway regions would set any precedent. Without a hint of irony—which would be appropriate, given China’s relentless opposition to similar votes in Taiwan—the diplomats instead insisted on the right of the Abkhazians and the South Ossetians to determine their own future via a plebiscite. Indeed, China acquiesced to East Timor’s independence on the same grounds.

China’s Expansionist Motivations. China would want to support its Russian partner’s military operations against Georgia for two reasons:

1. China considers American and NATO moves to bring Georgia into the network of Western security pacts as a threat to a close Chinese partner; and
2. China may want to preserve its options for taking similar action beyond its own borders.

For those who believe China is not an “expansionist” state, one should consider that China has active territorial claims on the following locales:

- Japan’s Senkaku Islands;
- All islands, rocks, shoals and undersea resources in the South China Sea (including those occupied by the Philippines, Vietnam and, of course, Taiwan); and
- “The whole of what you [Indians] call the state of Arunachal Pradesh,” as the Chinese ambassador proclaimed in a nationwide television broadcast in India.¹⁴

10. “Hu Jintao and Georgian President Sign Bilateral Joint Statement,” Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, April 12, 2006, at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/eng/wjdt/2649/t246689.htm> (September 3, 2008). Emphasis added.

11. Liu Chao, “Hu Jintao Meets President Saakashvili in Far-Reaching Exchange of Views on Bilateral Relations and International and Regional Issues of Common Concern, Reach Broad Consensus,” *Renmin Ribao*, April 12, 2006, p. 1, at http://paper.people.com.cn/rmrb/html/2006-04/12/content_2155796.htm (September 3, 2008).

12. “China-Georgia, Bilateral Relations,” Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, updated September 7, 2007, at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/wjb/zjzg/dozys/gjlb/1711/default.htm> (September 3, 2008).

13. “Foreign Ministry Spokesman Qin Gang’s Response to Reporter’s Question about Russia’s Recognition of Abkhaz and South Ossetian Independence,” Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, August 27, 2008, at <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/chn/xwfw/fyrth/t469157.htm> (September 3, 2008).

This last claim caused quite a start among the million people in Arunachal Pradesh—none of whom are ethnic Chinese. And, of course, there is Taiwan itself. The Taiwanese, however, may now take some glum consolation that at least their land is not the only territory that Beijing covets beyond its borders.

The Georgian adventure is Russia's fight, and there is no need for China to expend its diplomatic capital in the affair, which explains why China's representative failed to speak up in the United Nations Security Council last Thursday (August 28) on Russia's behalf. Instead, China preferred to let South

Africa and Vietnam play that role. After several fatiguing weeks dealing with Olympic-sized public relations fiascos, it suits China's diplomats to sit back and let the Russians take the heat for their Caucasian invasion. But in light of President Hu's assertion immediately after the invasion that Beijing and Moscow are "advancing across the board precisely in accordance with our commonly declared goals," one should not expect major fissures in the great Eurasian partnership of China and Russia.

—*John J. Tkacik, Jr.*, is Senior Research Fellow in China, Taiwan, and Mongolia Policy in the Asian Studies Center at The Heritage Foundation.

14. Surya Gangadharan, "PRC Ambassador to India claims 'whole of Arunachal Pradesh is Chinese Territory,'" CNN-IBN News India, November 13, 2006, at <http://www.ibnlive.com/news/arunachal-is-chinese-territory-envoy-minces-no-words/26108-3.html> (September 3, 2008).