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Reprint from Volume 20 Number 17

September 4, 2008

Has the US crippled NATO?

Murray Dobbin

With the end of the Cold War, many analysts and policy makers imagined that the developed world might actually move away from its irrational attachment to militarization and war. The most optimistic envisioned a huge, international peace dividend, shifting untold billions previously spent on conventional and nuclear weapons to tackling poverty and inequality around the world. Alas, the US had no intention of dismantling NATO. For the US, it was simple: NATO provided the sheen of legitimacy for the extension of US power well beyond its original mandate of Europe.

Now, ironically, the Bush administration—the most imperial of US governments in generations—may well go down in history as the one that crippled NATO and effectively left the US isolated. Following the destruction of human life in Iraq and Afghanistan and the current escapade in Georgia, it is the possible that the US will lose its already reluctant European Union (EU) partners in making the world safe for US oil companies. NATO risks, if not outright dissolution, a credibility crisis leading to political and military paralysis.

Afghanistan

NATO watchers repeatedly declare that losing in Afghanistan simply 'isn't an option.' But as virtually every analyst is saying, losing in Afghanistan with the current commitment of NATO partners is, in fact, the only option. The longer they stay, the more inept and indecisive they appear. To even maintain the status quo would need a doubling of troop levels, and this simply will not happen.

European populations have no stomach for body bags from a war that is not in Europe's interests. France is now rethinking its existing commitment, despite its president's statement to the contrary.

When (not if) EU NATO members pack their bags, it will be the end of extra-territorial adventures. The US will be totally on its own, save for Israel and, regrettably, Canada.

Russia Back On The World Stage

The situation in Georgia presents even greater problems for NATO as it exposes a widening gulf between the dominant EU powers—Germany, France and Britain—and the US.

While the US and its client state Georgia have, so far, achieved the media 'message' about the conflict, this does nothing to change the facts on the ground, which are clear enough. Georgian President Saakashvili unleashed a brutal, 12-hour assault with hundreds of rockets and artillery shells on the largely defenceless South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali, destroying apartment blocks, hospitals and other civilian infrastructure. It was utterly unnecessary destruction for the operation's stated purpose of occupying the territory.

The US seems completely oblivious to a reality that everyone else recognizes: Russia is now the hegemon in the region and has returned to the world stage with a vengeance. Bush's huffing and puffing and issuing of repeated empty ultimatums makes the 'sole remaining superpower' look weak and confused. The Russian leadership, both Prime Minister Putin and President Medvedev, show sneering contempt for the US for one reason: they can. There is virtually nothing the US can do.

To be sure, Putin is ruthless and authoritarian. But he is also enormously popular, about four times as popular as George Bush is in the US. Why? Because the US and the West in their efforts to turn the former Soviet Union into a free-market wild west, humiliated Russia and created the conditions for a resurgent nationalism that Putin plays like a fiddle. Russians don't much care if he runs roughshod over democracy as long as he re-establishes their pride in Russia as a great power.

Winning the media spin might just be the worst outcome for the West as it will undoubtedly fan the flames of national grievance in Russia even more.

More Georgian Facts

Despite US denials, it is inconceivable that the Bush administration did not know and approve of the invasion plans. The US and Israel have hundreds of military advisors embedded at virtually every level of the Georgian army. Georgia was simply playing its assigned role as an outpost of US neocon ambitions to encircle Russia with free-market client states and isolate it.

The media portrays President Saakashvili as a democrat.

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'This article was published (September 4, 2008) in 'Island Tides'. 'Island Tides' is an independent, regional newspaper distributing 17,500 print copies in throughout the Gulf Islands and the Canadian Strait of Georgia from Tsawwassen to Campbell River, BC.'

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There is no reference to his increasingly authoritarian rule—the brutal put-down of peaceful demonstrations last November, the widely reported abuse of state resources, controls on the media, the arrest of opposition activists, and the suppression of civil liberties.

There is also no reference to the fact that Saakashvili came to power in 2003 largely thanks to millions of dollars from the American Soros foundations poured into organizations that attacked former president Eduard Shevardnadze and promoted the pro-American Saakashvili for president.

Misreading The Russians

For years, the US could afford to dismiss Russian declarations that an encirclement was a threat to its national interests and would be resisted. Russia was weak. But the US occupation of Iraq, instead of unleashing its huge oil supplies, and being a bonanza for American oil companies, has severely weakened the US and contributed to the huge increase in oil prices—giving back to the Russian state the financial power it had lost. The Bush administration, still addled by ideology, apparently didn't notice and continued to dismiss Russia as if it were still a bankrupt state.

The Georgian attack was either a wag-the-dog strategy to help the Republicans win the White House, or one of the most spectacularly incompetent applications of foreign policy in US history. In either case, the US miscalculated not only Russia's response, but more importantly, the entire geo-political balance of power in the region. Someone, such as the usually astute Israelis, should have told the US that in this confrontation, Russia holds virtually all the cards.

The US Needs Russia

The US needs Russia much more than Russia needs the US. Russia actually supports America's determination to defeat the Taliban and allows non-lethal military supplies to travel through its territory. It continues to play a critical partnership role with the US in persuading both Korea and Iran to abandon any plans for nuclear weapons. It co-operates with US counter-terrorism and counter-narcotics efforts. And it has a veto in the UN—an institution the US has suddenly found very useful and which Russia can neutralize with the raising of a hand.

Annoying The Russians

Russia has a huge arms export capacity and currently sells to Iran, Venezuela, and Syria. So far, it has not sold its most sophisticated weapons systems, like its S-300 anti-aircraft missile system. But that could change, as a worried Israel knows full well.

In fact, Syria's President Bashar al-Assad met with President Medvedev in Russia on August 20, less than two weeks after the Georgian assault, to talk increased co-operation. It was no coincidence. Al-Assad knows all about geo-political power

imbalances and how they can be manipulated; Russia criticized Israel for providing a wide variety of arms to Georgia and al-Assad attacked Georgia as the aggressor and declared publicly: 'Our position is that we are ready to co-operate with Russia in any project that can strengthen its security.'

Pipeline Plans In Tatters—Europe Alienated

The biggest mistake of the US's Georgia blunder has already taken place. US plans to expand Georgia's role as a transit-point for Caspian basin oil and gas pipelines to Europe are in tatters. Private companies hate uncertainty, and it will be a long time, if ever, before they consider building another pipeline through a country with such unreliable leadership—one possibly headed back into Russia's sphere of influence.

European dependence on Russian oil and gas (now standing at 40% of EU consumption) gave Moscow too much power. This was the principal reason the US poured so much military assistance into supporting Georgia. And its disastrous military adventure, okayed by the US, gave Putin the excuse he needed to declare the return of Russia as a regional power and nip American energy plans in the bud, with huge consequences.

Now more than ever, the EU countries will be loathe to anger Russia. America's recent signing of the missile defence agreement with Poland has further angered Putin, and it is European countries that could suffer the consequences.

New NATO Memberships

European members of NATO recently moderated the aggressive American push for membership for the Ukraine and Georgia by saying it would come 'eventually.' But that now looks to be a very long way off. Would the European members of NATO really want to engage in a war with Russia over another incursion into tiny Georgia? They would be obliged to do so if Georgia was a member.

US foreign policy disasters in Iraq, Afghanistan and now Georgia threaten to drive NATO—corporate globalization's most legitimate policeman—back into its old barracks and with its old, narrow mandate. So just as the US is being forced to recognize that its superpower status can be regionally challenged, it could be virtually alone in trying to police the planet.

Commentary

The rigid adherence to ideology—any ideology—ultimately makes its adherents stupid. The neo-cons behind the Project for the New American Century (PNAC)—Dick Cheney and company's blueprint for American global dominance—so fervently believed in their project that they dismissively rejected the conventional approach to foreign policy. The PNAC, by simply believing the US had the right to police the world,

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assumed that it could.

The resulting doctrine of 'full-spectrum [military] dominance' over the entire planet was effectively immune to any real-world evidence to the contrary. In part because the PNAC brains trust and their president had contempt for the role of government, they simply bypassed the judgment of conventional state institutions and replaced reason with faith.

One Bush aide ridiculed what he called the 'reality-based community' which consisted of people who naively '...believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.' He told American writer Ronald Suskind: 'We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality.'

Indeed they do. But it is looking less and less like the one their faith led them to imagine. ☞