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### Poking the Bear

by Doug Bandow

01.15.2010

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Senator Richard Lugar, ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, has proposed that the United States and Europe rearm the country of Georgia. The result would be to increase the chances of renewed conflict with Russia.

Georgia well illustrates the plight of small, divided states with large, assertive neighbors. Independence and freedom are hard to maintain. Georgia spent centuries as part of the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. Even today Georgia exists in the shadow of a hostile Moscow.

However, Tbilisi shares another trait with many small, divided states—brutish nationalism. The status of ethnic minorities, such as the Abkhazis and Ossetians, has varied over time. Even the Mensheviks, who ran Georgia for a time after the Russian Revolution before being overrun by the more ruthless Bolsheviks, abandoned their more liberal principles when dealing with non-Georgians. Many Abkhazis and South Ossetians understandably do not want to be ruled by Tbilisi today.

The result is a geopolitical mess, but one with little relevance to America. During the Cold War no one suggested that the status of Georgia mattered to U.S. security. Georgia was listed as a “captive nation” in a 1959 congressional resolution—along with Turkestan, Armenia, Idel-Ural, White Ruthenia, Cossackia, and Tibet. Washington issued the usual platitudes about their plight, but there was no pretense that America ever would go to war in their defense. So it should remain with Georgia today.

Ronald Asmus of the German Marshall Fund of the United States argues that the August 2008 “war was fought to prevent Georgia from going west,” but even if so, the blunt question is: so what? It is desirable that Georgia be able to go west. But it is not desirable that Washington risk conflict to enable Georgia to go west.

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The United States won the Cold War without going to war. American policy makers accepted the unfortunate reality that Washington could not guarantee the national aspirations of all peoples—think Hungary in 1956. The end of the Cold War changed nothing in this regard. Nothing at stake in the Caucasus is worth risking war.

America has labeled Georgia a “strategic partner,” but the relationship’s costs are far greater than its benefits. Washington has provided Tbilisi with billions of dollars in aid, including \$1 billion after the August 2008 war, and spent generously to train Georgian troops. In return, the Saakashvili government deployed Georgian forces in Iraq and soon in Afghanistan. This caused Senator Lugar to refer to Georgia as “an exceptional contributor to international security,” but these detachments have been of only marginal value to America. The burden on Georgia has been far greater, but Tbilisi views such missions as an investment in its own security—to help its campaign to join NATO—rather than international security.

The Caspian Basin’s energy resources are valuable, but not crucial. Moreover, Russia would not block the West’s access to oil and natural gas in anything short of a major confrontation—such as NATO backing Georgia after an attack on Abkhazia and/or South Ossetia. Tbilisi also has been hailed as a way station to Central Asia, “an ideal launch pad into the region,” in the words of Michael Hikari Cecire of Evolutsia.net. However, this is far from being a great strategic asset: Attempting to create U.S. military outposts in territory surrounded by competing great powers, like China, India and Russia, is a fool’s errand.

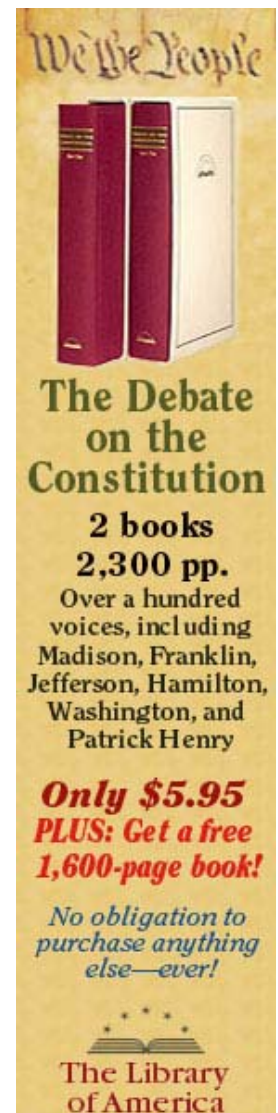
Much has been made of upholding international law by respecting Georgia’s territorial integrity against Abkhazi and South Ossetian separatism—in July Vice President Joseph Biden declared the administration’s support for a “united” Georgia. But a decade ago the United States and NATO launched an unprovoked, aggressive and illegal war to detach Kosovo from Serbia, and two years ago formally recognized Kosovo’s independence after pushing a sham negotiating process with independence as the predetermined outcome.

Last August Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili inveighed against “cross-border aggression, creating ‘frozen conflicts’ that destabilize sovereign states or attempt to legalize ethnic cleansing.” Yet his putative allies followed just such a policy in the Balkans. Whatever the juridical merits of the disputes involving Georgia, hypocrisy is too kind a word to apply to Allied policy in this regard.

Even Georgia’s claim to be an example of democracy and liberty in the region is strained. Freedom House declares Georgia to be only “partly free.” Last year the organization reported:

**Georgia received a downward trend arrow due to flaws in the presidential and parliamentary election processes, including extensive reports of intimidation and the use of state administrative resources, which resulted in a marked advantage for the ruling National Movement party.**

Human Rights Watch warned that President Saakashvili’s policies seemed “to fuel rather than reduce abuses.” Even Vice President Biden, as he led administration cheers for Georgia, alluded to the regime’s notable failings. Yet Tbilisi continues to push to get into NATO, which would extend American military guarantees up to Russia’s southern border. And Washington policy makers have endorsed Georgia’s membership, which would turn the alliance on its



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head: an organization intended to make the United States more secure would multiply the possibilities of going to war in a distant region with a nuclear power over issues of vital importance to that nation but of little account to America.

Enthusiasts of NATO expansion appear to believe that Russia would never challenge the alliance, but both the First and Second World Wars began with the failure of deterrence. Moscow would be far more likely to make the same judgment it made in August 2008: it had substantially more at stake in border security than the West had in creating a pliant satellite. Adding Tbilisi to NATO would merely increase allied embarrassment if war again broke out and the West did nothing.

Although President Barack Obama has largely adopted the policy of his predecessor in backing Tbilisi, he appears to be less determined to override European opposition in order to rush Georgia into NATO. The administration also indicated that it intends to emphasize military training rather than weapons acquisition, though it said doing the latter is “not off the table.”

In contrast, Senator Lugar would further entangle America by selling arms to Tbilisi. He recently released a delicately worded report, arguing that NATO “must come to grips with the reality that Georgia will require coordinated security support from America and Europeans nations for some years to come.”

Such a policy would further tie Washington to the dangerously provocative Saakashvili government. In principle, providing weapons but not security guarantees may be a cost-effective strategy enabling smaller states to defend themselves without forcing the United States to risk war. Even if they are unable to alone match a larger potential adversary, they could threaten to exact a sufficiently high price as to discourage aggression.

Unfortunately, President Saakashvili is interested in offense, not defense, in sharp contrast to, for instance, Taiwan’s government. Even former-President Chen Shui-bian, though determined to provoke China through rhetoric and policy, was never interested in initiating military conflict. In short, Chen was an agent provocateur, not a fool. The Bush administration denied Taiwan arms out of pique rather than to prevent America from being drawn into a war.

In contrast, President Saakashvili triggered the August 2008 war. Both foreign media and outside monitors reported that Georgia fired the first shots. An independent European Union report also concluded that Georgia struck first, in violation of international law, and that there was no evidence to substantiate Tbilisi’s claim that Russia moved troops into South Ossetia before Georgia attacked. Erosi Kitsmarishvili, Georgia’s former ambassador to Moscow, testified to the Georgian parliament that “Saakashvili wanted that war, he has been bracing for that during the last four years.”

According to Kitsmarishvili, Tbilisi expected American backing in any conflict. In sum, Taiwan is defensively revisionist, hoping to be recognized as independent of China. This objective is best achieved by avoiding war. Georgia is offensively revisionist, hoping to recover the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This goal can be best achieved by initiating war.

The fact that Russia was only too happy to exploit Saakashvili’s irresponsibility highlights the danger of backing Tbilisi. Whether Saakashvili believed that Georgia would win without Russian involvement or with allied support, he was willing to roll the

geopolitical dice and lost. There's no evidence that he's learned his lesson. Rather, he has redoubled his efforts to win U.S. support.

In December Mikheil Saakashvili explained his decision to send troops to Afghanistan: "Even though Georgia is not yet a NATO member—and while we know our path to membership may be long—we see ourselves as firmly allied in purpose and values with the U.S. and the transatlantic community." Paul J. Saunders of the Nixon Center also points to President Saakashvili's expressed belief that "Georgia will be more protected," obviously by the United States, once the Afghan and Iraqi wars are resolved.

The planned Georgian deployment to Afghanistan is part of Mr. Saakashvili's strategy. He likely would see weapons sales as another sign of U.S. support on the way to winning a security commitment. Washington's intentions are irrelevant. Michael Hikari Cecire notes that "Georgia hopes to purchase security guarantees against powerful Russia."

Encouraging Tbilisi's belief that it can solve ongoing territorial disputes militarily would be very dangerous in a region which remains locked in a cold war. The Georgian government already has proved its willingness to light "a match in a roomful of gas fumes," as former-Secretary of State Colin Powell put it. Rearming Georgia's military would encourage Saakashvili to try again.

There may come a time when renewed arms sales to Georgia would promote peace and stability in the Caucasus. But not with the present Georgian government. Washington must not again contribute to the misperception of allied support for an upcoming war.

Americans should sympathize with the Georgian people. But as Paul J. Saunders warns, "The problem with a closer U.S.-Georgia military relationship is that Mr. Saakashvili wants the United States as an ally to serve his interests and perhaps Georgia's at the expense of American interests." Yet Washington's principal responsibility is to protect the security of Americans. The United States should avoid any military commitments to Georgia.

Doug Bandow is a senior fellow at the Cato Institute. A former special assistant to President Reagan, he is the author of *Foreign Follies: America's New Global Empire* (Xulon Press). He also is a fellow at the American Conservative Defense Alliance.

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