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Alliances as Transmission Belts of War

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It's been a year since Georgia and Russia went to war. Both sides deserved more than a little blame. But the U.S. and most European governments lined up behind Tbilisi. They now have been embarrassed by the release of a report from the European Union blaming Georgia for firing the first shot. That is, the West backed the aggressor in an unnecessary war. The episode should serve as a caution before Washington again ties American security to alliances, which are as likely to serve as transmission belts of war as firebreaks to war.

The U.S. once avoided making permanent alliances. The American colonies accepted French support to win their independence, but the infant nation backed away from Paris when the latter was convulsed by revolutionary terror and Napoleonic dictatorship a few years later.

On leaving office George Washington advised his fellow citizens in his famous Farewell Address: "The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible."

In particular, he noted that "Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none; or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities."

Throughout the 19th century U.S. followed Washington's advice, other than in the War of 1812, which was justified as a response to British interference with American shipping and impressments of American sailors. The U.S. avoided the succession of later European conflicts, including the Balkans independence struggles which sparked John Quincy Adams' famous aphorism that while America is "the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all," she "goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy." For similar reasons the U.S. made no alliance with any nation.

A century later Woodrow Wilson dramatically abandoned American tradition, foolishly thrusting the nation into Europe's distant kill fest of World War I. But even then President Wilson maintained

America's independence by fighting as an "associated power" rather than a full member of the Entente. Only after World War II did the U.S. initiate its first enduring alliance—NATO in 1949. And then the Soviet Union and its allies posed a genuine threat. Other treaty commitments, with South Korea, Japan, and other countries, soon followed. But the fall of the Berlin Wall two decades ago, and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union, dissolution of the Warsaw Pact, and end of hegemonic communism, eliminated the justification for the Atlantic Alliance and other pacts.

For a time NATO officials debated the relevance of their organization. Some even suggested using the alliance to combat illicit drugs or promote environmental protection. But the new duty which attracted the most support was expanding into "out-of-area" activities, that is, intervening in conflicts such as the Balkans, involving nations other than NATO members. The alliance also began expanding up to the border of Russia. NATO already has incorporated the Baltic States. Next on the list for many analysts is Georgia and Ukraine. Washington promoted and funded anti-Russian governments in both countries and pushed the Europeans to clear the path to alliance membership. It didn't hurt that President Mikheil Saakashvili (like Ukraine's Viktor Yushchenko) spoke English, had been educated in America, spent generously on Washington lobbyists, and cultivated support from U.S. politicians, such as Sen. John McCain.

When war erupted between Georgia and Russia, Tbilisi presented itself as the victim. Despite evidence of Saakashvili's culpability—independent monitors, British military officers, and Western journalists alike offered inconvenient reports that Tbilisi had triggered the conflict by attacking South Ossetia, whose separation had been won with Russian assistance—the Bush administration offered strong support. Republican presidential candidate John McCain seemed prepared to march on Moscow, and Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama sounded only slightly less hawkish than McCain.

Afterwards Washington advocated rushing Tbilisi into NATO to deter Moscow from another attack. U.S. officials claimed to be defending the innocent and righteous in Georgia, even though Georgian officials subsequently confirmed Saakashvili's aggressive intentions. For instance, Georgia's ambassador to Russia, Erosi Kitsmarishvili, said that President Saakashvili, who had made return of the two territories one of his campaign planks, was "itching" to fight over South Ossetia.

The Obama administration has continued to push for including Georgia in NATO. The Europeans have been less enthusiastic, but have formally promised Tbilisi eventual membership. Now, however, Tbilisi's image recently took another body blow with publication of the European Union's Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia. The Mission emphasized that "There is no way to assign overall responsibility for the conflict to one side alone," and blamed Moscow for provoking Tbilisi—among other things, by supporting the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—and responding to Georgia's attack with disproportionate force. But the conflict began with "a massive Georgian artillery attack" on Tskhinvali, South Ossetia, which "was not," emphasized the Commission, "justifiable under international law."

In a separate statement Mission head Heidi Tagliavini observed: "None of the explanations given by the Georgian authorities in order to provide some form of legal justification for the attack" are valid.

At the time of the artillery barrage, the Georgian commander of his nation's peacekeeping contingent stated that "the operation was aimed at restoring the constitutional order in the territory of South Ossetia." Only later did President Saakashvili claim that the attack was intended to respond to a Russian invasion. Yet the Mission reported that it could not substantiate "the Georgian claim concerning a large-scale Russian military incursion into South Ossetia" and concluded that "Russia had the right to defend" its peacekeepers. After release of the report, Georgia's former UN Ambassador, Irakli Alasania, said that Saakashvili made a "politically irresponsible decision, which

triggered full-scale war and threatened Georgia's statehood."

In short, Tbilisi started a war while enjoying the strong backing of America. Kitsmarishvili said Georgian leaders expected backing from Washington. Having been encouraged in his pursuit of membership in NATO, Saakashvili probably expected Europe to come to his aid as well.

Unfortunately, real peace is not yet at hand. The Mission warns: "Even though both sides stress their commitment to a peaceful future, the risk of a new confrontation remains serious." Georgia and Russia routinely charge each other with provocations. South Ossetia and Tbilisi have been accusing each other of border violations. Saakashvili recently switched defense ministers in order to speed the rebuilding of Georgia's armed forces. Abkhazia shifted control of its railroad to Moscow, sparking Georgian charges of "robbery." In August Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin visited Abkhazia.

If Tbilisi was willing to start a war merely hoping for aid from countries with which it had no formal treaty obligation, imagine how Tbilisi likely would act if it enjoyed an official American promise to go to war. There would be no greater invitation to irresponsibility. Still, NATO expansion advocates assume that Russia would back down in any confrontation if Georgia belonged to the Atlantic alliance.

Even if that was true, Washington would antagonize Moscow for no obvious benefit. NATO made sense when the Soviet Union threatened war-torn Western Europe. But that world disappeared long ago. Today the European Union states have more than ten times the GDP of Russia and Moscow's old Warsaw Pact allies have changed sides. Russia has neither the will nor the ability to conquer its neighbors.

Even so, confronting Moscow would risk much potential loss. Washington wants Russian cooperation on supplying U.S. forces in Afghanistan, persuading Iran to eschew nuclear weapons, convincing North Korea to give up nuclear weapons, reducing American and Russian nuclear weapons, and supplying energy to the world market. Moscow is not likely to offer its assistance gratis.

Moreover, deterrence is never certain. Deterrence requires that an opponent view a threat as credible, and believe the consequences of backing down are less damaging than of moving forward. The issue is not what American policymakers view as reasonable, but what leaders in the opposing nation (or nations) believe.

Although the exact distribution of authority in the Putin-Medvedev diarchy isn't obvious, both appear to be committed to strengthening Russia's international position. Last year they demonstrated that they viewed border security as an interest worth war. And Moscow obviously calculated—correctly—that even though the U.S. and Europe had put Tbilisi on the road to NATO membership in 1992, the allies still were not prepared to defend Georgia from Russia. Formally bringing Tbilisi into the alliance would not change the balance of interests and thus likely would not change Moscow's judgment.

Of course, the U.S. and Europe might then feel sufficiently embarrassed at the prospect of abandoning an ally to risk war. But in that case NATO would have demonstrated how alliances can cause as well as deter war.

High-profile alliances failed to prevent conflict among the ancient Greek city states as well as Rome and varying allies and enemies. European history is littered with conflicts featuring a kaleidoscope of ever-varying coalitions; countries and empires often marched off to war in the certain knowledge that countervailing alliances would field armies and navies in response.

In World War I every major power simultaneously placed its security in an alliance and risked war against an opposing alliance. None of these nations allowed even the near certainty of conflict to deter their provocative policy. So, too, in World War II, which began with Germany's invasion of Poland after France and Great Britain guaranteed Warsaw's security. The U.S. and Europe might hope that expanding NATO would act as a cheap form of deterrence, but they have no assurance that it would do so. Especially when their prospective ally has demonstrated its tendency to attack its much larger neighbor.

Americans should sympathize with the Georgian people, who have been so badly served by their own government as well as victimized by the Russian military. But U.S. policy should promote the security of America, not of Georgia or other nations.

Alliances can be useful international tools, but it should come as no surprise that alliances created to fight the Cold War have little relevance in a world without a global hegemonic struggle. The new report on Georgia's responsibility for triggering the Russo-Georgian war should remind Washington that just as there is a time for joining alliances, there is a time for leaving them. Now is that time for America.

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