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Stumbling Into (Another) War

On August 26, Russian President Dmitri Medvedev recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Washington has sharply criticized Moscow for this, while the European Union has threatened sanctions. Russia and Georgia have signed a ceasefire agreement stipulating that Georgian forces must move back to their bases, while Russian troops are supposed to withdraw to pre-conflict positions. The agreement, however, leaves the Russians some room to take additional “security measures,” and reports continue to come in of Russian troops moving closer to Tbilisi.

The Bush administration has called for the withdrawal of Russian forces and has used the crisis to clinch a deal with Poland on deploying anti-missile-defense systems there. Moscow has responded by warning that this could make Poland a target. According to Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk, the deal includes a clause about a “mutual commitment” between the two countries to come to each other’s assistance “in case of trouble.” Thus Poland, like other Eastern European states and former Soviet republics, especially Ukraine (along with the United States and Israel, Kiev has armed the Georgian army), is nervously watching events in Georgia.

“NATO’s decision to withhold a Membership Action Plan for Georgia might have been viewed as a green light by Russia for its attacks on Georgia, and I urge the NATO allies to revisit the decision,” said John McCain. (Georgia’s Saakashvili also makes that claim.) One of McCain’s top advisors is a former lobbyist for Georgia, and in mid-August, Saakashvili stated that he talks to McCain “several times a day.” On August 13 Russia’s *Izvestiya* blamed American neoconservatives for the war, with Vice President Cheney and McCain playing the main roles in the plot to “whip up anti-Russian hysteria” and help McCain

win the November election. Without naming names, Vladimir Putin made a similar charge in an interview with CNN. But Barack Obama has also endorsed continuing the process of bringing Georgia into NATO. In view of the stakes, a dispassionate review of the conflict in Georgia might give readers a chance to decide for themselves where American interests lie and who is to blame.

Neoconservatives have been conspicuously anti-Russian. Nevertheless, Washington sources say that Saakashvili was repeatedly warned by administration officials not to use military force. Briefly, both disputed territories wanted independence from Georgia, if not incorporation into the Russian Federation. Moscow took a hand in the 90’s to insert itself into the dispute as a peacekeeping force. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Washington continued to press for NATO expansion eastward as the Warsaw Pact broke up, deepening ties with Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine, and the Baltic states, as well as former Soviet Central Asian republics. The West is interested in undermining Russia’s control of oil and natural-gas pipeline routes in Eurasia, and Georgia has been an alternative route for oil from the Caspian basin. NATO membership would have solidified the alternative route through a security guarantee and weakened Moscow’s hand.

Saakashvili has been frustrated by the reluctance of some NATO members to fast-track Georgian membership. The presence of Russian troops in the disputed territories was a particular cause of anxiety, but Georgia was set to press forward on a Membership Action Plan at the December NATO meeting. Meanwhile, Russia was strengthening her troop contingent in South Ossetia. President Bush, who has been Saakashvili’s close ally, is set to leave office in January, and Tbilisi could not be sure how the elec-

tions would turn out or what a new president, especially Obama, might do. Saakashvili appears to have been counting on strong U.S. support in a confrontation with Russia, winning a media campaign that would cast Russia as the aggressor, with the West pressing for the Russians to leave the disputed territories. The case for NATO membership would be boosted, while Saakashvili could consolidate his position domestically.

Russia’s rapid response suggests that the Georgia intervention was planned ahead of time. Military analyst Pavel Felgenhauer has claimed that Moscow began planning an assault in April, when a frustrated Vladimir Putin attended a Brussels NATO meeting and it became apparent that, in spite of Moscow’s warnings, the West would eventually move forward on NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine. According to Felgenhauer, the plan evolved toward a war that would remove Saakashvili and prevent Georgia’s inclusion in NATO. Some sources have claimed that the Russians baited Saakashvili (by most accounts a hot-headed and impulsive man) by shooting down Georgian reconnaissance drones and firing on Georgian police and Georgian-populated villages in South Ossetia, though others have since reported that the provocations were likely not all from the Russian side. Russian military analyst Aleksandr Golts has written that both sides had done “everything” to “spark a military conflict.”

Much remains unclear about the Russia-Georgia clash, but a close look at the available evidence suggests that there may be a “party of war” in Washington, Tbilisi, and Moscow. The game of bluff, saber rattling, and political maneuvering could pit the Western powers—or perhaps the United States alone—against Russia. Great powers have played such games before, stumbling into war. <