

# The Kosovo Payback



rather because its territory is the only logical route for oil/gas pipelines from the Caspian basin to the Mediterranean along the so-called B-T-C (Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan) axis, that bypasses both Russia and Iran. In order for Russia and/or Iran to be denied any royalty revenues or more

Different political ideas and perceptions would unavoidably lead to diverging opinions in apportioning blame and praise for the ongoing crisis in the Caucasus, distinguishing between “aggressors” and “innocent victims”, and drawing a clear line between right and wrong. One point must however be quite clear: what is happening there is a direct consequence of the Western military action against Serbia in the late 90s to enforce the separation of Kosovo, and even more particularly of our decision, earlier this year to formally acknowledge Kosovo as an independent state – in direct and defiant contradiction to not only international law, which admittedly counts but to a (very modest) point, but also the solemn commitments we took at the end of the conflict.

There indeed are some frantic attempts at splitting the hair in four and conveniently denying any logical connection between the two events, but the stench of hypocrisy and double standards emanating from such attempts is overbearing. The Russian intervention in the Georgia/South Ossetia conflict is the perfect mirror image of the NATO intervention in the Serbia/Kosovo conflict, and the Russian sanctimonious claims of their military action being but a “peace-enforcing” deployment to protect the South Ossetian population from Georgian violence are exactly as plausible and credible as NATO’s attempt, back in 1999 to sell its ten-week bombing campaign against Serbia as an “humanitarian intervention” on behalf of the Kosovo Albanians threatened by Milosevic’s thugs.

Those who are now tearing their vests apart and crying wolf about the “Russian aggression”, the “sacrosanct territorial integrity of sovereign states” and the like should ponder on the fact that it was us, and only us who for our own reasons did deliberately open this particular can of worms, fanning the flames of separatism on ethnic or/and religious grounds and justifying external armed intervention to support it. We were warned, over and over again about the possible consequences of such a policy, but in our supreme confidence we elected to blindly rush forward nonetheless – and now we seem to dislike being hoisted by our own petard.

Not that worries about the Kosovo or the South Ossetia populations have anything to do with all of this, of course. What is going on is not a tit-for-tat of support to separatist movements for its own sake, but rather a major geopolitical struggle on the “Grand Chessboard”, to use Zbigniew Brzezinski’s very appropriate expression – a struggle which however has been virtually one-sided so far, with the process of military/political encirclement of Russia

and the progressive erosion of its outer perimeter and area of influence that has been relentlessly going on for the best part of the past decade.

Yugoslavia was dismembered, and Russia could do nothing. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania were brought inside NATO – in breach of formal engagements by two successive US Presidents – and Russia could do nothing. The US set up military bases in the former Central Asian Soviet republics of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, and Russia could do nothing. Western agencies and NGOs engineered and financed the “Rose Revolution” that brought Saakashvili to power in Georgia and the parallel “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine, and Russia could do nothing. A very convenient pattern had apparently been established, whereby the West could move as it pleased in the strategic and political vacuum left by the collapse of the USSR. Now for the first time Russia is pushing back.

US Defense Secretary, Robert Gates is completely correct when he warns of the events of these days being likely to have “deep repercussions on the US/Russia relationship for many years to come”. Of course they will, because the Russians have sent an exceedingly clear signal about their willingness and preparedness to move resolutely to defend what they regard as their vital interests – a signal that we will ignore at our own peril. Any future Western moves at or across Russia’s borders, be these through “democracy-export” operations, NATO’s eastward march or other means, will need to be weighted much more carefully that it was the case during the recent past.

It is this perception of a resurgent Russia coming to resist Western and most particularly American “Great Game” plans in the Caucasus and Central Asia, and not any worry about “poor democratic Georgia”, that did trigger the very violent reactions (only verbal so far) in Washington and some other Western capitals (although not all of them, for a variety of reasons). Very much the same applies to the frantic calls about “stopping Russian aggression” that are now filling the pages and air times of most Western media, which appear having very quickly forgotten that it was Georgia that made the first irresponsible move. Some might wish to call this a “return to the Cold War climate”, but it would be more accurately described as the decade-long period of Russian frustrated impotence coming to an end.

Within the global struggle for control of the so-called “Heartland”, Georgia is important to the West not so much in view of the alleged democratic credentials of its government, but

importantly any form on control on energy supplies to Central and Southern Europe, Georgia must remain firmly anchored in the Western camp and safe from domestic or cross-border troubles.

Things are not that simple and unequivocal, however, because Russia has been making steady diplomatic and commercial progress with its rival “Southern Stream” pipeline project, that would bring oil and gas across the Black Sea to Bulgaria and then north through Hungary and west through Serbia. Bulgaria, Greece and Hungary have all signed agreements with Russia and stand to cash in juicy transit royalties, while Italy’s state-owned ENI oil concern happens to be a 50% partner of Gazprom in the “Southern Stream” venture. Thus, even within NATO there are forces, that have a vested interest in seeing Georgia doomed to a future of unreliability and disorder.

Which brings us to the passably interesting (although not really important) question of exactly who did deliberately trigger this crisis, and aiming at which results. The simpler and in a sense most optimistic explanation is that an irresponsible Georgian President committed a monumental blunder, invading South Ossetia on his own decision in the abysmally wrong perception that Russia would not be able to react, or/and in the foolish expectation that the US and the EU would stand ready to succour him with military force. This would seem to be confirmed by President Saakashvili’s repeated attempts at presenting his quarrel with Russia as automatically involving America and Europe, as well as his histrionic gesture of appearing in TV flanked by the flags of the EU and NATO – organisations which last time I checked Georgia was not part of.

By raising our hypothetical analysis a notch higher, it is also certainly plausible that the Russians deliberately provoked President Saakashvili, offering the bait of cross-border artillery shelling by South Ossetia separatists that he promptly swallowed hook, line and sinker thus giving the Kremlin a very solid pretext to intervene and “make their point”.

But in view of the very close relationship between President Saakashvili and the US administration, it is exceedingly difficult to imagine that he could have made such a momentous move without the previous knowledge and approval when not explicit instructions by Washington. From this particular point of view, it would be *very* interesting to know the real nature and content of the discussions that took place during Condoleezza Rice’s visit to Tbilisi about a month before the crisis erupted. “Semi-official” leaks to the US media are now trying to suggest that Dr. Rice explicitly warned the