

# Worsening conflict between Russia and Georgia driven by Washington-Moscow rivalries

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A series of recent incidents in Georgia's two breakaway republics, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, have brought about a further deterioration in relations between the Putin administration in Russia and the Georgian government of Mikhail Saakashvili. Both South Ossetia and Abkhazia receive support from Moscow.

Georgian authorities have complained to the United Nations about alleged repeated Russian incursions into Georgian airspace and have even claimed to have shot down a Russian fighter, which they say crashed in Abkhazia, within the strategically crucial and disputed Kodori Gorge. Georgian forces and a pro-Tbilisi government-in-exile control part of the Kodori Gorge, but areas under control by both sides are in constant flux.

In the other breakaway republic, firefights have repeatedly broken out between South Ossetian forces and their Georgian counterparts.

More seriously, in mid-September, what Moscow called "instructors" at an "anti-terrorist training center" were killed with knife and gunshot wounds in Abkhazia by Georgian forces. When Saakashvili spoke at the United Nations General Assembly on September 26, he accused Russia of "reckless and dangerous" behaviour.

The Saakashvili administration is being pressured, from both within and without, into increasingly reckless adventures designed to reunify the two breakaway republics with Georgia.

From within the country, the goodwill granted to Saakashvili is falling away across the social spectrum. As far as the Tbilisi elite are concerned, Georgia is no closer to reunification with the two breakaway republics than it was under the rule of Saakashvili's predecessor Edvard Shevardnadze. From the perspective of Georgian workers and peasants, the current building boom and increased commercial activity in the capital Tbilisi cannot mask the stagnation of already-meagre living standards. When Saakashvili took over from his former mentor, Georgia's

per capita income was lower than Swaziland's and more than half the population lived in poverty. Little seems to have changed for the better in the intervening five years.

From without, Georgia is being destabilised by Russian support for the breakaway republics. In response, the Georgian government's efforts to ingratiate itself with Washington in its drive to dominate the energy resources of the region have become ever more determined.

Georgia now has 2,000 troops in Iraq—the second largest troop presence among America's dwindling allies, behind Britain. The currying of favour with Washington is intended to smooth the way for its application for NATO membership and in return for US assistance in Georgia's conflict with Moscow.

Reporting on the new Georgian troop deployment in Kut, Iraq, Andrew Kramer for the *New York Times* spoke to Cpl. Georgi N. Zedguidze, who said, "As soldiers here, we help the American soldiers. Then America as a country will help our country."

The Georgian government has also announced that the 2007 military budget will rise by fully one third. Spending on the armed forces will constitute US\$769 million. Together with considerable American aid—Georgia is the third largest recipient of US military aid behind only Israel and Egypt—this represents an enormous spending pledge by such a small country.

Last year, Georgia built a NATO standard military base in Senaki at the de facto border with Abkhazia. Later this year, a similar standard base will be opened on the border with South Ossetia.

Such a posture by a former Soviet republic infuriates the Putin regime, which is in ever more open conflict with the US and is utilising all measures at its disposal to destabilise the Saakashvili administration. Since 2003, the Russian government has stopped the importation of Georgian produce into Russia—its nearest and largest market. Moscow has cut off energy supplies in winter, expelled Georgian

workers from Russian soil and thereby ended the flow of monies back to Georgia, continued to financially and militarily support Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and, most dangerously, attempted to draw Georgian forces into a direct military conflict.

The Putin regime is increasingly pressured by the US military along its whole southern border.

The collapse of the Soviet Union changed the geo-politics of the entire Eurasian landmass. A series of newly independent states emerged on Russia's borders in the Caucasus and Central Asia, redrawing the geographical lines between former Soviet territory and the Middle East, between the south Caucasus and the Middle East and likewise between the Central Asian states. The borders of the Soviet Union had extended as far south as Turkey and Iran.

For Moscow, the subsequent penetration of US military might into Eurasia, in Afghanistan, Iraq, possibly Iran and various Central Asian states, including Georgia, is an intolerable incursion into its traditional sphere of influence.

February 2007 marked a watershed in the deterioration of Russian relations with the US. President Putin's speech at the Munich conference on security policy directly accused the Bush regime of international aggression and designs on Russian territory. On a subsequent trip to the Middle East, Putin reiterated that Russia was a great power that saw itself as a counterweight to US imperialism.

The Russian government has identified America as its "principal adversary." In his May 9 Victory Day speech to commemorate the 62nd anniversary of the Red Army's defeat of the Nazi invasion, Putin made a comparison between the Third Reich's drive to war and the foreign policy of the Bush administration. He mourned the collapse of the Soviet Union as "the greatest geo-political catastrophe of the twentieth century."

For its part, the Bush administration is well aware of the Russian proximity to the Middle East. The possibility of Russian military forces entering Georgia from South Ossetia would bring them just 250 miles from the Iranian border.

Washington is set on installing what it claims is a missile defence shield in the Czech Republic and Poland supposedly directed against Iran. But Moscow knows that the real target is Russia. In mid-September, NATO also held a large naval exercise based on the Ukrainian port of Sevastopol. The Black Sea port was formerly the Soviet Union's main warm water port. Those included in the exercise include Azerbaijan, Georgia and the host Ukraine. At almost the same time, Russia, China and other Central Asian states held joint military manoeuvres under the banner of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

In response to American encroachment, Moscow is

prosecuting a war by proxy against Washington on Georgian soil through its support for Abkhazian and South Ossetian autonomy. Some voices in the Russian media are agitating for what they call a "small war" in Georgia—an echo of the claims made in the early 1990s around military aggression in Chechnya.

Russia has also sought to bolster its own military forces. Earlier this year, Putin approved a US\$200 billion, seven-year, rearmament plan to build missiles, ships and planes. On August 17, he announced that a dozen missile-carrying bombers, supported by tanker planes, will be permanently airborne. The resumption of such flights comes after a 15-year hiatus and amidst a series of aerial incidents between Russian and NATO forces, British and American.

Days after the announcement of round-the-clock flights, the Russian military reported that it had successfully tested a new lethal air-delivered bomb. The thermobaric device has been described as the world's most lethal non-nuclear weapon. Channel One, the state-controlled television station, said that the new weapon, nicknamed the "Father of all Bombs," is four times more powerful than the US-made "Mother of all Bombs."

The Bush regime's drive to dominate energy resources through the invasion of Iraq has backfired badly. It has helped bring about large rises in the price of oil and thereby strengthened Russia, which is the world's largest producer of oil and gas and the largest exporter of oil outside of OPEC. With the situation facing the US occupation worsening by the day, and its own coffers full, Moscow has been emboldened to go on the offensive.

Putin has taunted Washington over its failure to suppress Iraqi resistance and asked exactly what they have achieved in four years of occupation. He has called for a timetable of withdrawal for coalition forces from Iraq.

Pavel Feigenhauer, a Moscow-based military analyst, recently told the BBC, "For Baltic countries, for Poland and for those who want to join NATO, like Georgia, their main reason to join NATO is to have a guarantee against Russia." He continued that Georgian membership in NATO "makes NATO and Russia basically enemies.... In a sense they are on a collision course. So a real partnership is hardly possible and any expansion of NATO is seen, in Russia, in Moscow, as a threat to our interests."



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