

Georgian crisis heightens US-Russian tensions over Ukraine

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The crisis in the Caucasus provoked by Washington's belligerent policy toward Russia may soon be eclipsed by growing tensions over the future of Ukraine.

Following the Russian military response to Georgia's attack on South Ossetia August 7, Ukraine's pro-US president, Viktor Yushchenko, flew to Tbilisi to offer political support to Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

On his return, he restated his intention that Ukraine become a member of the US-dominated NATO military alliance, adding that, in the light of the situation in Georgia, Ukraine should boost its military defences. "We very much hope that a positive decision will be taken this year," Yushchenko said.

In a further provocative move, he issued a presidential decree demanding that Russia give 72 hours' notice before moving vessels from its Black Sea naval base in Sevastopol in the Ukrainian province of Crimea. He also reiterated his call for Russia to remove its fleet from the Crimean port when its lease expires in 2017.

Immediately after the Georgian-Russian conflict, Yushchenko issued a decree ending participation in the 1992 agreement with Russia on the use of radar stations in Ukraine, claiming that Moscow had broken its side of the accord.

Instead, Yushchenko said he would welcome Western cooperation in running the radar stations. Ukraine's foreign ministry said that the country could "launch active cooperation with European nations" on missile defence, possibly including "the integration of Ukrainian elements of missile early warning and space control systems with those of foreign countries that are interested in gathering space data."

Into this highly combustible mix stepped British Foreign Secretary David Miliband. Speaking in Kiev on Wednesday, Miliband gave a confrontational speech condemning Russia's actions in South Ossetia and Abkhazia and ignoring the Georgian assault that sparked the conflict.

Speaking alongside his Ukrainian counterpart, Volodymyr O Gryzko, Miliband attacked what he described as a "unilateral" attempt by Russia "to redraw the map" of Europe.

Miliband spoke of the British government's intention to build the "widest possible coalition" against Russia. While claiming, "We don't want a new cold war," Miliband alluded to British support for US plans to fast-track Ukrainian NATO

membership, stating, "My visit is designed to send a simple message: we have not forgotten our commitments to you."

Miliband's remarks followed a chorus of condemnation of Russia by the US and the major European powers for Moscow's decision announced Tuesday to recognize the independence of the Georgian breakaway provinces of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

In response to Yushchenko's threats, Russian authorities accused Kiev of aiding the Georgian assault on South Ossetia. A Russian Foreign Ministry spokesman said that Ukraine had been "supplying weaponry to Georgia so that it got armed to the teeth, and with that, directly encouraging the Georgian authorities to start the intervention and ethnic cleansing in South Ossetia."

Ukraine had "no moral right to tutor others and seek to participate in the settlement," the statement added.

During the fighting in Georgia, Moscow media reported that a Russian Tu-22 bomber was shot down over Georgia with an S-200 surface-to-air missile supplied by Ukraine. "We know that Kiev sold several SAM systems to Tbilisi. Among those, there could be the S-200 systems," an unnamed Russian military figure said.

Two Russian warships, the Black Sea fleet flagship Moskva and a patrol vessel, returned to the Russian port of Novorossiisk on August 10 after engaging with a Georgian ship allegedly carrying missiles. The ships returned to the Sevastopol base on August 23, without any further dispute from Kiev.

A republic of the Soviet Union until 1991, Ukraine today is at the frontline of Washington's efforts to dominate Eurasia.

Following the success of the so-called "Rose Revolution" in Georgia in 2003, which brought Shaakashvili to power with the aid of financial and logistical support from the US, Washington turned its attention to Ukraine, which had retained close political and economic ties to Russia.

The presidential election in late 2004 was to determine who would take over from Leonid Kuchma. His chosen successor, and the favourite of Moscow, was Viktor Yanukovich, prime minister of Ukraine and a man closely associated with the oligarchic clans of the Russian-speaking eastern part of the country. Against him stood former Kuchma loyalist turned pro-US politician Viktor Yushchenko.

Yushchenko and his ally Yulia Tymoshenko—another veteran of the Kuchma regime—presented themselves as the heads of an “Orange Revolution” modelled on the pro-US turnover that had taken place in Georgia.

With western backing, Yushchenko was initially successful in rallying opposition to the corrupt Kuchma regime, especially among young Ukrainian speakers in Kiev and the west of the country. But the “free market” economic policies and Ukrainian chauvinism that characterised the “Orange” forces were viewed with suspicion and outright hostility by much of the population, especially the large Russian-speaking minority, as well as those employed in industries with close ties to the Russian economy.

Over one million Ukrainians work in Russia, while 30 percent of Ukrainians have Russian as their first language.

As well as serving as a vital transit route for Russian oil and gas supplies to Europe, the Ukrainian province of Crimea hosts Russia’s Black Sea fleet. Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Moscow and Kiev came to a tentative agreement over the stationing of the Russian navy at Sevastopol. Comprising the bulk of the former Soviet Black Sea fleet, the base is viewed as a vital window on the world for the Russian military, giving Moscow a naval stake in the Black Sea, the Mediterranean and, thereby, the western regions of Central Asia and the Middle East.

It was, in part, to close this window that Washington intervened by orchestrating and sponsoring the “Orange Revolution.”

However, since gaining power, the “Orange” coalition has proven very unstable and has been beset by rivalries between different oligarchic interests.

Despite coming to power on the promise of cleaning up corruption and improving the living standards and freedoms of the Ukrainian people, Yushchenko has presided over a regime that is widely hated for being at least as corrupt and servile to big business interests as the previous Kuchma-Yanukovich government. Opinion polls put support for Yushchenko at under 10 percent.

Nearly two-fifths of the population live below the official poverty line. In foreign policy, Yushchenko has maintained the unpopular pro-Washington policy, based on demands for Ukraine admission to NATO—a move that polls have indicated is opposed by up to 75 percent of the population.

A state of virtual political civil war exists between Yushchenko and Tymoshenko over control of the levers of power. As a result, the regime has had to mend its economic relations with Russia, and has been unable to push through the kind of “free market” economic restructuring that had been anticipated by Western capital.

Tymoshenko’s political fortunes have fared somewhat better, partly because she is viewed as an opponent of Yushchenko. Currently prime minister in a coalition with Yushchenko’s parliamentary bloc, Tymoshenko is widely

tipped to stand against her erstwhile “Orange” ally in the 2010 presidential elections.

In a desperate attempt to hold onto power, Yushchenko is proposing constitutional reforms to replace the existing power-sharing arrangement between a directly elected president and a prime minister drawn from the largest faction in the Verkhovna Rada (parliament). In what would amount to the establishment of a presidential dictatorship, Yushchenko has proposed that the post of prime minister be abolished and that he alone be empowered to appoint the cabinet and all senior state personnel.

While the proposal has little chance of passing in the Ukrainian parliament, it is a damning exposure of the democratic pretensions of the “Orange Revolution,” which brought to power a group of pro-US oligarchs with no more commitment to democracy than the previous Kuchma regime.

There has been speculation that the Kremlin is backing Tymoshenko to replace Yushchenko in 2010. Although she has frequently utilised anti-Russian chauvinism to aid her political career, Tymoshenko’s virtual silence on the Georgian crisis has been taken as an indication that she is allying herself to Moscow in order to advance her presidential ambitions.

Whatever the veracity of the claims, Moscow appears to be counting on Tymoshenko to defend its interests in Ukraine.

In response to US-backed demands for Ukraine’s admission to NATO, Russia has already begun to hasten the decoupling of its military industrial complex from that of Ukraine.

Reflecting the highly-integrated economies of the Russian and Ukrainian republics that were developed during the Soviet period, the two countries still maintain close economic cooperation, especially in military technologies. However, in June a Russian military contractor announced that it would take over from a Ukrainian firm the building of engines for Russia’s cruise missiles.

Moscow also plans to develop the port of Novorossiysk on Russia’s Black Sea coast as an alternative base for its fleet, should it be unable to use Sevastopol after 2017.

There are well-founded fears in Kiev that a further souring of relations with Moscow and moves towards NATO membership could spark opposition within Crimea, an autonomous republic with strong historical, cultural and economic ties to Russia, raising the prospect of a South Ossetian scenario whose consequences would be even more catastrophic than the conflict with Georgia.



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