TRANSNATIONAL POLITICAL IDENTITY IN RUSSIA:
AN EXAMINATION OF MICRO NATIONALISM
IN OSSETIA AND ABKHAZIA

By

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Abstract

It is axiomatic to posit that we are in a period of sweeping and revolutionary
cchanges. The rise in the willingness of ethno-national groups to demand and
even fight for self determination has created what might be called micro
nationalism. This trend towards the fragmentation of political identities is
associated with the increased number of microstates that have established their
independence during the past few decades. This paper focuses on transnational
political identities in the Russian enclave of North Ossetia and Abkhazia. The
paper starts by arguing that a growing number of people knew themselves as
politically connected to a variety of groups, such as religion, that transcend the
traditional political boundaries of nation and state. The paper goes on to identify
the major sources of transnationalism. Clashes of civilizations served as our
theoretical framework of analysis. The paper concludes by positing that
transnationalism presents an alternative route to the future.

Introduction

It is axiomatic to posit that nationalism and ethnic differences
contributed to the final breakup of the Union Soviet Socialist Republic
(USSR) and have contributed to plague the Commonwealth of
Independent States (CIS), especially Russia. Lenin once described the
Russian empire as a “prison of
nations” brought together by
conquest. Stalin and his successors
failed to resolve the nationalities
“question”, weakening the Soviet
edifice to the point that Gorbachev
inherited a structure riddled with
problems. Under the Soviet system,
Russia had contained with its borders
16 autonomous republic and 5
autonomous regions. Separatism had
been largely controlled, but with the
break up of the USSR, the former
declared themselves “full” republics
and demanded more power and
greater self government. Russia’s
ethnic groups vary in religion,
language, lifestyle, and tradition (Mc.

Put differently, the central and
most dangerous dimension of the
emerging global politics would be conflict between groups from differing civilizations. In the words of Huntington (1996:13): “clashes of civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace, and an international order based on civilizations is the surest safeguard against world order”.

Huntington (1996:18, 20) went on to argue that the years after the cold war witnessed the beginnings of dramatic changes in peoples’ identities and the symbols of those identities. Global politics began to be reconfigured along cultural lines. People define themselves in terms of ancestry, religion, language, history, values, customs, and institutions. They identify with cultural groups: tribes, ethnic groups, religions, communities, nations, and at the broadest level, civilizations. People use politics not just to advance their interests but also to define their identity. As Baylis and Smith (2005:776) posited, the understanding of the self in relationship to an “other” identities are social and thus are always formed in relationship to others. Put differently, identities shape interests; we cannot know what we want unless we know who we are. But because identities are social and are produced through interactions, identities can change.

The recent border conflicts between Russia and Georgia explain identities politics in the former USSR. At stake is the future of Georgia’s breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Both regions have sought independence from Georgia in the early 1990s, against the wishes of Georgia. Both have run their own affairs without international recognition since splitting from Georgia in the early 1990s and have built ties with Moscow. Russia has granted its passports to most of their residents.

We are in a period of “sweeping and revolutionary changes”, one study begins (Klare and Chandraini, 1998: vii). “We have entered into a period of turbulent transitions,” another study concurs (Mansbach and Rhodes, 2000: xi). One direction of change, as identified earlier is the fragmentation of existing large states into ever smaller units as minority nations within the states seek their own independent homelands. This trend towards the fragmentation of political identities or micronationalism according to Barber’s (1996) “tribalism” is associated with the increased number of micro states that have established with the independence during the past few decades.

The other direction of change is taking humankind on a path toward a broader, more inclusive view of humanity. This call for change reflects frustration with the traditional way that we humans have organized ourselves politically, by making our nation and its associated sovereign territorial state the primary focus of our political identity (Rourke and Boyer, 2004: 106). Exploring transnational political identity in the old USSR is the focus of this paper. As we shall see, a growing number of people view themselves as politically connected to a variety of groups, such as religion, that transcend the traditional political boundaries of
nation-states.

Clarification of Concepts

TRANSNATIONALISM AND POLITICAL IDENTITY

Transactions between and across societies are the basis of integration, interdependence and transnationalism. Where issues of economy, migration patterns, trade, tourism, and politics cut across societies, what you will get is the multinationalization of politics. According to Kaiser (1971:797), the most significant question for multinational politics remains the impact on relations between societies and of overlapping decision-making. For as long as states alone possess the ultimate ratio regis, the empirical theory and paraxeology of international relations must examine how new developments circumscribe or can be used to circumscribe their powers. He points out that in Western European Integration, decision making structures in certain issue areas interpenetrate different political system which results in a far-reaching multinational intermeshing of the political process at the global level.

Rourke and Boyer (2003:106) adds that transnationalism includes a range of political identities, activities, and other phenomena that connect humans across nations and national boundaries. Transnationalism is therefore, inherently counternationalist in that it undermines nationalism and its tangible manifestation by promoting cross-national political activity. These interactions, in turn, raise the possibility of people adopting a sense of primary political identification that does not focus on the nation-state. Political identification is the connections in the minds of an individual between how that person defines himself or herself and an organization, group, philosophy or other reference point. In short, transnationalism is multi-faceted and has the potential of unifying or dividing an entity.

At the level of policy makers, this anxiety was articulated by Kofi Annan, then Secretary General of the United Nations Organization, in his 1997 Annual report. He lamented the rise of negative form of identity politics and their potentially explosive consequences. He stated among other things, that:

This particularistic and exclusionary form of identity politics has intensified in recent years within and among nations.... It is responsible for some of the most egregious violations of international humanitarian law and in several instances of elementary standards of humanity.... Negative forms of identity politics are a potent and potentially explosive force. Great care must be taken to recognize, confront and restrain them lest they destroy the potential for peace and progress that the new era holds in store (The Guardian, 1997:8; Jega, 2003:11)

Jega (2003:14) has articulated the resurgence of politics of identities in the following form. The concept of identity has long been used in social
anthropology and psychology, especially by structuralists and post-structuralists, and has gained particular currency in the post-modernist literature. As a socio-political concept, “identity” has both an individualist and a collective meaning. In any case, it can simply be defined as “a person’s sense of belonging to a group if (it) influences his political behaviour” (Erickson, 1968:57). It is said to be “always anchored both in physiological ‘givens’ and in social roles’...” (Erickson, 1968:63) Its attribute comprises “commitment to a cause”, “love and trust for a group”, “emotional tie to a group”, as well as “obligations and responsibilities” relating to membership of a group with which a person identifies. According to Pye (1962:124) “those who share an interest share an identity; the interest of each requires the collaboration of all”. Thus, ordinarily, identities serve as rallying and organizing principles of social action within the civil society, and in state-civil society relations. They inform and guide political behaviour, and they add dynamism to political conduct in the context of plural societies (Parry and Moran, 1994). In the context of state-civil society relations, they also serve as a check on the potential excesses of the state. Hence, Parry and Moran have observed that “in advanced societies... what is as significant as overriding national identities are the multiple identities which go to make up plural societies” (Parry and Moran, 1994:275). Such physiological givens as gender and age, and sociological characteristics as ethnicity, nationality, religion, kinship relations, or even workplace affiliations can, and often do, create a basis for identity. Identity is not only about individuality and self-awareness, but also and especially about identification with, and commitment to, shared values and beliefs, in a social collectivity into which a person belongs. At any given time, a person may have multiple identities, each of which may always have some bearing on his or her political conduct and social roles in society. Thus, as Adesina noted, where identities are concerned, an individual is Janus-faced.

However, the question of which sort of identity has the most significant impact or bearing on a person’s behaviour is the critical issue, and a subject of theoretical speculation. It is significant that while identities are more or less fixed, identity consciousness is dynamic. Hence, mobilization, provocation and agitation are central to the formation of a requisite identity consciousness which, in turn, is critical to identity-based politics.

The formation or construction of identity space, according to Larsh and Friedman (1992:336), is the “dynamic operator linking economic and cultural processes” in modern societies. In competition or struggles over societal resources, especially in situations of scarcity, collective demands tend to be predicated and organized on shared interests, which in turn and to be hinged on either physiological ‘givens’ or, as is more often the case, on shared socio-cultural identities. Thus, what can be termed as identity politics is nothing
more than, to use Joseph’s phraseology, “the mutually reinforcing interplay between identities and the pursuit of material benefits within the arena of competitive politics” (Joseph, 1987:52).

Identity politics, in other words, is basically “politics either starting from or aiming at claimed identities of their protagonists” (Calhoun, 1994) in national political struggles over access to the state and to avenues of accumulation. It involves the mobilization of identity consciousness in order to create a mass base of support for the ruling classes, and the elite generally, in their factional struggles in the accumulation process. Also, identity politics connotes a relatively high degree of the subjective entering into politics.

Nationalism grows from the sense of community and turns it into “a principle of political loyalty and society identity” (Gellner, 1995:2). Nationalism does this by merging the three concepts of state, nation, and nation-state in a way that is personally related to citizens (Rourke and Boyer, 2003:88). The transformation occurs when individuals (a) “become sentimentally attached to the homelands,” (b) “gain a sense of identity and self-esteem through their national identifications,” and (c) are “motivated to help their country” (Druckman, 1994:4). This merging of the three concepts means that nationalism is an ideology that holds that the nation, embodied in its agents, the sovereign nation-state should be the paramount object of the political loyalty of individuals (Rourke, and Boyer, 2005:88).

In the words of Huntington (1996:125): in the new world, however, cultural identity is the central factor shaping a country’s associations and antagonisms. While a country should avoid cold war alignment, it cannot lack an identity. The question, “which side are you on?” has been relegated by the much more fundamental one, “who are you?” Every state has to have an answer. That answer, its cultural identity, defines the state’s place in world politics, its friends and its enemies. Identity issues are of course, particularly intense in cleft countries that have sizable groups of people from different civilizations.

Politicians invoke and publics identify with “greater” cultural communities that transcend nation-state boundaries, including “Greater Serbia”, “Greater China”, “Greater Turkey”, “Greater Hungary”, “Greater Croatia”, Greater Azerbaijan”, “Greater Russia”, Greater Albania”, “Greater Iran”, and “Greater Uzbekistan” (Huntington, 1996:128).

Transnationalism springs from two sources. A global interaction is one; the degree to which economic interdependence, mass communications, rapid travels and other modern factors are intertwining the lives of people around the world. Human thought is the second source of transnationalism. The philosopher Rene Descartes posited in Discourse on method (1657) that intellect is the essence of human being. “I think, therefore, I am”, he wrote. People can think abstractly, can conceive of what they have not experienced, and can
group ideas together to try to explain existence and to chart courses of action (Rourke and Boyer, 2003:106-107).

Some streams of transnational thought are referred to as globalism, cosmopolitanism or some other such encompassing word. Other transnational movements such as religion and gender have limited focus. Transnationalism is conceived here to include a range of loyalties, activities, and other phenomena that connect humans across nations and national boundaries.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

Human history is the history of civilizations (Huntington, 1996:40). Throughout history, civilizations have provided the broadest identifications for people. As a result, the causes, emergence, rise, interactions, achievements, decline and fall of civilizations have been explored at length by historians, sociologists and anthropologists such as Annold Toynber, Max Weber, Emile Durkheim and Oswald Spengler among others. Civilization refers to the overall way of life of a people (their values, norms, institutions and world view) to which successive generations in a given polity have attached primary significance.

According to Huntington (1996:20); a civilization-based world order is emerging. Societies sharing cultural affinities cooperate with each other; efforts to shift societies from one civilization to another are unsuccessful; and countries group themselves around the lead or core states of their civilization. Put differently, in this new world the most pervasive, significant, and dangerous conflicts will not be between social classes, rich and poor, or other economically defined groups, but between peoples belonging to different cultural entities. Tribal and ethnic wars will occur within civilizations. In this new world, local politics is the politics of ethnicity; global politics is the politics of civilizations. The rivalry of the superpowers is replaced by the clash of civilizations. Huntington (1996:15) concludes by positing that “clashes of civilizations are the greatest threat to world peace, and an international order based on civilizations is the surest safeguard against world war”. Clash of civilizations refers to the controversial idle first used by Samuel P. Huntington in 1993 to describe the main cultural fault-link of international conflict in a world without communism. This paper adopts this concept as its model of analysis.

Huntington (1993 and 1996) offered a new paradigm of world politics in which the principal patterns of conflicts and cooperation were shaped by culture, and ultimately by civilization. Huntington suggested that the civilizations that would determine the future of international politics were the “Western, Confucian, Japanese, Islamic, Hindu, Slavic-Orthodox, Latin America and possibly African” (Huntington, 1993:25).

For Huntington, the balance of power among civilizations is shifting: the West is declining in relative influence; Asian civilizations are expanding their economic, military
and political strength, Islam is exploding demographically with destabilizing consequences for Muslim countries and their own culture. The “international system of the twenty-first century”, Henry Kissinger has noted, “... will contain at least six major powers the United States, Europe, China, Japan, Russia and probably India as well as a multiplicity of medium-sized and smaller countries” (Kissinger, 1994:23-24). Kissinger’s six major powers belong to five very different civilizations, and in addition there are relevant Islamic states whose strategic locations, large population, and/or oil resources make their influence in world affairs.

For Huntington, the clash of civilizations was a historical development. The history of the international system had essentially been about the struggles between monarchs, nations and ideologies within Western civilization. The end of the cold war inaugurated a new epoch, where non-westerners were no longer the helpless recipients of Western power, but now counted among the movers of history. The rise of civilizational politics intersected four long processes at play in the international system:

1. The relative decline of the West
2. The rise of the Asian economy and its associated “cultural affirmation”, with China poised to become the greatest power in human history
3. Its population explosion in the Muslim world and the associated resurgence of Islam and
4. The impact of globalization, including the extraordinary expansion of transnational flows of commerce, information and people (Baylis and Smith, 2005:545)

The coincidence of these factors was forging a new international order with cultural revival at the heart of it.

Baylis and Smith (2005) add that the world was becoming a smaller place, and this was raising human consciousness about cultural differences. Global economic changes had also weakened local loyalties. With Western original idea widely seen to have failed, communications sought to re-create some rooted past. Socialism and nationalism gave way to “Islamization, Hinduization and Russianization”. The “liberal idea” may have been presented as a new universal by the West, but its individualism, secularism, pluralism, democracy and human right had only superficial resonance in Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Buddhist and Orthodox cultures. In reality, the differences between civilizations ran deep: they were about man and God; man and woman, the individual and the state, the notions of rights, authority, obligation and justice. Culture was about the basic perceptions of life that had been constructed over centuries.

Huntington (1993 and 1996) goes on to posit that culture worked at the level of motivation. States remained key actors, but civilizational politics became real when states and peoples identified with each other’s core cultural concerns or rallied around the ‘core state’ of a civilization. Cultural conflicts could be found at a ‘micro’ and a ‘macro’ level. At the former, groups from different civilizations were prone to conflict across local ‘fault-lines’ and by means of a “kin-country syndrome” were
liable to bring in their wider brethren.

According to Huntington (1996: 162-3), the successor to the tsarist and communist empires is a civilization bloc, paralleling in many respects that of the West in Europe. At the core, Russia the equivalent of France and Germany is closely linked to an inner circle including the two predominantly Slavic orthodox republics of Belarus and Moldova, Kazakhstan, 40 percent of whose population is Russian, America, historically a close ally of Russia. In the mid-1990s, all these countries had generally come to power through elections. Close but more tenuous relations exist between Russia and Georgia (overwhelming Orthodox) and Ukraine (in large part Orthodox); but both of which also have strong senses of national identity and past independence. In the Orthodox Balkans, Russia has close relations with Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia and Cyprus, and some what less close ones with Romania. The Muslim Republic of former Soviet Union remains highly dependent on Russia both economically and in the security area. The Baltic Republics, in contrast, responding to the gravitational pull of Europe effectively removed themselves from the Russian sphere of influence.

At the 'macro-level', a more general competition was evident with the principal division between the 'West' and to varying degrees, the 'Rest'. According to Huntington (1993 and 1996) the West's dominance was the most contested by the two most dynamic non-western civilizations, the Sinic and Islamic. Resistance to the West was most evident over issues such as arms control and the promotion of Western political values, which were regarded as a form of neo-imperialism.

Huntington's thesis was highly contentious with critics pointing to conceptual and empirical problems (Murden, 1999); the treatment of culture was brief and the conclusions very pessimistic (Baylis and Smith, 2005:545). They went to posit that Huntington failed to tell the stories of interaction and synthesis that have always gone on between civilizations. Other scholars thought Huntington was needlessly constructing new enemies for the West, once it had lost the Soviet Union as its other, and that the clash of civilizations could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Baylis and Smith (2005) add that much of the criticism was based on caricature, but some reflected the enduring difficulty of using culture to analyze. He was also accused of downplaying the power of global economies and its culture and his failure to recognize the extent to which traditional cultures have been penetrated by global society and markets.

Notwithstanding these pitfalls, Huntington initiated an important discussion about human motivations following the collapse of the Iron Curtin and about the emerging patterns of international conflict and cooperation. This model is equally significant because it is able to:
1. Order and generalize about reality
2. understand casual relationships among phenomena;
3. anticipate and if we are lucky, predict future development;
4. distinguish what is important from what is unimportant; and
5. Show us what paths we should take to achieve our goals (Huntington, 1996:30).

The clash of civilizations may not have told the whole story of what was happening in the post-cold war world, but it told part of it. This model will be applied in the subsequent part of the work.

RUSSIA-GEORGIA CONFLICTS: COOPERATION VERSUS CLEAVAGES

Why should cultural commonality facilitate cooperation and cohesion among people and cultural differences promote cleavage and conflicts? Huntington (1996:128-130) explains as follows:

First, everyone has multiple identities which may compete with or reinforce each other: kinship, occupational, cultural, institutional, territorial, educational, partisan, ideological, and others. Identifications along one dimension may clash with those along a different dimension: in a classic case, the German workers in 1914 had to choose between their class identification with the international proletariat and their national identification with the German people and empire. In the contemporary world, cultural identification is dramatically increasing in importance compared to other dimensions of identity.

Along any single dimension, identity is usually most meaningful at the immediate face-to-face level. Narrower identities, however, do not necessarily conflict with broader ones. A military officer can identify institutionally with his company, regiment, division, and service. Similarly, a person can identify culturally with his or her clan, ethnic group, nationality, religion, and civilization. The increased salience of cultural identity at lower levels may well reinforce its salience at higher levels. As Burke suggested: “The love to the whole is not extinguished by this subordinate partiality.... To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germs, as it were) of public affections.” In a world where culture counts, the platoons are tribes and ethnic groups, the regiments are nations, and the armies are civilizations. The increased extent to which people throughout the world differentiate themselves along cultural lines means that conflicts between cultural groups are increasingly important; civilizations are the broadest cultural entities; hence conflicts between groups from different civilizations become central to global politics.

Second, the increased salience of cultural identity is in large part, the result of social-economic modernization at the individual level, where dislocation and alienation create the need for more meaningful identities, and at the societal level, where the enhanced capabilities and power of non-Western societies stimulate the revitalization of indigenous identities and culture.

Third, identity at any level personal, tribal, civilizational can only be defined in relation to an “other,” a different person, tribe race, or civilization. Historically, relations between states or other entities of the same civilization have differed from
relations between states or entities of different civilizations. Separate codes governed behavior toward those who are “like us” and the “barbarians” who are not. The rules of the nations of Christendom for dealing with each other were different from those for dealing with the Turks and other “heathens.” Muslims acted differently toward those of Dar al-Islam and those of Dar al-harb. The Chinese treated Chinese foreigners and non-Chinese foreigners in separate ways. The civilizational “us” and the extracivilizational “them” is a constant in human history. These differences in intra- and extracivilizational behavior stem from:

1. Felling of superiority (and occasionally inferiority) toward people who are perceived as being very different;
2. Fear of and lack of trust in such people;
3. Difficulty of communication with them as a result of differences in language and what is considered civil behavior;
4. Lack of familiarity with the assumptions, motivations, social relationships, and social practices of other people.

In today’s world, improvements in transportation and communication have produced more frequent, more intense, more symmetrical, and more inclusive interactions among people of different civilizations. As a result, their civilizational identities become increasingly salient. The French, Germans, Belgians, and Dutch increasingly think of themselves as European. Middle East Muslims identify with and rally to the support of Bosnians and Chechens. Chinese throughout East Asia identify their interests with those of the mainland. Russians identify with and provide support to Serbs and other Orthodox peoples. These broader levels off civilizational identity mean deeper consciousness of civilizational differences and of the need to protect what distinguishes “us” from “them”.

Fourth, the sources of conflict between states and groups from different civilizations are, in large measure, those which have always generated conflict between groups: control of people, territory, wealth, and resources, and relative power, that is the ability to impose one’s own values, culture, and institutions on another group as compared to that group’s ability to do that to you. Conflict between cultural groups, however, may also involve cultural issues. Differences in secular ideology between Marxist-Leninism and liberal democracy can at least be debated if not resolved. Differences in material interest can be negotiated and often settled by compromise in a way cultural issues cannot. Hindus and Muslims are likely to resolve the issue of whether a temple or a mosque should be built at Ayodhya by building both, or neither, or a syncretic building that is both a mosque and a temple. Nor can what might seem to be a straight-forward territorial question between Albanian Muslims and Orthodox Serbs concerning Kosovo or between Jews and Arabs concerning Jerusalem be easily settled, since each place has deep historical, cultural, and emotional meaning to both peoples. Similarly, neither French authorities nor
Muslim parents are likely to accept a compromise which would allow schoolgirls to wear Muslim dress every other day during the school year. Cultural questions like these involve a yes or no, zero-sum choice.

Fifth and finally is the ubiquity of conflict. It is human to hate. For self-definition and motivation, people need enemies: competitors in business, rivals in achievement, and opponents in politics. They naturally distrust and see as threats those who are different and have the capability to harm them. The resolution of one conflict and the disappearance of one enemy generate personal, social, and political forces that give rise to new ones. “The ‘us’ versus ‘them’ tendency is,” as Ali Mazrui said, “in the political arena, almost universal.” In the contemporary world the “them” is more and more likely to be people from a different civilization. The end of the Cold War has not ended conflict but has rather given rise to new identities rooted in culture and to new patterns of conflict among groups from different cultures which at the broadest level are civilizations. Simultaneously, common culture also encourages cooperation among states and groups which share that culture, which can be seen in the emerging pattern of regional association among countries, particularly in the economic area. Huntington’s thesis will enable us to x-ray our case study very well as Osuntokun (2008:9) explained. The next part of the paper will recreate Osuntokun’s thesis which is reproduced below.

Russian-Georgian Conflict in Perspectives

On the night of 7th of August 2008, Russian tanks with air cover crossed over to South Ossetia, a break away province in Georgia on the pretext that ten Russian soldiers, part of a Georgian-Russian peace keeping force had been killed and that an Ossetian carrying Russian passports and some Russian citizens have been killed by Georgian troops shelling Russian peace keeping troops position in South Ossetia. The Georgian President, Mikihail Saakashvili, has given a different perspective of the conflict. Essentially he has accused the Russians of assisting secessionist rebellion of the South Ossetians against Georgia. Georgia has accused Russia of choosing the time when the whole world was busy with the Olympics to engineer the destabilization of Georgia so that Russia could have a free hand in dealing with Georgia the way it deems fit. The problem has a long history before the present eruption and if care is not taken, it has the possibilities of serious consequences.

Georgia was a separate kingdom until the 19th century czarist expansion into the Caucasus. Georgians are orthodox Christians like Russians and apart from the Armenians, they are the only Christian nation in the volatile Caucasus. When the Soviet Union dissolved into its various republics, Boris Yeltsin wisely allowed the national frontiers within the Soviet republics to become international frontiers. Unlike in Yugoslavia where Milosevic of Serbia unleashed wars on the other component republics within Yugoslavia in an ambitious programme of Serbian expansion,
Boris Yeltsin allowed former Soviet republics to become independent. Mikhail Gorbachev, his predecessor had tried to organize the former Soviet union Republics into what was called Commonwealth of Independent States but this was an illusory structure which was not destined to endure. With the unraveling of the Soviet Union each of the emerging independent states went their own way. The Baltic states of Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia quickly became part of the European Union and also later joined the North Atlantic Treaty organization. Belarus has remained staunchly pro-Russia and Ukraine and Georgia have ambitions of joining the European Union. The other states particularly in the Caucasus are either bogged down in fissiparous nationalist implosion or fighting among themselves as is the case between Azerbajian and Armenia. One basic problem in most of the former Soviet republics, particularly Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine is the large concentration of ethnic Russians there. Happily this is not the case in Georgia. In fact, the South Ossetians are not Russians; they are actually Farsi speaking people related to the Iranians even though they are orthodox Christians. They broke away from Georgia in 1994 and since that time they have not been under Georgian control. The same has been the case with Abkhazia, another secessionist Georgian province on the black sea. South Ossetians have related peoples in the Russian province of North Ossetia and perhaps because of this there is sympathy for them in North Ossetia and consequently in Russia. The Russians and Georgians have maintained some precarious peace in South Ossetia since 1994. The same is the case with Abkhazia where the local secessionist militias also operate openly under Russian protection. What led to the current crisis apparently was Georgia's decision to use force to assert her sovereignty over South Ossetia. It is obvious to any observer that Russia would not accept this for several reasons. South Ossetia itself is of little value to Russia with eleven time zones and obviously a huge country where there is much to do without adding the little portion of South Ossetia with its 70,000 inhabitants.

In recent times, Georgia under President Mikhail Saakashvili has made her intentions clear of getting out of Russia's orbit. She has made her intention of joining NATO a strategic priority. She has courted the USA and Condoleezza Rice, the American Secretary of State and George Bush, the President of the USA has made highly publicized visits to the country. In fact for more than a year, American military mission has been training the Georgian army. Russia was not happy with this. Then Ukraine was also intent on joining NATO in spite of the fact that the Ukrainian population is almost 45 per cent Russian. With the Baltic states already in NATO and almost all the former members of the Warsaw Pact like the Czech republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania also in NATO, Russia felt it was losing out in strategic competition with her former NATO enemies. On top of this,
the United States decided to build a so-called missile shield in Poland and the Czech Republic against Russian opposition. Ostensibly this missile shield was said to be against Iran and other rogue states in the Middle East and possibly Asia, Russia was not convinced especially when it offered some facilities in Azerbaijan which were turned down by the United States. Further more, Georgia was also providing transit for gas and oil pipelines from the oil wells in the Caspian sea and other parts of the Caucasus through Turkey to the West thus bypassing Russian pipelines bringing oil and gas to Europe.

Europe's dependence on Russian energy is of considerable strategic advantage to Russia. This dependence made countries like Germany and France reluctant to antagonize Russia. These are the strategic considerations underpinning Russia's current actions. Russia, until Vladimir Putin took over, was virtually prostrate. The stupendous resources currently accruing to Russia has provided her resources to rebuild her dilapidated infrastructures and armed forces and her ability to reassert herself on the world stage. Russia had been virtually ignored by the United States in areas where Russia used to have interests such as Iraq, Afghanistan and Central Europe in the last twenty years. She seems not to be ready to remain acquiescent in the face of the American provocation. Unfortunately when two elephants fight, it is the grass that suffers. This is the case with Georgia. But it does seem Russia is overplaying her hand. The occupation of many parts of Georgia since August 8th until the time of writing has lasted too long. Russia seems to want to breach international norms of behaviour with impunity. What is more frightening is the Russian constitution experts the President of Russia to protect all Russians wherever they may be. Will this apply to Russians in Belarus, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and other former Soviet Republic? If this is so the world will be entering a dangerous era.

Further more, a Russian general recently threatened to nuke Poland if it allows the United States to install elements of the missile shield on its territory. This is not the kind of language that one expects in the 21st century. Who is actually in charge of Russia? Is it Vladimir Putin or President Dimitry Medvedev? The president seems to speak with a softer voice while Putin spookily operates dangerously like the master spy that he is. The West has said all these will have consequences. We should not expect the West fighting Russia but it could squeeze Russia economically. The price of crude oil and gas could be brought crashing down and Russia will find that her present strength and influence is built on shifting sand. Of course Russia will always remain a powerful nuclear power, but military power without prosperity at home and a satisfied citizenry is an illusion. This was how the Soviet Union unraveled and the Russian federation with its soft under belly of separatist nationalist and Muslim states in the Caucasus may yet be faced with the same problems of disintegration the
Soviet Union faced. The Chechnya trouble is a forewarning of what may happen if Russia engages in a new cold war with the West which it cannot win. This is why the current situation in Georgia should not be allowed to get out of hand. Russia is a very important country compared to Georgia, a small country of 5 million. The West and Russia share common concerns about nuclear proliferation especially the ambitions of countries like North Korea and Iraq. Even though the West seems to be more concerned about this, it should never be forgotten that Iran and North Korea are neighbours of Russia. The West and Russia also share a common fear of terrorism. Russia has had to fight Islamic fundamentalism in Chechnya at considerable human and material loss and with possible eruption of the same rebellion among Russian Muslim citizens. In fact Russia is more in need of collaboration with the West on this than the other way round. Any serious attempt to abate environmental abuse without Russian collaboration will come to nothing. So on a global and wider plain Russia-West collaboration and understanding is of fundamental importance. The West must do everything to accommodate Russia. Some of Russia's problems are probably psychological. This is a former global power finding herself relegated in major global decisions. Furthermore, Russia has seen a rising power of China in Asia, a continent which many forget it shares with other Asian countries. In other words, Russia is a European country as well as an Asian country.

The recent border agreement on Chinese terms is Russia's tacit acceptance of the need to reach a Modus Vivendi with China. Any push from the West, especially in Central Europe and the Caucasus will be viewed with alarm of encirclement by the Kremlin. It is therefore necessary for the West to assure Russia of its pacific intentions. Recent calls to suspend NATO-Russia rapprochement, or to kick out Russia from the G8 will be counterproductive. What the West needs to do is to encourage the forces of democracy in Russia and to help Russia become a prosperous country through trade and investment. With prosperity will come aversion for politics of brinkmanship and bellicosity. After all, trading nations generally don't fight themselves; 58 years of post Second World War Western Europe has demonstrated this. Unfortunately the precipitate recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia has compounded the problem and set back East-West relations.

Conclusion

Russia is concerned about how a conflict in a turbulent area in the North of Georgia's breakaway Abkhazia might develop. The Georgian authorities launched a special operation in the Kodori Georg, the only Tbilisi-controlled area of northern Abkhazia near Russian boarder, after a local militia leader announced the no longer recognized Tbilisi's authority. This action violated an agreement that no armed people can be deployed in the area. Similarly, Russia sent troops to
Ossetia populated by Russian ethnic group. There seems to be parallels to the situation in then Croatia and Bosnia, in that both South Ossetia and Abkhazia sought independence from Georgia in the early 1990s against the wishes of Georgia which appears to regain control over Ossetia. Georgia has maintained an alliance with the United States including sending troops to Iraq. United States backed Georgia vowed not accept any loss if its territory; but Russia insists that following the recent violence, residents are unlikely to want to live in the same state as Georgians.

Russia intends to maintain what it describes as a peacekeeping presence around these two provinces. She insists it is allowed these zones under previous peacekeeping pacts that tended fighting in Abkhazia and South Ossetia when they first broke away from Tbilisi in the 1990s. France brokered the ceasefire to end fighting over Georgia’s Russian-backed breakaway region which started on August 7, 2008. Under the terms of the six point peace plans, Russia must not jeopardize freedom of movement in Georgia; end all military actions among others. The deal’s terms are vague about the extent of any buffer zones analysts say. This is because the United Nations Security Council resolution was needed to clarify exactly what the ceasefire pact covers. This was lacking whether or not the effects was intended, Moscow now appears to be using geopolitical strategic overreach to teach a brutal lesson not only to the Georgians, but also to other neighbors seeking to align themselves with the West against Russia. Moreover, Georgia is the only alternative to Russia as the route for pipeline carrying oil westward from Azerbaijan. But Russia is not threatening to overrun Georgia. Moscow claims to be simply using its military to restore the secessionist boundary which in the process would deal Georgia a humiliating defeat.

**What should be done now?**

1. The UNSC should monitor implementation of the Franco-Finnish Russian-Georgian ceasefire pact conducted on behalf of the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE)

2. The United States, the Security Council and European Union should pass resolutions calling for Russia to withdraw its troops into Russia proper; which means withdrawing its peace-keeping missions from South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and remove all troops stationed in Georgian Controlled Georgia.

3. The United Nations, Security Council, the US and European Union should send neutral troops into the areas where the fighting has occurred to monitor and assess the situation on the ground, and fact find for violation of the Geneva convention on genocide.

4. The International Community should persuade both Russia and Georgia to agree to an international force build around the Commonwealth of Independent States and the EU states. The combatants should not send troops.
References


