

Lessons for the West from the Georgian War

Martin Shaw

The August war in Georgia underlines the fundamental deterioration in the global political situation in the 2000s and the increasingly sharp choices facing the democratic left. The easy bit is to condemn Russian aggression against Georgian cities and there has been no shortage of Western political figures queuing up to do this. The difficult bit is to recognise the Western responsibility in this outcome, which is both immediate and general.

First, let us consider the role of the USA in Georgia's opening of this war. Whatever provocations Georgia was under from Russia, it is clear that president Mikheil Saakashvili made a monumental error in attacking South Ossetia. Georgia under Saakashvili is a heavily dependent US client and it seems certain that if the US administration had known of his plans and wanted to stop him, it could have done so. So did it not know – a very surprising failure of intelligence – or did it not want to – a shockingly irresponsible and reckless position to take? Or was there an April Glaspie moment (Glaspie was the US ambassador to Iraq in 1990 who notoriously allowed Saddam Hussein to think he could get away with the invasion of Kuwait) when the State Department or US Embassy gave the Georgian government an ambiguous response to his plans, which Saakashvili foolishly took as a green light?

Whatever the answer to these questions, the opening that Saakashvili presented has not only allowed Vladimir Putin's Russia to shatter any chance of Georgia's reintegrating its breakaway regions and (possibly) its coherence as a state. It has also dragged the USA and the West down with it and highlighted the underlying incoherence of Western policy towards Russia and the post-Soviet region since the end of the Cold War. The US policy of drawing the newly independent post-Soviet states into its own and NATO's embrace, while containing – and in order to contain – Russia, has blown up in its face. The earlier failure to pursue a more ambitious and consistent policy, in the wake of the Cold War, of providing aid to the impoverished Russian people, supporting Russian democrats and integrating Russia with Western-led international institutions, has left Russia with little choice but the road of national and regional re-assertion whose results can be seen in the wrecked towns and villages of Georgia. Likewise the West's uncritical support for leaders of the 'colour' revolutions even when, as with Saakashvili, they have

SHAW | Georgia: Lessons for the West

shown their authoritarian and militarist colours, has betrayed the promise of democratisation as well as the prospects of peace.

Yet the responsibility of US and Western leaders is also wider. In the 1990s, Western leaders squandered the opportunities to genuinely move towards a 'new world order.' But in the 2000s, George W. Bush has led the world backwards towards an era of unabashed great power politics: not surprisingly, a resurgent Russia and the emergent Chinese superpower are ready to follow his lead. The ready resort to war after 9/11, in Afghanistan and Iraq, showed a disregard for international law and world opinion, and a reckless attitude towards the lives of many innocent civilians – both of which Putin is now aping in Georgia. The lassitude allowed to Israel in its grossly disproportionate bombardment of Lebanon hardly sent a message of moderation to other states. If the West wanted to create a climate in which Russia, China and other regional and local powers would feel restrained from using armed force, they could hardly have set about it in a worse way than the policies pursued in the Bush era.

For the progressive left, the obstacle to seeing the situation clearly is the question of democracy. Russia and China are emblematic of deeply embedded authoritarianism, if not worse, and it seems axiomatic – as it did to those who misguidedly backed the Iraq invasion – to support the 'democratic' side, i.e. the West. And yet there is hardly a democratic side in the Russo-Georgian conflict: despite the Rose Revolution which brought him to power, Saakashvili has not only turned on Georgian democrats, but his crude, even brutal attempt to force Georgian rule on South Ossetia was the opposite of serious engagement with the wishes of the people of that province. Deep-entrenched, ethnicised political divides, in regions like Ossetia and Abkhazia, can only be resolved by negotiation and confidence-building. Sovereignty is not an absolute, to be imposed by right, but depends on the consent of the people.

Fundamentally, we have to recognise that democracy and violence are not compatible; there are no short cuts or quick fixes from military power. As the Bush era finally draws to a close, this latest debacle should concentrate our minds. Yet John McCain ever more clearly represents Bushism by other means. It would be nice to think that in the light of the latest lessons Barack Obama (or Gordon Brown and David Miliband) might recoil from Bush's legacy. But how likely is it that, in thrall to soundbite media and opinion polls, they will truly dare to rethink? It seems all too probable that Obama will seek to reassure a purportedly hawkish

public opinion by repeatedly proving his own militarist credentials. Brown and Miliband will, likewise, refuse to show even the limited independence from the USA that French and German leaders have from time to time demonstrated. An uphill struggle beckons.

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