



The Georgia Watershed

By Leon Aron

On August 8, following Georgia's reckless attack on the Russia-supported separatist enclave of South Ossetia, Russia invaded Georgia. For the first time in post-Soviet history, Russian troops crossed the internationally recognized border of a sovereign neighboring state. Yet there were several other lines that may have been crossed. This short war looks more and more like a culmination and an emblem of the troubling evolution in the Kremlin's values and priorities and, by extension, its vision of the country's national interests. It may have heralded the onset of a distinct, and profoundly disconcerting, agenda both inside and outside the country. What has been said and done by the Russian authorities since last August strengthens this impression.

The principles and priorities of Russian foreign policy have changed in concert with the evolution toward authoritarianism inside the country guided by Vladimir Putin. The Kremlin has steadily repossessed key economic resources and reestablished control of the media, justice, and all national political institutions. The government and the national media have stoked the sense of loss and imperial nostalgia; fomented spy-mania; and fostered Russia's image as a country "de-facto besieged"¹ by cunning, plotting, and ruthless enemies on every side and aided by a "fifth column" of political opposition,² the latter compared by Putin to jackals looking for "crumbs near foreign embassies."³

The search for "a path to the common European home" and the commonality of interests with the West in the strengthening of democracy, human rights, and "all-human values," which underlined the Gorbachev-Yeltsin foreign policy, have been discarded as the shameful artifacts of "weakness" and "chaos." Russia's integration into the family of Western capitalist democracies (the

"civilized world") is no longer accepted even as a distant goal. Today, "Russia is inclined not only completely to reject Western values but even to refuse to admit that something like that exists," one of the most astute observers of Russian foreign policy, Fyodor Lukyanov, wrote in August of this year.⁴ These "values," another leading Russian expert noted, include "trifles like the rule of law and the respect for civil liberties and human rights," for which, in the Kremlin's opinion, the Russian people are somehow not yet "mature enough" and therefore need, in Putin's words, "about twenty years of manual control."⁵

Russia's relations with the West have evolved accordingly: from a protoalliance to "neutrality" and "mediation" between the West and its opponents (a theocratic, militant Iran and a resurgent, authoritarian China) to a kind of omnivorous "pragmatism" and, finally, to truculence, ad hoc anti-Western alliances, and pointedly anti-Western postures on a number of key issues. Perennially wronged and misunderstood by the West, in this new official perspective, Russia must embark on a policy of resurgence and retribution.

A "Revisionist" Russia? In the process, Russia has been transformed to what is known in the theory of international relations as a revisionist

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power. Until early 2007, it could be said that, although railing at the score more and more loudly, Russia was not seeking to change the rules of the game or reshape the playing field. Then, in a speech in Munich in February 2007, Putin stated that the world had “approached that watershed moment, when we have to think seriously about the entire architecture of global security.”⁶ Later in the year, Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov developed Putin’s theme by blaming such cornerstones of Europe’s post–Cold War security structure and stability as NATO, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty for unspecified “major problems.”⁷ Declaring that the “moment of truth” had arrived, Lavrov announced Moscow’s intention to “clear out” the offending institutions.⁸

Three weeks after the invasion of Georgia, Lavrov again alleged “obvious systemic defects” in the “entire current architecture of European security” and renewed calls for “a radical revision of the entire international agenda.”⁹ Along the way, he accused the United States and the “countries of the West” of acting on “instincts and prejudices of the past,” of being afflicted with “the deficit of morality,” and—quoting approvingly Kishore Mahbubani, dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore—of having become “for the entire world the main obstacle to the solution of international problems.”¹⁰

Two weeks later, the revisionist direction of Russian foreign policy was heartily endorsed by President Dmitri Medvedev: “Today we have to do everything we can to construct a different system of [international] security. As far as the Russian Federation is concerned, the one that exists is not satisfactory.”¹¹

The Recovery of the Soviet Geostrategic Assets.

Just as the reimposition of state control over the country’s politics, media, and law and the repossession of the country’s key economic “commanding heights” have become the regime’s paramount goals inside the country, so has the recovery of the geostrategic and geopolitical assets lost in the Soviet Union’s collapse—which Putin called “the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the twentieth century”—gradually turned into Moscow’s key foreign policy priority. Along with reviving former Soviet anti-Western alliances to bolster Russia’s influence in Asia (China), the Middle East (Iran and Syria), and Latin America (Venezuela) and selling advanced military hardware and nuclear technology to the new allies

and clients, Moscow is most eager to reclaim hegemony over the territory of the Soviet Union.

Up to a point, there is nothing unusual in Russia’s insistence on and enforcement of its military and economic preeminence in formerly Soviet territory. In seeking to ensure stability and, if possible, friendly regimes on its borders, Russia, too, is not unlike any other major land power since ancient Babylon, China, and Rome (as well as the United States in North and Central America). Since the elucidation of Russia’s first post-Soviet national security doctrine in 1993, it has been clear that, along with remaining a nuclear superpower and accepting its status as a great power (but no longer a superpower), Russia would insist on being the regional superpower.¹² As a leading Russian foreign policy expert put it recently, “Russia is a world power with regional ambitions.”¹³

Tacitly accepted by the West, Russia’s claim to leadership in the region during its painful transformation into a flawed and floundering but real and developing capitalist democracy was bolstered in the 1990s by its status as the leader in privatization and democratic institutionalization in the territory of the former Soviet Union (with the exception of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania) and, in the early 2000s, as the region’s fastest growing economy. Since then, the criteria for being the regional superpower have changed starkly. Moscow no longer appears content to maintain military and economic primacy in the region and exploit the “soft power” that flows from this position (not least because Russia has long surrendered its place as the region’s most dynamic economy, let alone a model of democratic and social transformation). Instead, Russia strives to wield something close to a veto power over the post-Soviet states’ domestic politics as well as their economic and foreign policy orientations.

In sharp contrast with the 1990s, the political and economic aspirations of the former Soviet republics have been recast by the Kremlin into a zero-sum game in which Russia automatically loses whenever Western influence or institutions take root. Be they the democratization of the “color revolutions”; oil and gas exports that bypass Russia; or, especially, membership in Western political, economic, and military organizations such as the European Union and NATO, such developments are now considered antithetical to Russia’s interests and opposed strenuously.

The Putin-Medvedev Doctrine. Referring to the possibility of Georgia’s membership in NATO, Medvedev said in September: “This situation is humiliating to

Russia. We won't be able to tolerate it any longer. It is not a simple choice for us but we will not tolerate [this situation], and there should be no doubts on this score."¹⁴ In pursuit of regional hegemony, threats and energy blackmail have now been supplemented by military aggression against a defiant nation.

In his August 31 interview with Russia's top three television networks, Medvedev added several dimensions to this doctrine. Henceforth, Moscow's "unqualified priority," he said, was to protect "the life and dignity of our citizens, wherever they might be."¹⁵ A lawyer by education, a law professor, and counsel to several top Russian corporations in the 1990s (as well as to the foreign relations department of St. Petersburg's city government, headed by then-deputy mayor Vladimir Putin), Medvedev is likely to choose his words with care. Thus, the nebulousness of "dignity" and of "wherever they might be" is hard to interpret other than having been deliberately formulated to be open to the widest (and wildest) interpretations by the Kremlin.

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Medvedev then affirmed what students of Russian foreign policy have strongly suspected for a number of years but what Moscow has never before put as bluntly and publicly: there are "regions" in which Russia has "privileged interests," and it will "work very attentively" with the states located there.¹⁶ Asked by one of the interviewers if the regions of these "privileged interests" are on Russian borders, Medvedev answered: "Of course . . . but not only," suggesting that the "defense of life and dignity" may be undertaken not only in places like South Ossetia, Estonia, and Latvia, but, for instance, in the breakaway enclave of Transdniestria inside Moldova, where, according to the Russian press, 100,000 Russian citizens live.¹⁷ (Before he departed for a September 3 meeting with Medvedev in Sochi, the "president" of the "Transdniestria Republic," Igor Smirnov, alleged that the Moldovan authorities were attempting "unilat-

erally" to reestablish sovereignty over the breakaway region, bypassing Moscow and Transdniestria's capital of Tiraspol, and that "the president of Russia has given a tough warning to the president of Moldova about the consequences of abandoning the peaceful solution to the Transdniestria problem."¹⁸ Smirnov's statement was likely in response to Moldova's criticism of Russia's recognition of South Ossetian and Abkhazian "independence" and reported contemplation about "changing . . . the existing peacemaking format," which until then had included only the Russian and Transdniestrian authorities.)

Accepting the Price. Among the most disturbing aspects of the Russo-Georgian war's aftermath has been the insouciance, indeed, bravado, with which Moscow has accepted the diplomatic and economic casualties of the incursion. It seems that the Kremlin almost welcomed its retreat from the "civilized world," the rejoining of which after seven decades of totalitarian autarchy and self-imposed isolation was among the key goals of the Gorbachev-Yeltsin revolution of the late 1980s and 1990s. "We don't need illusions of partnership [with NATO]," Medvedev said on August 25. "It is NATO that is most interested in our cooperation. . . . We are ready to make any decision, including the termination of the relationship with NATO altogether."¹⁹

The next day, speaking to the government-owned television network Russia Today shortly after he had signed the decrees recognizing the "independence" of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Medvedev added: "We are afraid of nothing, including another Cold War. We have lived before in different [from the West] conditions and can live in the same way again."²⁰ Five days later, Lavrov elaborated: "There is no doubt that for some time, and probably even a considerable amount of time, Russia and the West may live and act in two only rarely intersecting planes [*ploskosti*], in different systems of coordinates. This has happened before . . . so we won't have a hard time getting used to it again."²¹

This readiness to part ways with the West apparently includes perhaps the most potent symbol of Russia's post-Soviet evolution: membership in the G8 organization of the world's leading industrial democracies. "What choice do we have?" Putin asked a CNN interviewer on August 28. "Should we agree to be killed in order to remain . . . in the G8? And who will remain in the G8 if all of us are killed?"²² In any case, Putin added, "in its present form, the G8 already doesn't carry enough weight."²³

World Trade Organization. An immediate casualty of the war was Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization (WTO). As the Organization's member states have veto power over its decisions and Georgia is a member, Russia's membership in the WTO, in effect, was sacrificed even before Russian tanks rolled into South Ossetia.

Speaking to his cabinet on August 25, Putin averred that Russia did "not see or feel any pluses [from the pending membership] if [such advantages] existed at all," while certain sectors of Russia's economy, especially agriculture, felt "heavy pressure" from the agreements Russia had struck with the WTO.²⁴ Although the prime minister stated that "strategically" Russia should still be moving "toward the WTO," on the same day, the Ministry for Economic Development was tasked to draw a list of WTO agreements that Russia decided to abrogate.

Giving up on membership after thirteen years of negotiations—and after such significant concessions to Moscow as the ban on foreign bank branches and insurance companies in Russia—is a giant step backward toward self-isolation and autarchy. As Russian experts have immediately pointed out, the shielding of Russian firms from competition in the domestic and international markets would result in setbacks to modernization, greater efficiency, and quality of goods and services.²⁵ The likely diminution of food imports, most of which are of higher quality and many of which cost less to consumers than the domestically produced counterparts, was especially troubling to Russian analysts, who predicted price increases, especially for meat and poultry, at a time when inflation is becoming a serious threat.²⁶ These worries were confirmed by the Ministry of Agriculture's proposal to cut the import quotas on U.S. poultry by 17 percent in 2009.²⁷ (The sales of U.S. broilers grew by 21 percent in 2007 to a total of 855,000 metric tons because of their high quality. The quota was scheduled to increase to 930,000 tons in 2009.²⁸)

The Propaganda Line: The United States Is Behind the Georgian Attack. The aftermath of the war was marked also by a Kremlin-directed propaganda salvo of unprecedented volume and crudity. The campaign's main theme is that the United States ordered Georgia's August 7 attack on South Ossetia for political and economic reasons. In the Kremlin official interpretation, this was an attack on "Russian citizens" (that is, on around five hundred Russian "peacekeepers" and South Ossetians holding Russian passports) and, therefore, on Russia.

The tonality of the propaganda, which maverick billionaire Alexander Lebedev summarized as "stupid, militaristic rhetoric,"²⁹ was set by Putin and has been followed since by officials and by all major Russian national broadcast and print media. As former Soviet dissident Alexander Podrabinek put it in an article on an opposition website on August 27, "Today most Russian mass media give a distorted picture of the events in South Ossetia, demonstrating either their loyalty to the Kremlin or sincere agreement with its chauvinistic and aggressive foreign policy."³⁰

Putin contended that the United States "deliberately created this conflict to create a competitive advantage for one of the candidates for the U.S. presidency" and to help solve "the problems in the economy," including "financial problems" and "the mortgage crisis."³¹ "A little victorious war is needed," Putin added, "to rally the [United States] around certain political forces."³² Two weeks later, a reportedly "enraged" Putin told the group of foreign experts and journalists known as "The Valdai Club": "They like to shoot and to bomb so much, don't they! Why did they assume that if they had failed in Afghanistan or Iraq they would succeed here [in South Ossetia]? They have failed here as well, and they will continue to fail in the future!"³³

The General Staff spokesman, General Anatoly Nogovitsyn, claimed that "enough materials have accumulated to confirm the participation of American soldiers in the preparation of the aggression."³⁴ Nogovitsyn went on to claim that a passport of "a U.S. citizen, Michael Lee White," was found by Russian soldiers southwest of the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali.³⁵ (The owner had reported the passport missing after a Moscow–New York flight in 2005 and was in Austin, Texas, caring for his sick father when the war broke out.³⁶)

Foreign Minister Lavrov, too, averred that the United States had designed "anti-Russian provocations, including Tbilisi's aggression against South Ossetia," in order to shore up the White House's domestic standing.³⁷ "It is not by accident," he explained, "that it is precisely those whose domestic affairs are not going too well that interfere in the affairs of other states."³⁸

According to Medvedev, it was not "on her own" that Georgia attacked South Ossetia but with a "serious moral, financial, and military support . . . by another very large state with the pretensions of establishing the world order."³⁹ As told by Medvedev, the president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili, was ready to come to Russia to negotiate a treaty on the nonuse of force—until

“[U.S. secretary of state] Condoleezza Rice” traveled to Tbilisi. “After that, it seemed that our boy [Saakashvili] became a different person. He stopped calling. [He] started preparing for war.”⁴⁰

In the absence of a national media capable of questioning the government’s claims, this “line” has been effective in shaping public opinion: 43 percent of the respondents in a national poll reported having “changed their attitude toward the United States for the worse” during the month of August.⁴¹ Explaining the change, half of the respondents claimed that the “Americans had trained the Georgian soldiers” to attack South Ossetia or that they had “forced Saakashvili to start the military aggression.” Others thought that the United States was “inciting the world against Russia” and “threatens our security.”⁴² Overall, 75 percent of Russians in the same poll agreed with the description of the United States as “an unfriendly state”—the highest proportion ever.⁴³

9/11: A U.S. Government Plot. The anti-American propaganda reached a crescendo on September 11 when Russia’s most widely broadcast, state majority-owned Channel One television station marked the seventh anniversary of the terrorist attacks on the United States by airing a documentary entitled “Zero: An Investigation into 9/11.” The film purports to prove that U.S. authorities organized the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon in order to justify the “curtailment of political freedoms on the United States and the invasion of Iraq,” as well as to “forestall a crisis in the U.S. economy.”⁴⁴

Written by an Italian and a Frenchman, the documentary, as far as could be established, has not been shown on television in any European country, including Italy and France. (The Italian author of the script complained that a movie theater distributor, likewise, could not be found for the documentary in his country.) Channel One broadcasted the film on a Friday night, thus guaranteeing the film an “audience of many millions.”⁴⁵

As an observer on a leading liberal website, Grani.ru, noted, in the postbroadcast studio discussion the guests ostensibly representing the opposite point of view—that is, doubting that the 9/11 attacks were organized by the U.S. government—behaved more like “compliant sparing partners.”⁴⁶ Their feeble arguments were quickly dismissed by some leading media personalities—such as Vitaly Tret’yakov, the former editor of *Nezavisimaya*

gazeta—who were “persuading the viewers that the U.S. authorities think absolutely nothing of killing their own citizens—whether by thousands or by millions.”⁴⁷

The tone of the “discussion” is nicely captured in this exchange between host Alexander Gordon and guest Alexei Pushkov—one of Russia’s leading foreign affairs experts; a host of a popular television show, *Postscriptum*, on the TV-Center network, owned by the Moscow city government; and the director of the Institute for Contemporary International Problems at the Diplomatic Academy of the Foreign Ministry of the Russian Federation:

Pushkov: You know that there are lots of [political and military] structures in the United States that work in secret. So I don’t think that it was even the leadership of the secret services that organized [the 9/11 attacks]. Who organized the assassination of Kennedy?

Gordon: I don’t know.

Pushkov: And I don’t know. And nobody knows. Which means that there was a group of very influential people, very serious people who needed to do this. And I think the official version [of the attacks] that we have been given is designed by these people in order that no one learns the truth.

Gordon: You mean that there is some sort of powerful organization in the United States, which is above the government and the White House?

Pushkov: Not necessarily. This could have been a group whose participants included members of the government, the Bush administration. And the president may not even have known personally.

Gordon: This sounds like a Masonic conspiracy.

Pushkov: No. Masons have nothing to do with this. There had been an objective to create a critical mass of public opinion [in the United States] in favor of military action in the Middle East, and this objective is being carried out.

Gordon: So, to sum up, if I understand you correctly, there exists a group of people in the United States of America that . . .

Pushkov (interrupting): It does not exist [permanently]. It just got together specifically for this task.

Gordon: But this group controls the strategic designs of the foreign policy of the United States and, as a result, America’s behavior in the world. . . . So this group, getting together for a short time, decided to execute the [9/11] plot that would give America a free hand [in carrying out these designs], right?

Pushkov: Yes.⁴⁸

The “Fateful August.” Of all the negative effects of the war in the Caucasus, perhaps the most damaging has been the blow dealt to the hope for liberal reforms inside Russia. At least for the moment, Medvedev’s pre–August 7 promises of “rule of law” and “freedom of speech” and “anticorruption,” which implied trimming the excesses of Putin’s “vertical of power” and “sovereign democracy,” appear to be empty.

Not only did the Georgian foray accent Putin’s role as the de facto commander in chief and the man who speaks for the Kremlin (the roles that constitutionally belong to the president), but the Russian media also have gone out of their way to play up this preeminence of the prime minister, who supposedly works for and could be fired by the president. Putin flew from the opening of the Olympics in Beijing (a ceremony that should have been attended by Medvedev as the head of state, not by Putin as an appointed head of government) directly to the North Ossetian capital of Vladikavkaz to direct the war. He was then shown on Russian television conferring with the local military and civilian leaders, instructing Medvedev about what needed to be done, talking to the refugees from South Ossetia, visiting with the wounded in a hospital, and angrily rebuffing U.S. criticism of Russia’s actions.

The only image of Medvedev in the early days of the war was that of a vacationing *paterfamilias*, cruising down the Volga River with his wife and children. To the extent that there are “liberals” and “hard-liners” in the Russian leadership—as in the days of the Soviet Union, the opacity of the Russian government forces us to resort to the clichés of “Kremlinology”—the former have been utterly defeated.

Russia’s leading independent observers have been unanimous on this score. What one of them called the “fateful August” [*sud’ bonosnyi avgust*] was the time of a crucial choice made by the country’s leadership in favor of “the defense of the geopolitical interests and against the strategy of building a ‘new Russia’”—a freer, lawful, more predictable Russia, which would be more hospitable to private initiative and entrepreneurship (first and foremost, its own small and medium businesses) and more accommodating in its relations with the West.⁴⁹ The war “has crossed out” these desiderata; they are its “casualties.”⁵⁰ Some observers concluded that the party inside the government that defeated Georgia has “defeated its political opponents inside Russia” as well.⁵¹ The result: a further “narrowing” of the opportunities for political opposition and a greater confrontation with the West.⁵²

Silencing Opposition and Resurrecting Soviet Symbols.

Thus far, there has been nothing in Russia’s government policy to contradict this gloomy scenario and much to bear it out. The Kremlin engineered the breakup of the Union of Rightist Forces, the only legal (registered) liberal party that has favored the consolidation of the democratic opposition. On August 29, in front of media executives called to the prime minister’s residence in Sochi on the Black Sea, Putin berated Alexei Venediktov, the chief editor of Ekho Moskvyy radio station, the last remaining national broadcast outlet that broadcasts the opinions of some of the regime’s leading critics. Since then, some of the most daring guest commentators—Matvei Ganapol’sky, Yulia Latynina, and Valeria Novodvorskaya—have been branded “fifth column” traitors on Russian television.⁵³

While extirpating the vestiges of democratic liberties, the Kremlin is encouraging the restoration (or fond memories) of some of the key symbols of Soviet totalitarianism. On September 18, the members of the Committee on Security of the Federal Duma (the national parliament completely subservient to and guided by the Kremlin) applauded a proposal to bring the statue of the founder of the Soviet secret police, Felix Dzerzhinsky, back to Lubyanka Square in downtown Moscow in front of the FSB (formerly KGB) headquarters. The members of the committee had gathered to receive a medal for the 130th birthday of Dzerzhinsky from the chairman of the Union of the Veterans of State Security.⁵⁴

In another instance of loving remembrance of the Soviet days, the government has appropriated 2 billion rubles, or around \$77 million, for the Year of Youth, which was inaugurated on October 26 at the celebration of the ninetieth anniversary of the Komsomol, the youth branch of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. The festivities included a banquet in the Kremlin Palace of Congresses and seminars, concerts, and meetings throughout the country.⁵⁵

The Price of Combative Foreign Policy: Lessons of History

Should it become entrenched, this reactionary drift will be generally consistent with a broad historic pattern. Throughout Russian history, assertive and combative foreign agendas, no matter how successful initially, usually resulted in or were accompanied by gradual domestic ossification, setbacks in economic and political progress, and, finally, outright reaction. War victories almost

invariably led to greater political centralization and tyranny—from the imperial conquests of Ivan the Terrible to Peter the Great’s absolutism to the end of the liberal “Speransky reforms” in the wake of the victory over Napoleon. (The Count Mikhail Speransky himself fell victim to court intrigue and was demoted shortly before the start of the French invasion.) After the mild relaxation of 1941–44, the victory in World War II resulted in Stalin reimposing some of the worst totalitarian repression in Soviet history. (Conversely, military defeats were sometimes followed by radical liberal reforms or even revolutions, most notably after the Crimean War of 1854–56, the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905, and the Soviet Union’s war in Afghanistan in 1980–88.)

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Just as throughout most of Russian history the expansion or maintenance of the empire has proven an enormous obstacle to political and economic democratization—something that both Gorbachev and Yeltsin understood brilliantly and acted on so courageously—so Russian authoritarianism (and this, beyond doubt, is what Russia is today under “the National Leader” Putin) has shown itself to be ill-suited for peaceful coexistence with its neighbors and the West. Russian authoritarianism traditionally has been a restless authoritarianism—almost inexorably bent on military adventurism, expansionism, and empire-building, especially so when confident of domestic popularity and economic ascendancy. (An astute Russian observer compared today’s Kremlin to an old soldier feeling “phantom imperial pains” in the amputated limbs of the former Soviet Union.⁵⁶)

Potential Targets: Assessing the Probabilities. If, as seems likely, the Kremlin ignores these rather graphic lessons of history and continues to equate regional superpower status with veto power over the political, economic, and foreign policy priorities of the post-Soviet states, punishing those who disobey, the list of potential targets is not hard to compile. In addition to Georgia, it will include countries whose democratic transformation and largely pro-Western political or economic orientation

Moscow perceives as challenging its authority or undermining its strategic economic interests. Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Ukraine are Western-oriented democracies, while the pro-Western autocratic regime of Ilham Aliyev in Azerbaijan has defied Moscow by exporting some of its oil to Turkey via Georgia, bypassing Russia, and by so far not accepting Russia’s offer of buying all of its natural gas for transportation and resale—a deal that would severely, perhaps fatally, undermine the proposed non-Russian Nabucco natural gas pipeline to Europe.

Among the key tactical considerations enhancing or diminishing the likelihood of Russian pressure are simmering border disputes; the presence and relative strength of the ethnic Russian or Russian-speaking minorities, whose “life and dignity” may be seen by the Kremlin as imperiled; and the intensity of the irredentist sentiment among them. By these criteria, Azerbaijan is less at risk, despite being in a state of war with Armenia, one of Russia’s (and Iran’s) staunchest allies in the region. Azerbaijan lacks a sizeable Russian minority, and its border with Russia runs through the volatile region of the Muslim province of Dagestan, already barely governable, which would make Moscow doubly wary of destabilizing a neighboring Muslim state. The Kremlin is likely to outsource this job to Iran, which resents the ethnically close Azerbaijan at least as much as Russia does.

Similarly, although it is locked in a bitter conflict with the Russia-supported breakaway enclave of Transnistria, Moldova is shielded from Russia by the Ukrainian territory. With Moldova’s neutrality written in the country’s constitution, Moscow’s concerns about NATO membership have been allayed.

Thus, apart from Estonia and Latvia, where ethnic Russians constitute over one-fourth of the population but where NATO membership raises the risk for a Kremlin intervention, by far the most likely target is Ukraine. Kiev has repeatedly defied Russia in the pursuit of political democratization, a decidedly pro-Western orientation, and the eagerness of its leadership to join NATO. Nearly one in five of Ukraine’s citizens are ethnically Russian (a total of almost 8 million people) and live mostly in the country’s northeast, an area adjacent to the Russian border. (“George,” Putin reportedly said to President Bush at the NATO summit last April in Bucharest, “Ukraine is not even a real state!” Much of Ukraine’s territory, Putin continued, was “given away” by Russia, and Ukraine would “cease to exist as a state” if it dared to join NATO.⁵⁷)

There is no better place to humiliate Ukraine, to cause a political breakdown, and to force change in the

country's pro-Western leadership, already locked in a bitter internecine struggle, than the Crimean peninsula. Wrestled by Catherine the Great from the Ottoman Turks at the end of the eighteenth century and since then beloved by Russian poets and artists (including Anton Chekhov, who spent the last years of his life there), this beautiful and fecund peninsula, dotted with the spectacular summer palaces of the tsars, was for decades perhaps the most popular summer vacation place for millions of Soviet citizens. Crimea was "presented" by Nikita Khrushchev to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1954, when the republic's sovereignty was purely nominal. Less than a quarter of Crimeans are ethnic Ukrainians, while Russians make up over half of the inhabitants. (The pro-Ukrainian Crimean Tatars constitute one-fifth.)

Since the signing of the 1997 Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation between Russia and Ukraine by Boris Yeltsin and then-Ukrainian president Leonid Kuchma, a solid majority in the Duma has opposed the recognition of Crimea as Ukrainian territory. Russian nationalists have been especially adamant about the city of Sevastopol—the Russian Black Sea Fleet's base and the site of some of the most spectacular feats of Russian military valor and sacrifice in the Crimean War of 1854–56 and in World War II. Leading Russian nationalist politicians, including the mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov, have repeatedly traveled to Crimea to show the flag and support the Russian irredentists, many of them retired Russian military officers who periodically mount raucous demonstrations. (In 2006, their protests forced the cancellation of the joint Ukraine-NATO Sea Breeze military exercises.) "Sevastopol was and should again be a Russian city," Luzhkov declared this past May. "It is our obligation to confirm the Russian status and the Russian ownership of Sevastopol."⁵⁸ Last year, Moscow City Hall appropriated \$17 million for the "support of the Navy" in 2007–2009 and followed up this year with \$34 million for "the support of compatriots abroad" over the next three years.⁵⁹ On September 5, Ukrainian foreign minister Vladimir Ogrzyko accused the Russian consulate in the Crimean capital of Simferopol of distributing Russian passports to the inhabitants of the peninsula, as the Russian authorities had done for years in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

With almost three-quarters of Sevastopol's population of 340,000 ethnically Russian and with the 14,000 Russian Navy personnel (who have, in the past, reportedly donned civilian clothes and participated in the

demonstrations by Russian Crimean irredentists) already "on the inside," an early morning operation, in which the Ukrainian mayor and officials are deposed and arrested and the Russian flag hoisted over Sevastopol, should not be an especially hard mission to accomplish. Once established, Russian sovereignty over the city would be impossible to reverse without a large-scale war, which Ukraine would be most reluctant to initiate and its Western supporters would strongly discourage.

A potentially bolder (and likely bloodier) scenario might involve a provocation by the Moscow-funded, and perhaps armed, Russian nationalists (or the Russian special forces [*spetsnaz*] posing as irredentists). They could declare Russian sovereignty over a smaller city (for example, Alupka, Alushta, or Evpatoria) or a stretch of inland territory. In response, Ukrainian armed forces based outside Sevastopol would be likely to counterattack. The ensuing bloodshed would furnish Moscow the excuse of intervening to protect compatriots—this time, unlike in South Ossetia, ethnic Russians.

No Easy Reversal in Sight. Although occasioned by the wantonly irresponsible action of the Georgian authorities, Russia's invasion of Georgia was far more than a singular emergency operation. Instead, it has epitomized the steady ideological drift of the Putin government away from the liberal internationalist ideals of the Gorbachev-Yeltsin revolution and toward a starkly different set of national priorities. These, in turn, have informed the revisionism, the truculence, the imperial nostalgia, and the autarchic urges in Russian foreign policy.

With echoes of the history of Russian authoritarianism, the current Russian foreign and security strategy is not likely to be reversed until there is a profound change in the ideology of the regime, whose current convictions the West, and especially the new White House administration, ought to take very seriously, with no illusion of being able to reverse them quickly or easily.

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