

Russia-Georgia : the multipolar world's first war

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An analysis of the Russia-Georgia conflict from a geopolitical point of view brings out the strategic gains pocketed by Russia. They have put a brake on NATO's enlargement, which is responsible for Russia's perception of encirclement. On a wider scale, the conflict represents the arrival of a multipolar world. The European Union is directly concerned by this clash between Russia and the United States over the forming of spheres of influence on the Eurasian landmass. From the perspective of a 'political Europe', the security interests of the Union are dictated by geography. Renunciation of the enlargement of the EU and the Atlantic Alliance would be a response to the imperatives governing the stability of the continent and would open the way to a new Eurasian security system.

As part of its strategy of geopolitical synergy, www.diploweb.com is pleased to present this article, which first appeared in *Défense nationale et sécurité collective*, October 2008, pp. 35-40.

THE conflict between Russia and Georgia illustrates a constant which is too often forgotten in international relations, and two new factors.

Control of territory is a factor of power. It is a constant in the international balance of power. Many analyses concentrate on the distinction between the actors in a conflict as democratic or non-democratic states, whereas the legal point of view considers the respect or otherwise of international law. These approaches are often coloured by ideology and mask the real issues. An analysis of the conflict from a geopolitical angle is more revealing.

The conflict also confirms *the new geopolitical importance of Eurasia* since the end of the Cold War. Georgia plays the role of a pivotal state in the Caucasus, since the control of its territory enables decisive influence to be exerted over geostrategic, energy and economic questions on the Eurasian continent.

This conflict is, above all, *the multipolar world's first war*. By its military engagement in a pacification conflict beyond its frontiers, Russia has claimed the right to be involved in the highly strategic region of Eurasia, in open opposition to the sole claimant to power in a unipolar world, which consequently finds itself powerless to act.

The trend to a multipolar world signifies a redistribution of power between states in the form of a geographic dispersion accompanied by an 'unfreezing' of the existing order. A trend is growing of rivalries between states for the control of territories useful for their political and economic power, their security value and the significance of their identities. The geographical definition of the areas of influence of the various competing powers, the resolution of boundary disputes between states, and the changes consequent on their disintegration, are all decided by adjustment between the contradictory geopolitical designs of the various actors. The new balances are achieved either by conflict, that is, by warlike means, or in peaceful ways by negotiation.

The conflict between Russia and Georgia is larger than a local territorial affair and will have repercussions on a regional and worldwide scale. Russia's military support for the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, with the aim of defeating the Georgian attempt to re-establish its territorial integrity by force, and the United States's indirect military and political

support for Georgia, betray the presence of much larger issues.

The conflict constitutes an important stage in the confrontation between the United States and Russia for the constitution of spheres of influence on the Eurasian continent. By virtue of the geographical proximity of Russia and the Caucasus, and its historic links with the United States, the EU is directly involved in the conflict.

A new geopolitical balance post-conflict

Criticisms of Russia concerning its non-respect of international law lack credibility after the United States's undermining of the UN system at the time of the Iraq War and the non-respect of Serbia's territorial integrity with the recognition of Kosovo's independence by many states. In some respects, the Russian military operation also has some justification following the Georgian Army's attack on Russian peacekeeping forces and minorities.

The new situation on the ground enables Russia to strengthen its own security.

Russia has firm control of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Whether incorporated or not in the Russian Federation, these are strategic territorial gains. Russia's presence in Abkhazia enables it to improve its access to the Black Sea and, in the event of a conflict with a hostile force establishing itself on Georgian territory, would enable it to neutralise the Georgian deepwater port of Poti more quickly. Its presence in South Ossetia, close to the territorial heart of Georgia, enables Russia to reach the capital Tbilisi very rapidly, to cut the country's main east-west communications corridor, and to neutralise the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, which supplies the world markets and passes south of the Georgian capital.

Russia could also exercise more influence on the Eurasian continent's balance by making more difficult the use of Georgian territory by Israeli and American aircraft for refuelling in the event of a bombardment of Iranian nuclear installations.

The desire of the United States and some European countries to reduce their dependence on Russia, in order to diversify world and European energy supplies, is compromised if they try to avoid negotiating with Russia. The energy and commercial links between Europe and Central Asia passing through Russia have been strengthened and the alternative route through the South Caucasus has been rendered less certain.

Russia's priority to break its encirclement by the Atlantic Alliance has been achieved. The possibility of Georgia, and also Ukraine, joining the Alliance has been seriously put in doubt. In the event of an increase in tensions between Russia and the Atlantic Alliance, the replacement of the current Georgian government by one more favourable to Russia's interests would enable Russia to have the option of a strategic continuum between Russia, the remainder of Georgia, Armenia and Iran.

Georgia's strategic value to the Atlantic Alliance has been diminished by the de facto loss of a third of its territory. The uncertainty of Georgia's frontiers and Russia's demonstrated intention to defend its areas of influence militarily make any promises of military assistance hazardous.

As far as Ukraine is concerned, its membership of the Atlantic Alliance has become more risky in the face of Russia's new determination and its potential leverage over the Russian-speaking areas of the Crimea, a highly strategic region for operations by the Russian fleet in the Black Sea and the Mediterranean from the port of Sevastopol. Disagreement between member states over the enlargement of the Alliance will probably increase.

Consequences for the EU and the Atlantic Alliance

Russia believes that the policy of enlargement of the Atlantic Alliance pursued by the United States and its allies has the aim of encircling it. Whether or not this perception is exaggerated or pertinent does not alter the fact that it must be taken into account. In the conflict with Georgia, Russia has shown that an intrusion into its sphere of interest is now a *casus belli*.

Although Georgia was admitted to the preparation programme for entry to the Atlantic Alliance at the Bucharest summit in April 2008, at the behest of the United States and some European countries, the conflict between Georgia and Russia has demonstrated the inability of the Alliance to react to Russia without risking a much more serious conflict. The principle of mutual assistance which is at the heart of the Alliance's credibility may have been further weakened.

The enlargement of the Atlantic Alliance desired by the United States and some European states does not correspond to the security interests of the EU, which would find itself directly affected by a large-scale confrontation in Eurasia. The geographical position of the United States may encourage it to take more risks to achieve its geopolitical objectives in Eurasia. As far as security is concerned, geography takes precedence over cultural links. To clarify and improve the transatlantic relationship the question cannot be avoided.

If the EU still harbours the strategic ambition to build a European political identity, it must be able independently to identify and defend its interests in the multipolar world that is taking shape. A realistic analysis of its interests suggests the following principles :

- . From the perspective of a 'political Europe', the type of relationship to be created with Russia differs considerably from the approach followed by the United States and the most Atlanticist European states.

- . The debate dividing the protagonists between Westerners and Russia is a false one because it conceals the differences between the United States and the continental European heartland.

- . The enlargement of the Atlantic Alliance desired by the United States and its European allies such as Britain, Poland and the Baltic States can be seen as a way of weakening Russia by reducing its traditional sphere of influence built over several centuries.

- . For the heart of continental Europe, constituted by Germany, France, Belgium, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Austria and Hungary, supported by Italy, Portugal and Spain and also Greece and Cyprus, Russia is a historic partner and cooperation should take precedence over confrontation. The other members of the Union occupy intermediate positions.

Although the question of relations with Russia continues to divide the members of the EU, they

will continue to conduct relations with Russia bilaterally. Russia will make the most of this. As for the current divisions within the EU, a geopolitical strategy towards Eurasia and Russia can only be constructed on the basis of a political core consisting of Germany and France, before drawing in other members of a more realistic cast. Europe's political strategy must provide military, economic and energy security as a first priority, through a policy of alliances around its geographic boundaries. Geography makes Russia an unavoidable partner for the Eurasian area.

In a multipolar world, stability in Eurasia can only be achieved through a balance between the great powers, not by an obsession with the doctrine of an 'enlargement of democracy', which serves as a pretext for weakening Russia and results in increasing mutual mistrust. Russia serves as a useful counterweight in the context of a balanced policy on a world scale. It also constitutes the energy and commercial hinterland of the EU. The possibility of a strategic partnership between the EU and Russia should therefore be preserved.

The EU and the new Eurasian security system

The EU's security strategy is still embryonic. The major crises affecting the stability of the geographic neighbourhood of the EU are opportunities to pursue research and to fill out this strategy.

The Russo-Georgian conflict is therefore a chance for in-depth study of strategic questions between Russia, a growing actor in world multipolarity, and the EU, in concert with the Atlantic Alliance, for the constitution of a new Eurasian security system. The identification of its interests and geographical priorities by the EU must be conducted in parallel. This is a necessary precondition for the development of an independent geostrategic strategy over the long term for its ultimate goal ; a European political identity.

From this perspective, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Central Asia are key regions to cement Russia's security aspirations. Russia will always exercise a determining influence over its borders for obvious historical and geographical reasons. Prudence suggests that the enlargement of the EU should not be carried out precipitately, and that of the Atlantic Alliance even less so. A buffer zone including Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova transitioning gradually into a region of cooperation between Russia and the EU is a more realistic option.

Renunciation of the enlargement of the EU and the Atlantic Alliance into Russia's 'near abroad' is the way to increase regional stability and improve relations with Russia. With stable frontiers, the EU would put an end to its dilution, which is growing with successive enlargements. Its internal cohesion and also its identity, which is crucial for popular support, would be strengthened by this. Without calling relations with the United States into question, a rebalancing of the Atlantic Alliance is also necessary in order to take European interests more into account. This new balance would form the basis of a new Eurasian security architecture by taking into account Russia's security interests and by facilitating the stabilisation of the continental hinterland of the EU. It would also make it possible for the EU to constitute an area of stability close to Russia. It must not be forgotten that, for historical and geographic reasons, Russia is the natural partner of the EU.

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P.-S.

Consultant on geopolitics at the European Institute for International Relations (IERI), Brussels.