

Who Is Responsible for U.S. Russian Policy?

Пише: William Pfaff

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Paris, August 19, 2008 – A convincing account of the origin and development of the war between Russia and Georgia has now been provided by The New York Times, clarifying what it charitably describes as the “miscalculation, missed signals, and overreaching” responsible for the war.

The one thing it does not clarify is who is ultimately responsible for an American policy towards Russia that since the collapse of the Soviet Union has been aggressive, militarily overbearing, and threatening to the integrity of Russia, to absolutely no useful purpose. The conventional Western comment says the NATO governments have underestimated “Russia's determination to dominate its traditional sphere of influence.”

This is wrong. Russia has been amazingly tolerant of successful western efforts to annex its “traditional sphere of influence,” if that term means the Warsaw Pact, which until 1991 was the Communist counterpart to NATO, lending troops to enforce the so-called Brezhnev Doctrine, which held that membership in the Warsaw Pact and in the “Socialist bloc” was irreversible.

Mikhail Gorbachev reversed it. He withdrew troops from Afghanistan.

NATO was redefined by the first President George Bush, as he recounts in his memoirs, as “a political instrument of European stability” rather than a force of military confrontation. On those terms Gorbachev agreed to the unification of Germany within NATO. Warsaw Pact states were invited to go their own way, and they did -- into NATO.

President Bill Clinton told Boris Yeltsin that the expansion of NATO would stop with the East European states annexed to the Soviet bloc by the Russian Army during and just after the second world war. Thus Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland, particular victims of the cold war U.S.S.R. were among the first admitted to NATO.

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In 2004, the second Bush administration, including Condoleezza Rice, a Soviet scholar who should have known better, brutally broke those agreement by causing the admission to NATO of Bulgaria, Romania, Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia (among others), the latter three integral if unwilling parts of the Soviet Union during the second world war. Neither Clinton nor the first President Bush, who made these promises, protested.

Next came the American-sponsored “color revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine, installing pro-American governments, followed by the Bush administration's efforts to get NATO to give them a formal Military Action Plan for membership, an initiative fortunately blocked by Germany and France. And in February of this year, Kosovo, Serbian since the 12th century, was – illegally -- declared by the U.S. and the EU to be an independent nation.

This was the turning point for Russia . Now the United States and the EU had not only unilaterally dismembered Serbia but were attempting to make two states historically part of Russia into western satellites. Georgia and Ukraine had not simply been part of the Soviet Union , but before that of Czarist Russia.

Ukraine is at the core of Russian history. Its capital, Kiev , was at the center of the Rus principality in the Middle Ages, from which modern Russia descends, and has always been known as “the mother of Russian cities.”

Georgia has a complex and tormented Caucasian history of conflict with neighboring powers but in the 18th century its monarch voluntarily became a vassal of the Czar in exchange for protection. Georgia has been integrally part of Russian history since. Stalin himself, and his powerful secret police chief Lavrentiy Beria (who is thought to have murdered Stalin to halt the last great Stalinist purge) were both Georgians, as were other leading Bolsheviks.

One can understand that a hysterical and demagogic Georgian nationalist like Mikhail Saakashvili might think he could wipe out long-standing ethnic dissidence in his country by attacking Russian peacekeepers legally stationed in those enclaves to protect the dissidents. But who in Washington is promoting this strategy of hostile military and political encirclement of Russia? What conceivable interest of the West does this serve?

It is a senseless policy, apparently meant to intimidate Russia , but why? For the sake of

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perpetuating international tension so as to strengthen the forces that with Cheney and Bush have been promoting constitutionally unaccountable executive rule in the United States?

This is a very serious matter, being treated in the American press as if the United States has not been playing with dynamite. Russia is a powerful and nuclear-armed nation with legitimate national interests. Russia is no longer the messianic and ideological state with world ambitions the Soviet Union was. Those adjectives describe the United States today, as well as the policy towards Russia conducted under both Bush and Clinton administrations.

The most sensible advice I have seen has come from Europeans, directed towards other Europeans. It is to break away from this American policy of senseless and aggressive confrontation with Russia , and follow the successful Sarkozy mediation in Georgia with an effort to establish European terms for resolving this crisis, ignoring the United States.

Saakashvili is not likely to prove an obstacle. His people may soon rid themselves of the author of this fiasco, which humiliated his own country, NATO, and the United States as well. Perhaps a friend will preempt an indignant citizenry by offering Saakashvili a bottle of Scotch and a loaded pistol, and locking the office door. Bush and Rice too will soon be off the stage -- although who knows what will follow.

The European initiative makes sense. Forget Washington and approach Russia with a proposal for a new and constructive relationship with Europe, with arbitration and resolution of its problems with Poland, Ukraine and Georgia in the same way that similar issues have been handled inside Europe. It would take a very brave Europe to do this, but the U.S. on its present course may leave it with little choice.

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