

**RUSSIA'S VENTURE INTO GEORGIA:
RUSSIA'S PROBLEMS, CHINA'S DILEMMA**

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Executive Summary

1. The Russian invasion of Georgia has been referred to as the beginning of a new Cold War between Russia and the West with the exception that, this time, it is rooted in geo-political interests rather than ideology.
2. It has created a dilemma for China. China cannot afford to sit by idly when Russia and the West are in a conflict. If China does not lend any show of support to or at least some symbolic solidarity with Russia, its coveted Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) would be rendered a paper tiger and it would be difficult for China to win strong Russian support in international affairs in the future.
3. Meanwhile, China is also concerned with Russian influence over the direction that the SCO is developing. The Russians in recent years wanted the SCO to become an organization through which it can compete with the Western bloc, perhaps as a military counterbalance to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.
4. This is against the Chinese doctrine of peaceful rise and would certainly provoke Western powers and Japan. China wants to avoid this for the sake of its modernization program. Getting involved in Georgia would certainly put China into a military role envisioned by the Russians for the SCO.
5. China's interests are not in Georgia *per se* but in its own backyard – in areas like Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan. However, it may extract some political mileage out of the Russian invasion. One possible message from Beijing to the West, especially the US, is a reminder of the Chinese vision of a multipolar world and its rejection of US hegemony. The Russian Monroe Doctrine-like reassertion of its influence in the Caucasus as a traditional sphere of Russian influence in regional relations fits into this vision.
6. At its core and foundation, China prefers to be an autonomous and independent player in the international order. China thus supports neither the

Russian nor the French resolutions in the UN Security Council in respectively justifying or condemning the Georgian invasion. This position is well demonstrated by its rather bland initial official reaction to Russia's move on Georgia.

7. The issue is as much a litmus test for Beijing as it is for the West. The West has to be careful not to antagonize both Russia and China simultaneously as this may force Beijing to get closer to Russia, thus creating enormous problems for resolving key international issues such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation.

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ZHENG Yongnian & LIM Tai Wei*

A New Cold War?

- 1.1 The whole issue blew up when Georgia, a former Soviet state, dispatched troops to South Ossetia on Thursday 7 August 2008 to go after pro-independence separatists and to foster South Ossetia's unification with North Ossetia which is located in Russian territory. Russia retaliated on Friday, 8 August 2008 by sending troops to Georgia where its peacekeeping troops were based.
- 1.2 To the West, the Russian move into Georgia has been regarded as the beginning of a new Cold War between Russia and the West with the exception that, this time, it is rooted in geopolitical interests rather than ideology. There are in fact more differences. The Cold War was fought between two superpowers in a bipolar world and was global in nature whereas the retaliation on Georgia is limited to Russia's traditional sphere of influence in the Caucasus. This time, it signals the beginning of a multipolar world due to the decline of US predominance and the rise of the BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China).
- 1.3 The current conflict is also predominately about Russia and the West, with overwhelming balance of power on the latter and Russia in a much weaker position, a far cry from the bipolar structure of the Cold War. In fact, the West has been giving its support to Georgia for some time and toying with the idea of making the small state a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally.

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For years, the Russians have been threatened by the West's incursion into their backyard. This has made it necessary for Russia to seek support from its Asian neighbors and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO or 上海合作组织 in Chinese) formed in 2001 to hedge against Western pressure.

- 1.4 The Russia-Georgia conflict has created a dilemma for China. Because ideological lines are not clearly drawn in the sand, China, like Russia, also has to consider its own geo-political interests. China's interests are not in Georgia *per se* but in its own backyard – in areas like Xinjiang, Tibet and Taiwan. Beijing is wary of Western pressure and its support for separatism in such Georgia-like scenarios and is therefore careful not to antagonize the West and stir up support for its own separatist challenges. The Chinese leadership also needs to maintain its perceived pro-West image and its aim to build a peaceful international environment for the country's modernization program.
- 1.5 Meanwhile, China is sympathetic about Russia's move in Georgia since China has been very suspicious about the motivations of the US-Japanese alliance in Asia for years. Therefore, while China cannot afford to openly support Russia, it remains keen to use the Russian invasion as a clear signal to the West of Beijing's own resolve to keep China's own backyard out of Western reach.

China's tightrope

- 2.1 China has much at stake in this conflict. China cannot afford to sit by idly when Russia and the West are in conflict. If China does not lend any show of support or at least some symbolic solidarity with Russia, its coveted SCO, which was initiated as a counter-balancing instrument at the height of Chinese fears of rising terrorism in Xinjiang, the US-Japan alliance and the worsening relations with Japan during the Koizumi administration, would be rendered a paper tiger.
- 2.2 Beijing's fudging on the Georgian issue may also cause the overall direction of the SCO to become unclear. If China and Russia, the two major players in the SCO, cannot reach a consensus, then the SCO may lose its effectiveness

and even rationale for existence. For years, China has gained the firm support of the SCO in its battle against terrorism in Xinjiang. The SCO member states have also consistently supported Beijing's 'one-China policy' over the Taiwan issue. The SCO has been important and will continue to be important to China.

- 2.3 At the same time, Beijing is also wary of Russian influence over the direction that the SCO is developing. From the very beginning, the Chinese side wants the organization to focus on countering terrorism, separatism and extremism, all considered politically correct issues given the US-inspired global War on Terrorism and China's own priority in these areas.
- 2.4 But, in recent years, Moscow tends to focus on adding military elements to the SCO in the hope of developing it into an organization through which it can compete with the Western bloc, perhaps as a military counterbalance to the NATO. The US is already very wary of the Russian agenda to include Iran (which the US suspects is developing a weaponized nuclear program) as an observer to the SCO.
- 2.5 This is against the Chinese doctrine of peaceful rise and is a move that is certain to provoke Western powers and Japan. China wants to avoid this. Since 2007, China has attempted to focus on economic cooperation which is evident in the theme of President Hu's speech during the 2008 SCO meeting: "Building long-lasting peace together in a region of co-prosperity"¹. These issues are deemed as safe and acceptable to China's non-SCO neighbors (most importantly Japan which views the SCO with concern) and the US.
- 2.6 Getting involved in Georgia would certainly put China into a military role that Russia has expected. Beijing has to be wary. Beijing also knows that Moscow's move on Georgia is not popular internationally. So far, only the presidents of Belarus and Syria amongst Russian allies publicly supported the Russian move.²

¹ "胡锦涛上合峰会促深化反恐", *Mingpao*, 29 August 2008.

² "Russia Looks East After Criticism from the West", *Deutsche Welle*, 28 August 2008.

- 2.7 Even within the SCO, China is not alone in being wary of Russian intentions of militarizing the organization. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have balanced their Russian ties with US power by hosting both American and Russian military bases. Russia's move on Georgia is extremely sensitive to SCO member states like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, former Soviet Union states which became independent only after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991.
- 2.8 Despite such uncertainties, Beijing may extract some mileage out of the Russian invasion. One possible message from Beijing to the West, especially the US, is a reminder of the Chinese vision of a multipolar world and its rejection of US hegemony.
- 2.9 The Chinese cited the influence in the Caucasus as akin to that of the Russian Monroe Doctrine. Regional powers prefer to impose traditional spheres of influence over their own backyards than to subscribe to the hegemonic theory of having a single hegemon maintaining the global order.
- 2.10 As a consequence of its move on Georgia, Russia is now the front man in preventing Western encouragement of separatism in other regions of the world. The idea of regional autonomy is a grave threat to the Chinese, especially in its restive provinces. This is one area in which China shares strategic interest with Russia. When Russia opposed the independence of Kosovo, China gave its full support.
- 2.11 But China's overwhelming interest is still peaceful rise. China needs a peaceful international environment for its own modernization program. To achieve that goal, China has to live in peace with the West and the US. That was indeed the main message presented by the Beijing Olympics to the world symbolized by the word '*he* (和)' which refers to peaceful and harmonious relations with the world. The tug of the global Western capitalist order which China is currently thriving in inevitably pulls China away from Russian

strategic interests towards a more autonomous position in the global balance of power.

- 2.12 At its core and foundation, China prefers to be an autonomous and independent player in the international order. In this case, China supports neither the Russian nor the French resolutions in the UN Security Council justifying or condemning the Russian invasion. This position is well-demonstrated by its rather bland initial official reaction to Russia's move on Georgia.
- 2.13 When pressed on whether China would recognize the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Chinese Foreign ministry spokesman Qin Gang elaborated only slightly about the Russian parliament's passing of motions to recognize South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent nations: "We have noted the latest developments of the situation, and we hope relevant parties find a proper resolution of the issue through dialogue." The ministry added that it would contact the media when it had more to say.³
- 2.14 Qin's bland but calm and collected statements were reiterated on 28 August 2008 in that Beijing "understands the complex histories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia" and that "China's ongoing position on this issue is that they hope all sides use negotiations and dialogue to resolve the issue".⁴ In his speech at the SCO summit, President Hu Jintao repeated the same line in that China wants to see the dispute "appropriately solved through dialogue and consultation".⁵ The irony is not lost. If Beijing had openly supported the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it may send the wrong signals to its own restive provinces.
- 2.15 China's state media, including the *People's Daily*, the official mouthpiece of the ruling Communist Party, also minimized coverage of Russia's move on

³ "Russia Looks East After Criticism from the West", *Deutsche Welle*, 28 August 2008.

⁴ "China Expresses Concern About Russia's Stance on Georgian Regions", *Voanews*, 28 August 2008.

⁵ "China voices concern over Russia, Georgia", *Reuters*, 28 August 2008.

Georgia and its support of the independence of the two small breakaway republics as news broke. The *People's Daily*, for example, carried a neutral factual account of the entire episode without passing value judgment, falling in line with the official position of the Chinese government. The *Global Times* which has frequently published provocative commentaries on international relations has so far avoided any commentaries on the Georgia issue.

Long-term implications

- 3.1 Ultimately the Russian invasion has long-term implications. In the broad stroke, it is regarded by the West as conflict between authoritarianism and capitalist democracies, and hence a possible a New Cold War between the two. If a Cold War comes to pass, China might be forced to take side. On the other hand, in the shorter term, this conflict can reap dividends for Beijing.
- 3.2 Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Beijing has enjoyed relatively calm relations with the US when it was preoccupied with the War on Terror. Distracted, the US has taken China off the hook as the number one villain. But the US focus on Islamic extremism could lessen with time. It may go in search of a new adversary or a blame factor for its domestic economic problems; in both cases, China is the most convenient substitute. With the world's attention now on Russia, it is likely to take over as the greatest perceived threat to US interests and worldview in the minds of American policy-makers.
- 3.3 Economically, there may even be spin-offs for Beijing as the stand-off between Russia and Europe create more uncertainties for Western investments in Central Asia and the Caucasus, opening up economic space for the Chinese. Both regions are oil and gas rich.
- 3.4 Nevertheless, China remains mindful of its next-door neighbor with whom it has just settled a boundary dispute and is increasingly dependent on for energy. Beijing still remembers and is bitter over Moscow's awarding of oil pipeline deals to Japan instead of its Northeast refineries. In other words, a geographically close but geo-strategically unfriendly neighbor can spell

trouble for China as it did in the Cold War when the two fought brief border clashes.

- 3.5 But, in even longer terms, Beijing will be worried about Georgia-like situations in their backyard, specifically Western (including US) promotion of “color revolutions” in Tibet and Xinjiang. Mikheil Saakashvili, the Georgian president, is a product of Western-inspired “color revolutions” which promote democracy in Eastern Europe and Central Asia. Beijing may be tempted to use the Russian position to warn the US not to foment “color revolutions” in its own backyard, particularly in the restive provinces of Xinjiang and Tibet.
- 3.6 Separatism remains an active and very real threat to Beijing. In the latest incident, the fourth attack in less than two months by Chinese separatists, eight Uighurs and local ethnic Muslims in Jiashi County Xinjiang killed two policemen and wounded seven others.⁶ Such attacks indicate that the twin forces of ethnic violence and extremist religion (Buddhism in Tibet and Islam in Xinjiang) feared by Beijing can become even more formidable if fanned and supported by Western encouragement. In other words, “color revolutions” are not welcomed in China.
- 3.7 In another commonality, both Russia and China are experiencing bouts of nationalism especially in their newfound economic strength. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev declared that Russia “will not allow the deaths of our compatriots to go unpunished,” and “those guilty will receive due punishment.” “My duty as Russian president is to safeguard the lives and dignity of Russian citizens, wherever they are. This is what is behind the logic of the steps we are undertaking now,”⁷ he added.

⁶ “新疆刀煞襲警 2 死 7 傷”, *Mingpao*, 29 August 2008.

⁷ “Fighting with Russia spreads to cities across Georgia”, *CNN*, 8 August 2008

A litmus test for China

- 4.1 At the moment, China is keeping a relatively low profile on the subject, preferring to rely on quiet diplomacy to defuse the situation. Ultimately, it does not want to take a stand. China has used the SCO to make statements on the issue. Using coded language without referring to states in particular, the Xinhua news agency has reported the joint statement by SCO leaders as declaring that “attempts to solve a problem through use of force would never work, and instead it would hinder a comprehensive settlement.”⁸
- 4.2 The same joint statement was careful to highlight the six-point proposal reached in Moscow on 12 Aug 2008 to resolve the issue and its praise for Russia for its “positive role in promoting peace and cooperation in the region”⁹. The declaration called for respect for “territorial integrity” without specifically naming Georgia.¹⁰ Using this strategy, Beijing is rallying behind a collective front to avoid unilateral statements of intention.
- 4.3 Beijing is also hoping that its absence of public criticism of Russia’s move on Georgia would be interpreted by Moscow as condoning its actions or as a form of silent approval. Beijing’s most public comments came in the form of statements of approval for a French-brokered peace plan for settling the conflict between Georgia and its breakaway region of South Ossetia which both parties signed.
- 4.4 The issue is as much a litmus test for Beijing as it is for the West. The West has to be careful not to antagonize both Russia and China simultaneously as this may force Beijing to get closer to Russia, thus creating enormous problems for resolving key international issues such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation.

⁸ “SCO: Solve problems by dialogue”, *Xinhua*, 28 August 2008

⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁰ “Putin assails US over Georgia conflict”, *AFP*, 29 August 2008.

APPENDIX



(L-R) Presidents Kurmanbek Bakiyev of Kyrgyzstan, Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan, Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, Hu Jintao of China, Emomali Rakhmon of Tajikistan, Dmitry Medvedev of Russia and Hamid Karzai of Afghanistan posed for a picture before the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) summit in Dushanbe on August 27, 2008. (Source: “SCO: Solve problems by dialogue”, Xinhua, 28 August 2008)



Russian fighter bombers bombing Georgia (Source: CNN, 8 August 2008)