

THE END OF THE FROZEN COLD WAR?

COMMENT BY

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Abstract

After the Russian incursion into Georgia many analysts ask questions of whether or not the world is standing on the verge of a new Cold War. Almost no one is asking a question of what if the 20th century Cold War was never finished but, rather, was just “frozen” and what we are witnessing now is the process of melting. To the extent that on both sides of the Cold War are the same countries as in the last century, and the reasons and driving forces of the conflict - as well as the Kremlin’s action style - have never changed, one may conclude that what we see now is not a new Cold War but, rather, the resumption of the old Cold War. It is quite probable that the old story may happen again and the West’s softness towards Russia may lead to the “refreezing” of the Cold War and the sacrifice of Georgia for an imaginary peace in Europe and the whole world.

Keywords: Cold War, Russia, USSR, Europe, US, Chechnya, Georgia

Introduction: New or Old Cold War?

Is Europe going to be a battlefield for a new nuclear rivalry?¹ This question became particularly topical after President Dmitry Medvedev of the Russian Federation had declared his plans of deploying Russia’s Iskander missiles in the Kaliningrad Oblast of the Russian Federation² unless the US leadership takes back its intention to set up a missile shield in Europe³. Undoubtedly, this maneuver, especially after the Russian war against the small Caucasus state of Georgia, is reminiscent of the old rivalry between the West and the former

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¹ Whitney, Mike, “Obama versus Medvedev: Nuclear Standoff in New Europe,” *Global Research*, November 09, 2008. (<http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=10865>).

² Barabanov, Mikhail, “The Iskander Factor,” *Kommersant. Russia’s Daily Online*, November 09, 2008. (http://www.kommersant.com/p1052937/r_527/Iskander_missiles_to_counterbalance_American_AMD_system_s/).

³ Isachenkov, Vladimir, “Russia: Missile Deployment Depends on US Moves,” *USA Today*, 11.09.2008. (http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/2008-11-09-4032420362_x.htm?loc=interstitialskip).

USSR in the time of the Cold War. Many politicians⁴ and analysts⁵, therefore, ask questions of whether or not the world is standing on the verge of a new Cold War and, if yes, how it could be avoided. Such questions, because of different reasons, were urgent before Russia's war against Georgia as well⁶.

Almost no one, however, is asking the question of whether the 20th century Cold War was never finished⁷ but, rather, was just "frozen" and what we are witnessing now is the process of melting?

West's Dream and Illusion

First in Gorbachev's, and later in Yeltsin's epochs there developed an impression that the Cold War came to an end and that the new Russia irreversibly chose a track of co-operation with the civilized world, along with democratic changes and transition to a market economy. Yet the Russian aggression against Georgia in August 2008 made it clear that the end of the Cold War was not a reality but, rather, the West's dream and illusion that the West simply mistook for reality. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the collapsing USSR and its successor, a newly independent Russia, were so weak in both political and economic terms that they were greatly dependent upon the West's economic assistance. The desire to get this assistance forced Moscow to turn to the West and Western values. At the same time, nostalgia for the lost empire became increasingly strong in Russia. Many Russians became obsessed with the complex of a beaten nation and the desire to take revenge.

A good example of how the West deliberately turned a blind eye to Russia's antidemocratic actions at times is President Putin's successful enterprise to make his Western partners believe that the Kremlin's war in Chechnya was just an antiterrorist operation. Ironically, the Kremlin accomplished this goal with relative ease, despite a flood of international human rights organizations' criticism that swept Moscow in response to its actions in Chechnya.

In light of the above-mentioned growing revengefulness of the Russian society, the military operations in Chechnya drastically increased the Kremlin's esteem inside the country. Coincidentally, this period was marked by a steady growth of the oil price in the global market which led to a rapid strengthening of Russia's economy. Furthermore, whilst Europe

⁴ For example, Rice, Condoleezza, "Speech at German Marshall Fund on U.S.-Russia Relations," *U.S. Department of State*, September 18, 2008. (<http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2008/September/20080918155132eaifas0.4152033.html?CP.rss=true>).

⁵ For example, Fukuyama, Francis, "They Can Only Go So Far," *The Washington Post*, August 24, 2008. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/22/AR2008082202395.html>).

⁶ Brzezinski, Zbigniew, "How to Avoid a New Cold War," *Time*, June 07, 2007. (<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1630544,00.html>); Cohen, Stephen F., "The New American Cold War," *The Nation*, June 21, 2006. (<http://www.thenation.com/doc/20060710/cohen>); Friedman, Thomas L., "The New Cold War," *The New York Times*, May 14, 2008. (http://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/14/opinion/14friedman.html?_r=1); Johnson, Daniel, "Putin's New Cold War," *The New York Sun*, February 7, 2008. (<http://www.nysun.com/opinion/putins-new-cold-war/70910/>); Kotkin, Stephen, "Myth of the New Cold War," *Prospect Magazine*, Issue 145, April, 2008. (<http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/pdfarticle.php?id=10094>); Lucas, Edward, "The New Cold War: How the Kremlin Menaces Both Russia and the West", (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2008).

⁷ Simons, Jr., Thomas W., "The End of the Cold War?", (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

receives 40% of its natural gas supplies from Russia, Moscow obtained a powerful weapon which forces the Western world to accommodate the Kremlin. They did so by changing the G-7 format into a G-8 format as a favour to Russia which, in turn, made the Kremlin believe that it has re-obtained enough previous influence to dictate its conditions to the rest of the world.

Russia's Growing Influence

It is true that Russia's influence has noticeably grown but this influence has not been strong enough to dissuade the US from launching an antiterrorist campaign in Iraq, for example, or to prevent the West from recognizing the independence of Kosovo. These events awakened the Kremlin's passion to show the world that it was much stronger than anyone thought. If the US is conducting a military operation in Iraq—a country which is so far away from its shores—then why can Russia, as one of the leading powers in the world, not embark upon a similar action in neighboring Georgia? If many countries of the West recognized Kosovo's independence, then why can Russia not recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and, thereby, demonstrate to the world that it has truly re-obtained its previous power and influence?

Why Georgia?

There comes a further question. Why is it that Georgia has become Russia's first target? It is not difficult to find an answer. Firstly, not only Georgia proper but also its two breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have common borders with Russia. Secondly, both regions have been ruled by Russia's puppet regimes, with their separatism being inspired and fostered politically and economically by the Kremlin, and both of these separatist regimes have been used by Russia as an important base for preparing and implementing a military attack against Georgia. Thirdly, Georgia's Rose Revolution and Mikheil Saakashvili's government, which came to power as a result of it, have been regarded by the Kremlin as a project of Washington; furthermore, Georgia's aspirations to NATO have broadly been considered an insult to Russia's national dignity. Fourthly, Russia wants to dominate pipelines which are crossing Georgia.

The Kremlin's Efforts against Georgia: Past, Present and Future

For quite a long while, the West was unenthusiastic to acknowledge and admit publicly that Tbilisi's key problem in Abkhazia and South Ossetia resided in Moscow. Whilst Moscow was extensively distributing Russian passports in the separatist-controlled regions and persecutions of ethnic Georgians were underway in Russia, the West was still urging the Georgian government to find a friendly settlement with Russia. It was only after Russia launched an act of military aggression against Georgia and occupied the Georgian territories that the Western world realized that Russia was in conflict not only with Georgia but also with Western values.

Having been euphoric after a quick military victory over Georgia, the Kremlin recognized the independence of both breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and disregarded the fact that the vast majority of the populations in those separatist regions were Russian citizens. Paradoxically, Russia recognized the independence of two new states whose inhabitants were not citizens of Abkhazia and South Ossetia but, rather, and owing to the Kremlin's efforts of Russia itself. Whilst the Kremlin is fond of drawing parallels with Kosovo, it must be remembered that before recognizing Kosovo's independence, neither the United States nor any other country had encouraged the people of Kosovo to accept the US or any other country's citizenship.

That the world would not commend Russia for the above steps and would not recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia should not be seen as something unexpected for the Kremlin. Even if some openly anti-Western regimes support Russia's latest moves, they will still be unable to change the climate of modern international relations. There arises another question. What did Moscow count on when it was deciding to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia?

One may foresee that after a certain while, the Kremlin will instruct the puppet governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to hold referenda about their incorporation into the Russian Federation. The outcomes of such referenda might be quite predictable and they could be justified, for example, by the following logic. If the UN, the EU and most of the world's nations refuse to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia, then peoples of those states will have no choice but to request joining with Russia, especially as the most of those people already are Russian citizens. Moreover, Russia is not only a subject of international law but also a permanent member of the UN Security Council. In that capacity it will be in a better position to protect the interests of the peoples of Abkhazia and South Ossetia who will already be inhabitants of the new Russian territories. In so doing, the Kremlin would accomplish the objectives that it has been pursuing for a long while, on the one hand, whilst on the other hand being able to "successfully blame" the West for the extension of Russia's borders into the South of the Caucasus range because it refused to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and thereby "forced" Russia to annex to Russia Georgia's two historical regions.

Conclusion: "Refreezing" or Completion?

Russia's military aggression against Georgia, the Russian occupation of the Georgian territories, Russia's disrespect for the cease-fire agreement signed by Presidents Sarkozy and Medvedev and Moscow's unilateral recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia without any consultation with the world's leading G-7 nations is naturally reminiscent of the epoch of the Cold War⁸.

⁸ Asmus, Ronald D., and Richard Holbrooke, "Black Sea Watershed," *The Washington Post*, August 11, 2008. (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/08/10/AR2008081001870.html>); Powell, Bill, "Cold War: The Sequel," *Time*, August 12, 2008. (<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1831859,00.html>).

To the extent that on both sides of the Cold War are the same countries as in the last century and the reasons and driving forces of the conflict, as well as the Kremlin's action style, have never changed (one must keep in mind that in 2008 the Kremlin took an attempt to replace the political regime in Georgia by the same methods which it used in 1956 in Hungary and in 1968 in Czechoslovakia), one may conclude that what we see now is not a new Cold War but, rather, the resumption of the old Cold War. In other words, we are facing the renewal of the same situation which the West has mistakenly considered to be over. It appears now that it was just frozen and the frontline of this "melting" Cold War⁹ is located in the Caucasus, in Georgia¹⁰.

The political price of Russian gas, notably during the winter (which is the urgent problem of today¹¹), is so high that the Western European countries, unlike some Eastern European nations which are exposed to the immediate danger of potential Russian aggression, apparently have chosen to once again turn a blind eye to the reality and Russia's present policy towards the West and Western values. Regrettably, it is quite probable that the old story may happen again and the West's softness towards Russia¹² may be justified by more self-deceptive assurances that Russia is no longer the USSR and that democratic transformations and Western values are not alien to Russia. In fact, such an attitude may lead to the renewal of the process of "refreezing" of the Cold War and the sacrifice of Georgia for an illusory peace in Europe and the whole world. If this is true, then the West's financial and diplomatic support of Georgia may be interpreted in a way that whilst the West feels an instinctive sympathy to this small country in the Caucasus, by extending this aid it wishes to pay it off.

At best, the main challenge for the international community is the elaboration of an effective means for the real—and not virtual as it was in the late 1980s and early 1990s—completion of the twentieth-century Cold War.

⁹ Jackson, Alexander, "IA Forum Interview: Vladimer Papava," *International Affairs Forum*, August 14, 2008. (<http://ia-forum.org/Content/ViewInternalDocument.cfm?ContentID=6377>).

¹⁰ Saakashvili, Mikheil, "The War in Georgia Is a War for the West," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 11, 2008. (http://online.wsj.com/article/SB121841306186328421.html?mod=opinion_main_commentaries).

¹¹ For example, Daly, John C.K., "Analysis: Russian-Ukrainian Gas Dispute," *Russo Daily*, December 26, 2008. (http://www.russodaily.com/reports/Analysis_Russian-Ukrainian_gas_dispute_999.html); Elder, Miriam, "Behind the Russia-Ukraine Gas Conflict," *Business Week*, January 3, 2009. (http://www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/jan2009/gb2009013_045451.htm?campaign_id=rss_daily); Elkind, Jonathan, and Edward Chow, "Don't Act Surprised," *International Herald Tribune*, January 7, 2009. (<http://www.iht.com/articles/2009/01/07/opinion/edelkind.php>); Runner, Philippa, "Cold War Haunts EU Gas Crisis Response," *Business Week*, January 6, 2009. (http://www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/content/jan2009/gb2009016_769430.htm?campaign_id=europe_relat ed).

¹² Bush, Jason, "The New Cold War?," *Business Week*, August 22, 2008. (http://www.businessweek.com/globalbiz/blog/europeinsight/archives/2008/08/the_new_cold_wa.html); Kuchins, Andrew, "Time to Treat Russia as a Partner," *The Moscow Times*, September 22, 2008. (<http://www.moscowtimes.ru/article/1016/42/371114.htm>); Kuchins, Andrew, "Where Should U.S. Policy toward Russia Go from Here?," *CSIS Commentary*, September 8, 2008. (http://www.csis.org/media/csis/pubs/080908_kuchins_russia.pdf).