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RSIS COMMENTARIES

CRISIS IN THE CAUCASUS:
What can we learn from it?

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The jury is still out over where the responsibility for the current Russian and Georgian conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia lies. In all probability, there may never be a unanimous verdict. For the moment, however, two general lessons can be learnt from this crisis.

On 8 AUGUST, Georgia and Russia went to war in the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The million dollar question of the moment, naturally, is who is responsible for the war. This question remains decidedly open-ended. Some quickly assign guilt to Georgia – its initial attack and occupation of South Ossetia an irresponsible and provocative rash miscalculation. Yet others wag their fingers at Russia for blatantly sending its forces into a sovereign country, *prima facie*, an act of war. Time may provide a clearer, fuller answer. Despite the name-calling and finger pointing, the crisis in the Caucasus offers two immediate lessons.

Lesson #1 – Be wary of conditions for a Perfect Storm

Just a decade ago – possibly even more recently – Russia would not have been able to be as assertive as it now is. Its military and government were in disarray. Russia's current confidence is an indication how disparate factors can come together like a "perfect storm" to turn a country around. Such change can come comparatively quickly.

The 1991 Halloween Nor'easter – the "perfect storm" – was caused by the coincidence of favourable meteorological conditions which amplified the hurricane's strength considerably. That "perfect storm" was the result of perfect timing. In war, timing (along with luck) is everything, too. In World War Two, Japan invaded Southeast Asia partly because the opportunity to do so had conveniently availed itself. With France and Holland defeated by Nazi Germany and their colonial possessions now vulnerable, Britain concerned about its very survival, and the Soviet Union occupied in the West by the surprise Nazi invasion, the timing for a Japanese Southern thrust to seize vital natural resources could not have been better.

The concurrence of these favourable conditions contributed to the eventual Japanese success.

Similarly, the recent flexing of Russian military might against Georgia was possible because of the confluence of factors in Russia's favour.

Russia holds a permanent seat on the United Nations Security Council. Through the veto it wields, Russia is insulated from clear UN condemnation, thus severely limiting the global body's ability to directly involve itself in the crisis. The United States, a friend of Georgia, is currently overstretched and has no effective way of twisting Russia's arm. The "War on Terror" and American involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq have taken a heavy toll on American resources. Even if the US could spare them to intervene in the crisis, it is doubtful if it has the political will or clout to act. The US is war-weary and presently facing the worst economic turmoil in decades.

Furthermore, the unpopular war in Iraq has eroded the moral high ground the US once occupied, a weakness Prime Minister Vladimir Putin quickly exploited when rebuffing American criticism of Russia's intervention. Additionally, Washington has been keen on improving relations with Moscow to address more pressing international issues like global terrorism. The US is now caught between the proverbial rock and a hard place. Hard choices have to be made. As Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov put it, Washington must now choose between its "special project", Georgia, and a partnership with Moscow.

Closer to the region, European Union countries are heavily dependent on Russian energy exports. With such a noose around its neck, the EU will undoubtedly tread cautiously. The high price of oil and gas has also resulted in a Russia flushed with cash, resulting in a stronger, more confident Russia. Above all, the post-9/11 preference to focus on "non-traditional" security threats such as terrorism, transnational crime and pandemics may have shifted the world's attention away from classic inter-state conflict – to Russia's immediate benefit.

In sum, Russia had the means to act, and knew the rest of the world would have its hands tied, unable to strongly act against it.

Lesson # 2 – There is a difference between "friendship" in international and human relations.

Nineteenth century British Prime Minister Lord Palmerston once suggested that there exist no permanent friends or enemies, just permanent interests. An implicit suggestion of Palmerston's axiom is that human conventions, and thus expectations, of relationships do not always apply in international relations. "Friendship" suggests very little of the specifics of national policy; complicated, even contradictory, national interests decide that. Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union signed the German-Soviet Boundary and Friendship Treaty in 1939, yet the former invaded its "friend" just two years later. "Friendship" in international relations neither always translates to friendly acts, nor is it synonymous with "alliance". One therefore cannot understand "friendliness" between countries at face value. Unfortunately, average Georgians did.

Given Georgia's growing friendship with the US, they expected the US to immediately intervene on its side. US President George W. Bush often spoke kindly of democratic Georgia, and was also a strong advocate for its membership in NATO. In return, Georgians declared the US a great friend, even naming a street after President Bush. But when Georgian defeats quickly became a rout, and the US failed to intervene, Georgian anger turned on the US. They felt they had been let down, even betrayed.
One Georgian refugee called America the real "evil empire". A Georgian soldier earnestly asked a New York Times reporter "where are our friends?" Another exclaimed, "[The US] is spitting on us." Clearly, the inaction of the US was seen as reneging an implied promise that it would stoutly stand behind the fledgling Georgian democracy. Legally, however, the US was not obliged to intervene. American support was merely suggested by political rhetoric, not enshrined in treaties. The US' choice to remain militarily uninvolved was its prerogative. In any event, current American national interests

would suggest a course of non-intervention. The average Georgian's expectation of friendship was clearly different to the US' Palmerstonian understanding of it in *realpolitik*, with possibly fateful consequences.

While news of President Bush's dispatch of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to Georgia boosted Tbilisi's morale, the longer-term impact on US standing in the eyes of the average Georgian remains to be seen. Any fall, no matter how slight, cannot be discounted. As should be expected in a democracy, the views of the average citizen will undoubtedly determine the shape and direction of Georgia in the future. If Georgians collectively feel like they have been let down by the US, relations in the future may be frostier. An immediate American concern is the fate of Georgia's contribution to the American effort in Iraq. Withdrawn from Iraq, it is uncertain if the two thousand-strong contingent will return to Iraq following Washington's unsatisfactory response to Russia's aggression.

The lesson here is that governments must be mindful of how the lines between its foreign policy are read, especially by the lay person. After all, the common citizen is the basis of any democratic government's legitimacy, and thus power. While strong statements of support make for good publicity, they may also inadvertently cause discontent when anticipated help is not immediately provided. As diplomatic rhetoric thickens this century, such a lesson is timely.

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