

NEW REALITIES, LESSONS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES IN THE CAUCASUS

Aristos Aristotelous
Member of the House of Representatives of the Republic of Cyprus
(AKEL-Left-New Forces)

Whilst world attention was focused on the Olympic Games the Georgian crisis brought international affairs and US – Russia antagonism in the Caucasus into a new era of tense relations and power struggles. The obvious outcome of this crisis is a new reality regarding the balance of power in this part of the world. But there are lessons to be drawn from it. At the same time there are challenges ahead, and the difficult question that remains to be answered is where this adventurous situation will lead international politics and US – Russia relations in the future.

Certainly confrontation in Georgia was not a surprise event. There had been a series of actions by the US during the past few years which were viewed by Moscow as provocations against Russia - reviving Cold War behaviour and memories – starting from the expansion of NATO in the ex Eastern European countries, the inclusion of nuclear weapons in the Atlantic Alliance’s strategy, the decision to install an antiballistic missile shield in Europe by using Polish and Czech territories and the declaration of independence in Kosovo. Furthermore there have been great pressures from Washington on its hesitant European allies to go along with its policy and push for Ukraine’s and Georgia’s membership to NATO. The move was perceived by the Kremlin as an attempt

by the US to encircle and weaken Russia as a major player in the geoeconomics of the rich oil fields in its backyard.

The Russians have traditionally been very sensitive about the situation in the Caucasus and could hardly refrain from responding to potential threats. They have always seen Georgia and the province of South Ossetia, in particular, as strategically important, since it straddles the trans - Caucasus highway, linking the North and South Caucasus. Immense American investment in the oil business in the Baltic sea and Azerbaijan over the past years and the construction of the Baku - Tbilisi - Ceyhan pipelines through Georgia, avoiding Russia, enhanced the importance of the region further. It also fuelled the antagonism between Moscow, the US and other Western powers. But as Russia's President Dmitri Medvedev reminded, Moscow cannot and will not give up its strategic interests in the area. He stressed that "historically Russia has been, and will continue to be, a guarantor of security for peoples of the Caucasus". Under these circumstances any attempt by the American backed regime of Tbilisi to forcefully restore control over the pro Moscow breakaway province of South Ossetia, which along with Abkhazia sought independence in early 1990's, would have provoked a military response from Russia. And it did. Unlike its more reconciling attitude, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, now, a more prosperous and confident Moscow, in the face of expanding American hegemony in Russia's peripheral states - like Ukraine and Georgia - appeared to be.

Russia's war in Georgia constituted the first major Russian intervention outside the country, since the fall of the Soviet Union, signaling a new phase in the

Kremlin's policy towards neighbours flirting with the US. At least this is one message that Moscow wanted to convey to the world. Another strong message stemming out of Russia's actions is that they resemble American military operations elsewhere, which had also ignored world public opinion and the UN. These are practices reminding every student of politics of some realities in international relations regarding the limitations of international law, the usefulness and constraints in the role of international organizations such as the UN, the OSCE or even the European Union in dealing with conflict situations or war. It underlines the utility of military power in the pursuance of national interest and the prevailing anarchic nature of the international environment in the 21st century.

One may even view the war of Russia against Georgia as a proxy military confrontation with the US, considering that the ex Soviet republic soon after the collapse of the USSR became a protégé of Washington - receiving substantial economic and military aid, advisors, training, weapons, hardware and equipment. In this respect, the humiliating defeat of the Georgian regime by the reemerging Russian's strong military machine was in essence a severe blow to US prospective domination in the region and a shift in the balance of power in favour of Russia. This is a new reality in the politics of Caucasus, at least for the time being.

There are also some lessons to be drawn from the crisis in Georgia. The US is undoubtedly a superpower that cannot really be challenged by the Russians on world scale. Russia has neither the economic resources, nor the military

capabilities to do so even in the long run. But in the short run it appears that the US overstretching of its military resources in its involvement in various parts of the world, like Iraq and Afghanistan, its confrontation with Iran and South Korea, created gaps and exposed weaknesses in its dealings with challenges elsewhere. Besides it very much needs Moscow's cooperation in all the above and probably thought or hoped it could deal with the issue of Georgia later. But in the absence of any real ground, air and naval support from the US, for Georgians, the Administration's rhetoric was not enough to avert the tragic consequences of the war. Other ex Soviet Republics, harbouring the same ambitions as Georgia for closer military ties with Washington, may have seen US credibility as an ally undermined by its inability to act.

Finally, the current crisis in Georgia may be over, but there are many challenges ahead that will test the already uncomfortable relations between Washington and Moscow on various issues. For example: How will Russia respond to the latest agreement between US and Poland as regards the missile shield and the probable renewal of efforts of Georgia and Ukraine to join NATO? What are the effects of Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia both for Russia, the US but also for the UN and international law and order? What will the European Union's attitude be? What are the possible effects on transatlantic relations and on the European Common Foreign and Security Policy? How will the flow and price of oil be affected? What impact will these situations have on other ex Soviet Republics at the periphery of Russia and in their domestic and international affairs? These are certainly difficult

questions that make any analysis complicated and highly hypothetical. But whatever the answers, one thing that is certain: Relations between the US and Russia are no longer the same as they used to be during the early post Cold War years. Antagonism between the two powers, as well as co operation, however difficult this may be, will continue to dominate their relationship and attract international attention for one more reason: Russia remains the only country in the world that can pose a real threat to US's homeland with its nuclear weapons.