

THE COSTS TO THE UNITED STATES OF THE AUGUST 2008 WAR

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To assess the question of what kind of costs the 2008 war imposed on the United States or to U.S. foreign policy, we need to distinguish between a few meanings of the word. First, there are the “costs” the United States bore willingly to support Georgia, a pro-Western strategic partner, in its time of need. Second, there is the “cost” to a core element of U.S. policy toward Georgia: the promotion of conflict resolution policies that could result in the reunification of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to Georgia. Finally, there are more ambiguous geopolitical “costs” that resulted from Russia’s armed resistance to Georgian reunification and its subsequently enhanced military position in the Caucasus-Black Sea region. The severity of these costs ultimately depends on how tight a link one finds between the 2008 war and the one six years later in Ukraine, when the United States truly identified these costs and reacted accordingly.

THE “COSTS” OF SUPPORTING A U.S. PARTNER IN ITS TIME OF NEED

The first set of costs involve the expenses – economic and diplomatic – that the United States invested as a result of the conflict. These are expenses that the United States would not have incurred in the absence of conflict, but they are costs it willingly bore and which were seen as necessary for supporting, and showing solidarity with, a close international partner in its time of need, as well as for years beyond.

These costs were primarily economic. In the wake of the conflict, the United States immediately provided over \$38 million in humanitarian aid and emergency relief, utilizing U.S. aircraft and naval and coast guard ships.² Subsequently, the United States pledged a far more substantial assistance package to Georgia worth \$1 billion. With total budgeted assistance to Georgia in FY2008-2009 totaling just over this amount, this package amounted to approximately four times the average annual assistance the United States had provided to Georgia over the previous decade; in dollar amounts, this meant nearly \$390 million a year for two years in extra assistance that otherwise would not have been allotted. This included \$250 million in direct budgetary support and over \$175 million in financing for a variety of consumer mortgage and construction projects, as well as sizeable funds for humanitarian assistance and infrastructure development.

The United States also committed new diplomatic resources to Georgia. These included the establishment of a U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership Commission, which convenes annual plenary sessions as well as meetings of four working groups to address political, economic, security, and people-to-people issues. In addition, a senior State Department official regularly participates in the Geneva International Discussions, convened quarterly by the OSCE, EU, and the UN to address issues related to the conflict. Finally, the United States has maintained support for a close military-security relationship with Georgia, both bilaterally and via NATO. While this support has largely been reciprocation for Georgia’s own security

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2 <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/109345.htm>.

commitments in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, it also stems from the United States' commitment since 2008 to help reinforce Georgia's security.

THE "COST" OF WAR: DASHED HOPES FOR CONFLICT RESOLUTION

The above "costs" are relatively straightforward to assess. It is rather more difficult to assess more amorphous costs to U.S. policy. To do this, we need to determine the degree to which the war itself was responsible for imposing relevant costs. We also need to determine not only what matters to the United States but also how much.

One seemingly significant cost, for example, concerns the prospects for promoting conflict resolution policies that could lead to the reunification of South Ossetia and Abkhazia to Georgia. Since Georgia's independence, the United States has been broadly supportive of the country's territorial integrity in the borders bequeathed to it by Soviet collapse. Within this framework, it has also been supportive of peace plans that provide federal or autonomous status to the breakaway regions (like the 2001 UN "Boden Document" for Abkhazia).³ After the Rose Revolution, the U.S. government supported Georgia's plan to establish constitutionally-based autonomy for South Ossetia.⁴ In 2005, the State Department underlined U.S. readiness to work with Georgians, South Ossetians, Russia, and the OSCE "in pursuit of a settlement that ensures the South Ossetians autonomy within a unified Georgia," initially pledging \$2 million in support of relevant confidence-building measures and economic rehabilitation projects.⁵

The 2008 war put an end to such efforts at conflict resolution. First, the war underlined Russia's resolve to separate the breakaway regions from Georgia once and for all; if in the past Moscow left open the possibility of reunification, it now sought to create – and force acceptance of – a "new reality" of lasting secession from Georgia. Russia's recognition of these regions' independence is not a permanent obstacle to reunification, but it is a sign that if it is to occur it will be a generational project. Recognition not only indicated Russia's own commitment to protecting the secession of South Ossetia and Abkhazia but it has also eliminated the need (or, arguably, opportunity) for Ossetians and Abkhaz to even consider discussing a negotiated settlement to the conflicts that would involve reunification with Georgia. An apt comparison is Northern Cyprus. Turkish recognition of Northern Cyprus as an independent state in 1983 did not hinder Northern Cypriots from eventually voting on reunification with Cyprus, but that vote took place only after twenty years of de facto independence (and was rejected by Greek Cypriots).

Relatedly, the 2008 war drove a further wedge between South Ossetians (and Abkhaz) and Georgians. Hostilities that unfolded even before the outbreak of the war heightened tensions that ultimately escalated to the Georgian assault and temporary takeover of Tskhinvali; Russia's invasion, air attack, and temporary occupation of territories outside South Ossetia; the deaths of several hundred soldiers, militia, and civilians on all sides; and the ethnic cleansing of South Ossetia's Georgian population, destruction of their villages, and a redrawing of the lines of control. The conflict also led to the hardening of the boundary lines of South Ossetia and Abkhazia; a heightened Russian military presence; and increased limitations over transborder movement. In the case of South Ossetia, virtually all transit outside the reoccupied district of Akhalkgori was eliminated. All these costs were grave in and of themselves, but they were also costs for conflict resolution. They hardened divisions in ways that prevent populations from developing linkages that could help maintain a sense of integration that, in turn, could facilitate future efforts at reunification.⁶

Third, the 2008 war eliminated the Georgian demographic and state presence in South Ossetia. At base, this concerns an estimated one-third or more of the region's population that remained loyal to Tbilisi. But

3 On U.S. support of the Boden plan, see the U.S. Department of State, "United States Participation in the United Nations – 2001 – Part 1, Political and Security Affairs," p. 30. <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/18959.pdf>

4 <http://www.coe.int/T/E/Com/Files/PA-Sessions/janv-2005/saakashvili.pdf>; <http://www.osce.org/pc/16801?download=true>; http://gfsis.org/media/download/GSAC/resources/South_Ossetia_Road_Map.pdf

5 <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2005/55768.htm>; <http://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2006/67900.htm>.

6 For more detail, see Charap and Welt 2011.

it also concerns the state structures that enabled Georgia to claim territorial control – Georgian police and security forces in Georgian-populated areas and, from 2006, the “alternative” South Ossetian government run by the region’s former defense minister Dmitry Sanakoev, who had pledged loyalty to Tbilisi. On the one hand, this presence strained relations with the de facto government of South Ossetia and contributed to the escalation of a local security dilemma prior to the outbreak of war.⁷ On the other hand, it enabled Georgia to maintain integral links to at least parts of the region, keeping alive the possibility of the eventual reunification of its remaining parts.

Finally, the 2008 war eliminated the international presence in South Ossetia, which also played a role in keeping the door open to a mediated settlement. The conflict led to the closure of the OSCE Field Office in South Ossetia (together with the entire OSCE Mission to Georgia). The OSCE had engaged in valuable monitoring; liaising with various parties; and promoting confidence-building measures between Ossetians and Georgians. The loss of the international presence in South Ossetia helped reduce the prospects for promoting integration – or even just sustaining communication – between Ossetians and Georgians (admittedly a challenge in the wake of the ethnic cleansing of the region’s Georgian population).

These factors helped to eliminate, at least for now, possibilities for the negotiated reunification of South Ossetia (and Abkhazia) with Georgia. Given that this was a core goal of U.S. policy toward Georgia, we can see them as costs.

That said, our evaluation of such costs might depend, first, on how important Georgia’s reunification was for U.S. policy. To be sure, it was a stated goal for almost two decades. However, it is fair to ask whether it was such a priority that its failure should count so strongly as a cost to U.S. policy.

A more serious objection stems from an assessment of what exactly might have been achieved in the absence of the war. If the war destroyed the definitive prospect of reunification, for instance, we might consider its costs to be far greater than if it only foreclosed unspecified possibilities.

From this perspective, we again might argue that the costs of 2008 were not that great. The prospects of reunifying the whole of South Ossetia, let alone Abkhazia, with Georgia were dim even before August 2008. By then, it had been long evident that Russia supported South Ossetia’s secession from Georgia and had no intention of facilitating its reunification, at least so long as Georgia was committed to a course of Western, in particular NATO, integration – a foreign policy decision to which Russia was staunchly opposed. As long as Georgia’s conflicts remained unresolved, Russia would be able to hinder this course.

Still, the war did eliminate opportunities to build bridges between communities and to develop more innovative and sustainable policies of conflict resolution. The policies of the Saakashvili government had created strains with regional authorities as far back as 2004, when Tbilisi first sought to reestablish control over South Ossetia: inserting a greater force presence in the region, shutting down illegal trade, and seeking to bring about local regime change.⁸ It was after these policies failed and brought Georgia to the brink of war that Tbilisi turned to establish Sanakoev’s alternative government.

If the 2008 war had not intervened, such policies could have been recalibrated under Saakashvili or his successors. After the war, Saakashvili’s government introduced a plan to considerably step up engagement with South Ossetia and Abkhazia that on paper was promising but was unveiled far too late to make a difference.⁹ In the absence of the war, the introduction of such a plan to encourage greater trade and transit would have been a valuable step forward. Even if Saakashvili’s government would not have made such a move, or de facto authorities in Tskhinvali and Sukhumi would have resisted, successors in Tbilisi could have had a greater opportunity to build links with the breakaway regions. Moreover, while Russia would have continued to oppose reunification, it would have had a difficult time opposing greater social interaction, trade, dialogue, and the building of relations. In this respect, the 2008 war was a lost opportunity at conflict resolution.

But there is another, possibly more controversial, way to understand the cost of the war. Consider that Georgia’s attack on Tskhinvali might actually have succeeded in securing the region’s reunification with minimal violence beyond the initial assault, if Russia had decided not to resist. Once Georgian forces

7 See Welt 2010.

8 Ibid.

9 See Charap and Welt 2011.

entered Tskhinvali, it is unlikely that Ossetians alone could (or would) have engaged in sustained armed resistance. With a rapid cessation of hostilities and the replacement of de facto authorities with a local – autonomous – government, South Ossetia might have been reintegrated to Georgia with relative ease. If this is a possibility, then Russia’s decision to prevent such an outcome by going to war truly imposed high costs on the prospects of Georgia’s reunification.

THE AMBIGUOUS GEOPOLITICAL “COSTS” OF 2008

The 2008 war arguably imposed other, more geopolitical, costs to U.S. policy. Similar challenges arise, however, when evaluating those costs.

First, the war made clear that NATO enlargement to Georgia (and possibly other post-Soviet states) could only be achieved in the long term at best. Just four months before the war, NATO members fatefully pledged at an April 2008 summit in Bucharest that Georgia (together with Ukraine) would eventually “become members” of the alliance. In the absence of the war, Georgia was not assured of obtaining membership in an accelerated timeframe, but there could have been a firmer and ever increasing commitment to that goal, particularly if Georgia managed to make headway in resolving its ethnoterritorial conflicts. Arguably, the need to avoid this newly concrete possibility played a major role in Russia’s decision to go to war. Almost eight years later, NATO members insist the pledge remains in force, but it is an empty one, devoid of any road map or deadline.

Second, the conflict forced the United States to confront the fact that Russia was not willing to accept its place in an international system that required it to earn, rather than impose, regional influence. One month after the conflict, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Daniel Fried argued that U.S. Russia policy had been built for almost two decades “on the assumption that Russia – perhaps in fits and starts, imperfectly and in its own way – sought to become a nation integrated with the world...strong, to be sure, but strong in the measure of power for the 21st century, not the 19th century.” Russia’s invasion of Georgia suggested that it was opting instead “to be a nation whose standing in the world is based not on how much respect it can earn, but on how much fear it can evoke in others.”¹⁰ It was now clear that U.S. policy toward Russia had been based on not entirely sound foundations. While leaving the door open to strategic cooperation and a Russian change of heart, the United States was going to have “to prepare to resist Russian aggression where we must.”

The costs of such a policy shift appeared to be heightened, at least in the Caucasus-Black Sea region, due to Russia’s increased military posture there. Initially, there was hope that Russia would abide by the terms of the August 12 ceasefire agreement that mandated the return of all military forces to their prewar positions, leaving behind at most the small peacekeeping contingents Moscow had previously dispatched to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, it soon became clear that while Russia intended to pull back from areas outside the regions that it had temporarily occupied, it also planned to transform and beef up its military presence in both regions (as well as retain control over territories within the regions that were previously under Georgian jurisdiction). This enhanced Russia as a military power south of the Caucasus mountain range, as well as along the Black Sea coastline. It also underlined Georgia’s acute vulnerability to Russian military force, now positioned miles from Tbilisi and even closer to the country’s central East-West highway, and in direct control of around half the country’s Black Sea coastline.

Again, however, the costs of these developments to the United States are debatable.

First, NATO membership for Georgia was never a certain outcome, particularly given the reluctance among many European members to consider it due to Russia’s stiff opposition. Detractors pointed to NATO’s 2005 “study on enlargement” that held that the resolution of “ethnic” or “internal jurisdictional disputes...would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance.” The decision to eventually accept Georgia (together with Ukraine) as a NATO member at the 2008 Bucharest Summit was a poorly conceived compromise. Ultimately, Georgian membership into NATO was – and is – of

¹⁰ <http://2001-2009.state.gov/p/eur/rls/rm/109345.htm>.

relatively low significance to U.S. policymakers. The United States may support Georgian membership into the alliance, but U.S. policy in the region does not hinge on the expansion of Western military power into the Caucasus and other post-Soviet areas. U.S. policymakers tend to see the cost of Russian denial of this objective to be relatively low.

Second, the war imposed relatively few costly shifts in U.S. Russia policy. Particularly under Barack Obama's new administration, U.S. policymakers concluded that the 2008 war was more an anomaly than a sign that Russia had tacked away from becoming a "21st century" state. They did not view the war as having changed the fundamental dynamic present in Georgia or the wider region for years, whereby Russia sought to resist a further loss of influence to the West but through at most a limited use of force. The 2008 war was ultimately viewed as the extreme manifestation of this use of force and one, moreover, that had been facilitated by the Georgian government's own misguided use of force. The war did not result in a change in Western military posture, sanctions, or any other serious severing of relations. On the contrary, just seven months later it gave way to the Obama-Medvedev "reset" in U.S.-Russian relations, by which the United States was determined to engage Russia in a number of areas to achieve productive "win-win outcomes."¹¹ This was not the gloomy picture Assistant Secretary Fried painted half a year before.

Finally, the United States did not consider Russia's enhanced military posture in the Caucasus-Black Sea region as a fundamental change to the status quo ante. As much as this posture posed an increased threat to Georgia, U.S. policymakers did not see that Russia's increased military presence in the region (or its recognition of the regions' independence) had much of an impact, either in forcing a change to Georgia's own policies – which remained pro-Western – or in encouraging and enabling similar military action in other states. There were still serious limitations to Russia's use of military power, and the United States viewed engagement as a better instrument for encouraging restraint than containment and isolation.

FROM GEORGIA 2008 TO UKRAINE 2014?

In September 2008, Assistant Secretary Fried warned of the possibility that Russia would "choose to continue its aggressive course, particularly against neighbors who have aspirations for closer security relations with us and NATO." He specifically cited the case of Ukraine.

Indeed, the geopolitical costs that were forewarned in 2008 – but still appeared minimal at the time – emerged in full force in 2014. While the United States in 2008 ultimately dismissed the prospect that Russia would reject "21st century" mores and downplayed Russia's military resurgence, in 2014 it perceived Russia to be adopting "19th century" means of aggression while posing a serious revanchist threat to its neighbors. The harsher response of the United States – including the imposition of sanctions and the enhancement of NATO's military posture in Eastern Europe – reflected this change in perception.

To determine the geopolitical costs of the 2008 war, then, requires us to assess the strength of the link that exists between Russia's actions in Georgia in 2008 and its actions six years later in Ukraine. Seen in isolation, the 2008 war imposed relatively little geopolitical costs on the United States (and the West). But if we view the 2008 war as prelude to the annexation of Crimea and the generally far more destructive conflict in Ukraine, we would have to conclude that the war imposed the greater geopolitical costs U.S. officials feared at the time – costs that for years remained underappreciated.

11 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/us-russia-relations-reset-fact-sheet>.