

Georgian War – 2008 Explaining the Different Dimensions of Geopolitics

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ABSTRACT

Beyond the grand narratives, geopolitics is politics for geography. At the same time, it is a spatial manifestation of politics. If anything, be political or otherwise that affects the geographical or political space of a country or infringes on the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of a country, is geopolitics. The Georgian War of 2008 is remembered as the first war of the 21st century on the soil of Europe. Although it lasted for only five days (from the night of 7th-8th August 2008 to 12th August 2008). It was a swift and decisive war. Although the war was fought over the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia it changed not only the political map of Georgia but also the geopolitical configuration of the world at large. The Georgian War of 2008 is regarded as the return to the cold war. The War itself was over within a few days, but the repercussions of this War continue to reverberate for many years. It shaped the wider geopolitical environment of the region. It also brought changes in relations between Russia, the US and the European Union. This research provides an analysis of the geopolitical circumstances in and around Georgia and the geopolitical interests of Georgia as well as Russia and the clash of their national interests. It also presents an analysis of the larger geopolitics between Russia, the US and the European Union.

Key Words : Geopolitics, Georgian War of 2008, Russia, US, European Union, NATO

INTRODUCTION

The Georgian War of 2008 is remembered as the first war of the 21st century on the soil of Europe. Although it lasted for only five days (from the night of 7th-8th August 2008 to 12th August 2008). It was a swift and decisive war. Although the war was fought over the separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia it changed not only the political map of Georgia but also the geopolitical configuration of the world at large. The Georgian War of 2008 is regarded as the return to the cold war.

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Dimensions of Geopolitics:

Beyond the grand narratives, geopolitics is politics for geography. At the same time, it is a spatial manifestation of politics. If anything, be political or otherwise that affects the geographical or political space of a country or infringes on the national sovereignty and territorial integrity of a country, is geopolitics. The glossary of geopolitics also consists of political processes such as the disintegration of a country or the unification of countries. As the consequences of these processes affect the (political) geography, these all are nothing but geopolitics.

Geopolitics is the spatial implication of politics (international relations). Territorial expansion of a country or an alliance of countries is inescapably spatial and therefore, geopolitics. It has both politics and geography in itself. The politics of occupying, controlling and protecting territorial spaces and resources thus, might be called geopolitics. In a similar vein encroachment in others territories (and sometimes in the sphere of influence) has commonly been treated as geopolitics. It is inscribed within geography and it proceeds through geopolitics.

Geopolitics is related to the desire and need to control geographical entities. The dictionary of geopolitics, therefore, combines political phenomena such as colonization and decolonization or neo-colonization. Nothing is new in this. The expansion of its influence and its spatial reach is geopolitics. The spatial imaginations of countries are the root of these phenomena.

With all empirical insights, territorial conflict reflects the nature and the character of geopolitics. If conflict over the contested territory is geopolitics, then, the post-conflict occupation is also geopolitics. Geopolitics also includes intervention in others' internal affairs (under the pretext of anything). Going by the same logic, then, the regime-change is also geopolitics. Such intervention is characterized as the new invention of geopolitics. Fermenting revolutions such as Colour Revolutions are geopolitics in a new incarnation.

Geopolitics is the pursuit of national interests. At the same time, conflict of interest is inherent in geopolitics. Broadly speaking, therefore, geopolitics is the response to a challenge or crisis. Protecting and advancing the goals and interests of a country or a group of countries is also geopolitics. All attempts to define and achieve security of respective areas of interest drive geopolitics. Spatial expansion and containment are also geopolitics. Geopolitics is also the defensive response to domination and exploitation. Every politics of security (including armament and disarmament) is geopolitics.

IR cannot be understood or analysed without addressing the geopolitics. It is the defining aspect of international relations. It is also about forming alliances. Dominance (be it economic or military) is the ability to make others whatever is desired, either by threat, sanctions or through manipulation. As a consequence, these politics are defined as geopolitics.

The deepening of the conflict in Georgia and the growing tensions between Russia, the US and the EU present different dimensions of geopolitics. There is a

clear link between the expansion of NATO and the enlargement of the EU eastwards and the Russian aggression in Georgia. Threatened by the loss of its vital interest, Moscow had to take drastic measures. The rest of the things are part of the geopolitics of the region.

Ethnogeopolitical Landscape of Georgia and Conflicts:

Georgia is a small country in the Caucasian region. It is located between Turkey and Russia. It also borders Armenia and Azerbaijan. Geographically it is situated in a very strategic location. It controls much of the Caucasus region and routes through them. Over the centuries, it has remained the object of rivalry between Persia, Turkey and Russia. It was eventually annexed by Russia in the 19th century. In 1991, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Georgia emerged as an independent country. But since then, the country has had a troubled existence. Ultimately, Georgia witnessed a war with Russia in 2008.

The conflict between Russia and Georgia was centred on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It was the product of the ethnogeopolitical landscape of the (South) Caucasus. This landscape has more than 80 ethnic communities. Georgians, Armenians, Russians, Abkhaz and South Ossetians are the largest and politically most significant ethnic communities in this region. The Georgian region of the (South) Caucasus has witnessed many violent ethnic conflicts since 1988. These conflicts were the result of increasingly aggressive Georgian nationalism which was witnessed during, and after, the dying days of the Soviet Union.

The roots of conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia goes deep in history. South Ossetians are accused of taking the side of Moscow when the Red Army invaded Georgia in the early 1920s. After the creation of the Soviet Union, South Ossetia became an autonomous oblast (province) of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (Gregory Hafkin, 2010). During the early 1990s, after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Georgia proclaimed its independence. But it remained politically and ethnically divided. Considering their existence and survival as distinct ethnocultural communities Abkhazian and South Ossetians were not in the favour of their inclusion in Georgia (as an independent political entity). Abkhaz and South Ossetians wanted to preserve their separate identity and political autonomy therefore they wanted to remain within the Soviet Union.

Since the beginning of the 1990s both Georgians and South Ossetians viewed their neighbours with suspicion. South Ossetians saw remaining in Georgia as threatening their survival, whereas Georgians saw Ossetia as a geopolitical tool of Moscow in undermining the sovereignty of Georgia (Gregory Hafkin, 2010). The subsequent years of the 1990s witnessed the rise of a separatist movement in South Ossetia. The other region, Abkhazian also witnessed similar political and ethnic relations with Georgia.

The existence of separatism in territories of Abkhazian and South Ossetia within Georgia represented one of the most serious threats to the security and stability of the country. Georgia has frequently accused Russia of supporting separatism and seeking to undermine the sovereignty of Georgia.

After flashes of violence, in late 1991 a peace agreement was signed between Georgia and South Ossetia in 1992 and the Moscow agreement was formalized between Georgia and Abkhazia in 1994. It prompted the deployment of a Peacekeeping Force within the conflict zone of Georgia (Abkhazian and South Ossetia have, since then, maintained an autonomous existence away from Georgia). This ethnogeopolitical conflict precipitated in the Russian and Georgian war.

Frozen Conflicts and Russian Geopolitics:

Since the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century, the Russian geopolitics could be seen as an attempt of the reunification of Russian lands and Russian souls. It resembled with the idea of German reunification in 1990. Although it failed to materialize but it shaped the geopolitics of Russia. The creation of frozen conflicts with unresolved ethnic problems (and border disputes) over the territory of newly independent countries (of the erstwhile Soviet Union) could also be interpreted from the perspective of geopolitics.

Situated between Russia and Eastern Europe, the Caucasus region has historically served as a buffer between Russia and the West. Soon after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Georgia has taken a strong pro-Western direction. It has a strong desire to join the EU and NATO. Since the early 1990s, Georgia sought to intensify ties with NATO (James Nichol, 2009). Therefore, it has even closely cooperated with NATO since 1992. Georgia joined the Partnership for Peace (PFP) program of NATO in 1994. It declared that it aspired to eventual NATO membership at the NATO

Summit in Prague in November 2002 (James Nichol, 2009). As the ambitions of Georgia to draw closer to Europe and the transatlantic community have grown, its relations with Russia have deteriorated (Kornely K. Kakachia, 2010). The pro-western and anti-Russian aspirations of Georgia were particularly alarming for Russia. With the incorporation of Georgia into the EU and NATO, the so-called buffer area between Russia and the West will disappear. Then the EU and NATO will come close to the borders of Russia itself. This is the main security concern of Russia.

For centuries, Russian security is premised on the ability of the country to keep the West (the EU and NATO) at a distance and to dominate its immediate neighbourhood. Therefore, the Russian geopolitics was directed towards its attempts to stop Georgia to join the EU and NATO. Some scholars believe that frozen conflicts over the territory of Georgia acted as a deterrent in Georgian efforts to seek membership of the EU and NATO. The resolution of the frozen conflicts could have made it easy for Georgia to move closer to the West. Therefore, Russia had little interest in a resolution of the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Georgia witnessed Rose Revolution in 2003. The revolution changed the geopolitical balance of the equation. It established a government that was supportive of the idea of inclusion of Georgia in NATO and the EU. In his first days in power after the Rose Revolution of 2003-04, Saakashvili (president of Georgia) pledged to re-establish the territorial integrity of the country before the end of the first (five-year) term of his office. His intention was the restoration of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Georgian territory. (Ivan Krastev, 2008)

Russia was comfortable with the status of the frozen conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The aspiration of Georgia to join the EU and NATO was blocked (at least temporarily) by the frozen conflicts.

Other Dimensions of Geopolitics :

Geopolitics is politics for the control or command over geography. Every attempt to control or command geography (territory and its resources) leads to geopolitics. It is believed that the conflict over territory and resources and competition over control of trade between countries has always been the cause of war. Due to its strategic location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, the larger Caucasus region, in general, and Georgia, in particular, has always been important for foreign trade. Its strategic

location (and control over that location) was the main cause of conflict between Russia and the West. Thus, the geopolitics to control the resources of the Caucasus and the Caspian Sea and the trade routes across the Black Sea became the source of instability in the Caucasus region. As a result of increasing engagement between Russia, the US and the European Union, the region witnessed a rise in tension in Georgia and elsewhere.

The attacks on America on 9/11, enhanced the importance of the South Caucasus for American security. In the post 9/11 situation, Georgia acquired an even greater geopolitical value for monitoring and securing the US interest in their operations in the greater Middle East and Afghanistan. Flight over Caucasus became a vital component of the ongoing military operations of both US and the NATO (Svante E. Cornell, 2007). Therefore, the US unconditionally supported the request of Georgia for membership of NATO. The security and military cooperation between the US and Georgia were of great concern for Russia. Joint exercises of the American and Georgian military have already become commonplace. The United States has also committed itself to provide Georgia with military planning and training assistance (Kornely K. Kakachia, 2010). With the increasing nearness of Georgia, NATO has gained a valuable ally in the Caucasus. Georgian troops have been even deployed in several crisis management missions of NATO.

Georgia has cooperated with NATO since 1992 and declared its intention to become a member of NATO at its Prague Summit in 2002. Since then, it has been working closely with the Alliance and has constantly shown its interest in associating with the West. This was further indicated by the resolution to render support for the membership of Georgia (Schulze, 2009). The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the Eastern Partnership (EP) have further eased the inclusion of Georgia. NATO agreed to grant membership to Georgia at the Bucharest Summit in 2008. The nearness of Georgia with the EU and NATO has troubled its relations with Moscow.

The expansion of NATO and the EU towards the western borders of Russia was a direct attempt of encirclement of Russia. NATO and the EU were seen as threats to Russian security. It was difficult for Russia to tolerate the encirclement by NATO and the EU. Building closer ties with Europe in general and NATO, in particular, was provocative for Russia. The war in Georgia in August 2008 was a retaliatory move to stop the encirclement of Russia.

Besides these circumstances, Georgia is situated on an important transportation corridor. In strategic terms, Georgia plays a crucial role in linking the Caspian Sea with the West. The control over Georgia allows the development of an east-west contact between Europe and the Caspian in terms of energy transportation (Svante E. Cornell, 2007). Ever since the US discovered the strategic relevance of Georgia as a transit country for transportation of energy, its geostrategic significance acquired a new meaning. To fulfil the demand for easy access to the energy resources of the Caspian Sea, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline became operative in 2005. It was an encroachment on the geoeconomic interests of Russia. All these circumstances shaped the future geopolitics of the Caucasus and the relations between Russia and the west.

There were few other important catalyzing events that led to the Georgian war of 2008. It included the recognition of the independence of Kosovo by the US and most of the countries of the EU. The other incident included the Bucharest Summit of NATO in 2008. In this summit, the alliance promised that Georgia and Ukraine would someday become members of NATO. For Russia, both of these incidents were challenges to the Russian dominance in the region. Russian response in Georgia is regarded as counter geopolitical manoeuvring. The Russian countermove was crucial in precipitating this situation.

In its pursuit of the ultimate goal of global dominance, the US pushed NATO further eastward toward the

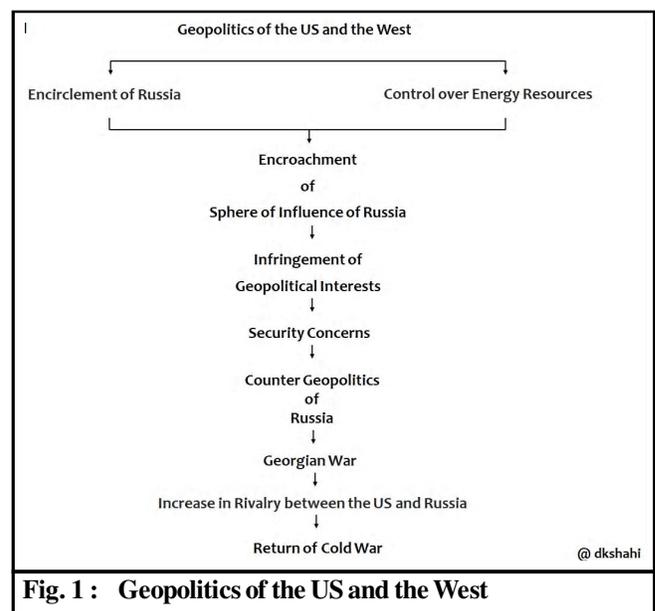


Fig. 1 : Geopolitics of the US and the West

borders of Russia (Herbert P. Bix, 2008). America poured huge money and armaments into Georgia. It also invested in the training of the Georgian army. All these activities paved the way for the August war. It also brought in a dangerous new era of rivalry between Russia and the US, that is called as the return of the cold war (Gerard Toal, 2008).

Georgian War of 2008:

The Russian intervention in Georgia was the first-ever use of military force against a sovereign country (Karagiannis, 2012) in Europe in the 21st century. A situation of conflict (low warfare) on provocations erupted into a full-blown military conflict. Initially, Tbilisi had plans to recapture South Ossetia with its capital Tskhinvali. Georgia had intended to reintegrate what had by then become a Russian dependency and an outpost of Russia, back into Georgia proper. In the war on South Ossetia, the forces of Georgia pushed forward to conquer Zkhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia and blocked the strategically important Roki-Tunnel. It was intended to stop the Russian troops to enter in the war zone. Both aims were not achieved. The Russian military intervened hours after the Georgian military offensive and the Russian troops pushed the Georgian army back (Schulze, 2009).

The exact nature of the start of the August 2008 war is uncertain, Georgia claimed that at first, the Russian regiment crossed into South Ossetia, while Russia responds that this was part of the normal movements related to the peacekeeping operation. On August 8 President Dmitry Medvedev said in a statement that on August 7, 'Georgian troops committed what amounts to an act of aggression against Russian peacekeepers and the civilians in South Ossetia' (Gregory Hafkin, 2010). The Russian military entered South Ossetia only after Saakashvili ordered an attack on Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetian. By August 10 the war involved not just South Ossetia but also areas of Georgia outside the disputed region. Georgia claims that Russia even dropped bombs on Gori and the capital of Tbilisi.

The Russian military campaign lasted 5 days until the parties reached a preliminary ceasefire agreement on 12th August 2008. The European Union (EU), led by the French presidency, mediated the ceasefire. After signing the agreement, Russia pulled most of its troops out of uncontested Georgian territories but established buffer zones around Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Cohen

and Hamilton, 2011). At the end of August 2008, the then Russian President, Dmitry Medvedev signed and ratified a declaration, announcing South Ossetia and the other separatist region, Abkhazia, as sovereign states. By December 2008, bilateral security and cooperation agreements were concluded, allowing Russian troops to be stationed in South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Schulze, 2009). It turned South Ossetia into a military protectorate of Russia. Russian decision to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Svante E. Cornell, 2008) is simple geopolitics. It was a deliberate change in the geopolitical landscape of the Caucasus.

The incident of August 2008 caused concern among Western countries. They interpreted the Russian response to the Georgia military strikes on South Ossetia as an act of unwarranted aggression (Gregory Hafkin, 2010). Naturally, the incident on 8th, August 2008 marked a radical change in international politics in and around the Caucasus.

The purpose of this geopolitical move was not merely directed to South Ossetia or even Abkhazia but it was directed towards Georgia also. It constituted the first military aggression of Moscow against a neighbouring country since the invasion of Afghanistan in 1978. It took place, against a country which was on the track of being integrated with NATO (Svante E. Cornell, 2008).

Some scholars have even come to realize that the Georgian war of 2008 may be the most significant challenge to European Security since the end of the Cold War. It is therefore of particular importance.

Remapping the Geopolitical Landscape:

The Georgian war of 2008 is regarded as the greatest crisis in the Russian relationship with the West. The US condemned the attack on the sovereign territory of Georgia. America regarded the military operation of Russia as a violation of the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia. In the opinion of the US, it was a contravention of international law. It was also against the UN Charter and the Sochi Agreement of 1992 that governed the conduct of Russian peacekeepers in . . . South Ossetia.

The Georgian war of 2008 was the first war in Europe of the present century. It brought into focus the aggressive policies of US and NATO since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The search for causes of the Georgian conflict also brought to the fore the American quest for unchallengeable, global military dominance. It

required America to establish military bases at strategic places around the world. The most notable among these was the military encirclement of Russia and the planned U.S. anti-ballistic missile deployments in Poland and the Czech Republic.

By invading Georgia in 2008 and recognizing the separatist regions of Georgia as independent geopolitical entities, Russia secured its footholds in Georgia. One of the obvious motivations for this action was to compel NATO to think harder about its plans for future enlargement.

On the other hand, the Russian aggression exposed the inability of the west to prevent Russia from moving aggressively to restore its dominance over the territory of the former Soviet Union.

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