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Ossetia-Russia-Georgia

Noam Chomsky

September 9, 2008

Aghast at the atrocities committed by US forces invading the Philippines, and the rhetorical flights about liberation and noble intent that routinely accompany crimes of state, Mark Twain threw up his hands at his inability to wield his formidable weapon of satire. The immediate object of his frustration was the renowned General Funston. “No satire of Funston could reach perfection,” Twain lamented, “because Funston occupies that summit himself... [he is] satire incarnated.”

It is a thought that often comes to mind, again in August 2008 during the Russia-Georgia-Ossetia war. George Bush, Condoleezza Rice and other dignitaries solemnly invoked the sanctity of the United Nations, warning that Russia could be excluded from international institutions “by taking actions in Georgia that are inconsistent with” their principles. The sovereignty and territorial integrity of all nations must be rigorously honored, they intoned – “all nations,” that is, apart from those that the US chooses to attack: Iraq, Serbia, perhaps Iran, and a list of others too long and familiar to mention.

The junior partner joined in as well. British foreign secretary David Miliband accused Russia of engaging in “19th cen-

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Retrieved on 19th February 2022 from chomsky.info

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ture forms of diplomacy” by invading a sovereign state, something Britain would never contemplate today. That “is simply not the way that international relations can be run in the 21st century,” he added, echoing the decider-in-chief, who said that invasion of “a sovereign neighboring state...is unacceptable in the 21st century.” Mexico and Canada therefore need not fear further invasions and annexation of much of their territory, because the US now only invades states that are not on its borders, though no such constraint holds for its clients, as Lebanon learned once again in 2006.

“The moral of this story is even more enlightening,” Serge Halimi wrote in *Le Monde diplomatique*, “when, to defend his country’s borders, the charming pro-American Saakashvili repatriates some of the 2,000 soldiers he had sent to invade Iraq,” one of the largest contingents apart from the two warrior states.

Prominent analysts joined the chorus. Fareed Zakaria applauded Bush’s observation that Russia’s behavior is unacceptable today, unlike the 19th century, “when the Russian intervention would have been standard operating procedure for a great power.” We therefore must devise a strategy for bringing Russia “in line with the civilized world,” where intervention is unthinkable.

There were, to be sure, some who shared Mark Twain’s despair. One distinguished example is Chris Patten, former EU commissioner for external relations, chairman of the British Conservative Party, chancellor of Oxford University and a member of the House of Lords. He wrote that the Western reaction “is enough to make even the cynical shake their heads in disbelief” – referring to Europe’s failure to respond vigorously to the effrontery of Russian leaders, who, “like 19th-century tsars, want a sphere of influence around their borders.”

Patten rightly distinguishes Russia from the global superpower, which long ago passed the point where it demanded a

sphere of influence around its borders, and demands a sphere of influence over the entire world. It also acts vigorously to enforce that demand, in accord with the Clinton doctrine that Washington has the right to use military force to defend vital interests such as “ensuring uninhibited access to key markets, energy supplies and strategic resources” – and in the real world, far more.

Clinton was breaking no new ground, of course. His doctrine derives from standard principles formulated by high-level planners during World War II, which offered the prospect of global dominance. In the postwar world, they determined, the US should aim “to hold unquestioned power” while ensuring the “limitation of any exercise of sovereignty” by states that might interfere with its global designs. To secure these ends, “the foremost requirement [is] the rapid fulfillment of a program of complete rearmament,” a core element of “an integrated policy to achieve military and economic supremacy for the United States.” The plans laid during the war were implemented in various ways in the years that followed.

The goals are deeply rooted in stable institutional structures. Hence they persist through changes in occupancy of the White House, and are untroubled by the opportunity for “peace dividends,” the disappearance of the major rival from the world scene, or other marginal irrelevancies. Devising new challenges is never beyond the reach of doctrinal managers, as when Ronald Reagan strapped on his cowboy boots and declared a national emergency because the Nicaraguan army was only two days from Harlingen Texas, and might lead the hordes who are about to “sweep over the United States and take what we have,” as Lyndon Johnson lamented when he called for holding the line in Vietnam. Most ominously, those holding the reins may actually believe their own words.

Returning to the efforts to elevate Russia to the civilized world, the seven charter members of the Group of Eight industrialized countries issued a statement “condemning the action

of our fellow G8 member,” Russia, which has yet to comprehend the Anglo-American commitment to non-intervention. The European Union held a rare emergency meeting to condemn Russia’s crime, its first meeting since the invasion of Iraq, which elicited no condemnation.

Russia called for an emergency session of the Security Council, but no consensus was reached because, according to Council diplomats, the US, Britain, and some others rejected a phrase that called on both sides “to renounce the use of force.”

The typical reactions recall Orwell’s observations on the “indifference to reality” of the “nationalist,” who “not only does not disapprove of atrocities committed by his own side, but ... has a remarkable capacity for not even hearing about them.”

The basic facts are not seriously in dispute. South Ossetia, along with the much more significant region of Abkhazia, were assigned by Stalin to his native Georgia. Western leaders sternly admonish that Stalin’s directives must be respected, despite the strong opposition of Ossetians and Abkhazians. The provinces enjoyed relative autonomy until the collapse of the USSR. In 1990, Georgia’s ultranationalist president Zviad Gamsakhurdia abolished autonomous regions and invaded South Ossetia. The bitter war that followed left 1000 dead and tens of thousands of refugees, with the capital city of Tskhinvali “battered and depopulated” (New York Times).

A small Russian force then supervised an uneasy truce, broken decisively on 7 August 2008 when Georgian president Saakashvili’s ordered his forces to invade. According to “an extensive set of witnesses,” the Times reports, Georgia’s military at once “began pounding civilian sections of the city of Tskhinvali, as well as a Russian peacekeeping base there, with heavy barrages of rocket and artillery fire.” The predictable Russian response drove Georgian forces out of South Ossetia, and Russia went on to conquer parts of Georgia, then partially withdrawing to the vicinity of South Ossetia. There were many

a resurgent power, not an anti-Western strategy of confrontation.”

casualties and atrocities. As is normal, the innocent suffered severely.

Russia reported at first that ten Russian peacekeepers were killed by Georgian shelling. The West took little notice. That too is normal. There was, for example, no reaction when Aviation Week reported that 200 Russians were killed in an Israeli air raid in Lebanon in 1982 during a US-backed invasion that left some 15–20,000 dead, with no credible pretext beyond strengthening Israeli control over the occupied West Bank.

Among Ossetians who fled north, the “prevailing view,” according to the London Financial Times, “is that Georgia’s pro-western leader, Mikheil Saakashvili, tried to wipe out their breakaway enclave.” Ossetian militias, under Russian eyes, then brutally drove out Georgians, in areas beyond Ossetia as well. “Georgia said its attack had been necessary to stop a Russian attack that already had been under way,” the New York Times reports, but weeks later “there has been no independent evidence, beyond Georgia’s insistence that its version is true, that Russian forces were attacking before the Georgian barrages.”

In Russia, the Wall Street Journal reports, “legislators, officials and local analysts have embraced the theory that the Bush administration encouraged Georgia, its ally, to start the war in order to precipitate an international crisis that would play up the national-security experience of Sen. John McCain, the Republican presidential candidate.” In contrast, French author Bernard-Henri Levy, writing in the New Republic, proclaims that “no one can ignore the fact that President Saakashvili only decided to act when he no longer had a choice, and war had already come. In spite of this accumulation of facts that should have been blindingly obvious to all scrupulous, good-faith observers, many in the media rushed as one man toward the thesis of the Georgians as instigators, as irresponsible provocateurs of the war.”

The Russian propaganda system made the mistake of presenting evidence, which was easily refuted. Its Western counterparts, more wisely, keep to authoritative pronouncements, like Levy's denunciation of the major Western media for ignoring what is "blindingly obvious to all scrupulous, good-faith observers" for whom loyalty to the state suffices to establish The Truth – which, perhaps, is even true, serious analysts might conclude.

The Russians are losing the "propaganda war," BBC reported, as Washington and its allies have succeeded in "presenting the Russian actions as aggression and playing down the Georgian attack into South Ossetia on 7 August, which triggered the Russian operation," though "the evidence from South Ossetia about that attack indicates that it was extensive and damaging." Russia has "not yet learned how to play the media game," the BBC observes. That is natural. Propaganda has typically become more sophisticated as countries become more free and the state loses the ability to control the population by force.

The Russian failure to provide credible evidence was partially overcome by the Financial Times, which discovered that the Pentagon had provided combat training to Georgian special forces commandos shortly before the Georgian attack on August 7, revelations that "could add fuel to accusations by Vladimir Putin, Russian prime minister, last month that the US had 'orchestrated' the war in the Georgian enclave." The training was in part carried out by former US special forces recruited by private military contractors, including MPRI, which, as the journal notes, "was hired by the Pentagon in 1995 to train the Croatian military prior to their invasion of the ethnically-Serbian Krajina region, which led to the displacement of 200,000 refugees and was one of the worst incidents of ethnic cleansing in the Balkan wars." The US-backed Krajina expulsion (generally estimated at 250,000, with many killed) was possibly the worst case of ethnic cleansing in Europe since World War II. Its fate in approved history is

lone holdout in Europe to the political and economic programs of the Clinton administration and its allies, though it will be a long time before such annoyances are allowed to enter the canon.

There are of course other differences between Kosovo and the regions of Georgia that call for independence or union with Russia. Thus Russia is not known to have a huge military base there named after a hero of the invasion of Afghanistan, comparable to Camp Bondsteel in Kosovo, named after a Vietnam war hero and presumably part of the vast US basing system aimed at the Middle East energy-producing regions. And there are many other differences.

There is much talk about a "new cold war" instigated by brutal Russian behavior in Georgia. One cannot fail to be alarmed by signs of confrontation, among them new US naval contingents in the Black Sea – the counterpart would hardly be tolerated in the Caribbean. Efforts to expand NATO to Ukraine, now contemplated, could become extremely hazardous.

Nonetheless, a new cold war seems unlikely. To evaluate the prospect, we should begin with clarity about the old cold war. Fevered rhetoric aside, in practice the cold war was a tacit compact in which each of the contestants was largely free to resort to violence and subversion to control its own domains: for Russia, its Eastern neighbors; for the global superpower, most of the world. Human society need not endure – and might not survive – a resurrection of anything like that.

A sensible alternative is the Gorbachev vision rejected by Clinton and undermined by Bush. Sane advice along these lines has recently been given by former Israeli Foreign Minister and historian Shlomo ben-Ami, writing in the Beirut Daily Star: "Russia must seek genuine strategic partnership with the US, and the latter must understand that, when excluded and despised, Russia can be a major global spoiler. Ignored and humiliated by the US since the Cold War ended, Russia needs integration into a new global order that respects its interests as

pendence was justified on the principle of a mistreated minority's right to secession – the principle Bush had established for Kosovo,” the Boston Globe editors comment.

But there are crucial differences. Strobe Talbott recognizes that “there’s a degree of payback for what the U.S. and NATO did in Kosovo nine years ago,” but insists that the “analogy is utterly and profoundly false.” No one is a better position to know why it is profoundly false, and he has lucidly explained the reasons, in his preface to a book on NATO’s bombing of Serbia by his associate John Norris. Talbott writes that those who want to know “how events looked and felt at the time to those of us who were involved” in the war should turn to Norris’s well-informed account. Norris concludes that “it was Yugoslavia’s resistance to the broader trends of political and economic reform – not the plight of Kosovar Albanians – that best explains NATO’s war.”

That the motive for the NATO bombing could not have been “the plight of Kosovar Albanians” was already clear from the rich Western documentary record revealing that the atrocities were, overwhelmingly, the anticipated consequence of the bombing, not its cause. But even before the record was released, it should have been evident to all but the most fervent loyalists that humanitarian concern could hardly have motivated the US and Britain, which at the same time were lending decisive support to atrocities well beyond what was reported from Kosovo, with a background far more horrendous than anything that had happened in the Balkans. But these are mere facts, hence of no moment to Orwell’s “nationalists” – in this case, most of the Western intellectual community, who had made an enormous investment in self-aggrandizement and prevarication about the “noble phase” of US foreign policy and its “saintly glow” as the millennium approached its end, with the bombing of Serbia as the jewel in the crown.

Nevertheless, it is interesting to hear from the highest level that the real reason for the bombing was that Serbia was a

rather like that of photographs of Trotsky in Stalinist Russia, for simple and sufficient reasons: it does not accord with the required image of US nobility confronting Serbian evil.

The toll of the August 2008 Caucasus war is subject to varying estimates. A month afterwards, the Financial Times cited Russian reports that “at least 133 civilians died in the attack, as well as 59 of its own peacekeepers,” while in the ensuing Russian mass invasion and aerial bombardment of Georgia, according to the FT, 215 Georgians died, including 146 soldiers and 69 civilians. Further revelations are likely to follow.

In the background lie two crucial issues. One is control over pipelines to Azerbaijan and Central Asia. Georgia was chosen as a corridor by Clinton to bypass Russia and Iran, and was also heavily militarized for the purpose. Hence Georgia is “a very major and strategic asset to us,” Zbigniew Brzezinski observes.

It is noteworthy that analysts are becoming less reticent in explaining real US motives in the region as pretexts of dire threats and liberation fade and it becomes more difficult to deflect Iraqi demands for withdrawal of the occupying army. Thus the editors of the Washington Post admonished Barack Obama for regarding Afghanistan as “the central front” for the United States, reminding him that Iraq “lies at the geopolitical center of the Middle East and contains some of the world’s largest oil reserves,” and Afghanistan’s “strategic importance pales beside that of Iraq.” A welcome, if belated, recognition of reality about the US invasion.

The second issue is expansion of NATO to the East, described by George Kennan in 1997 as “the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-cold-war era, [which] may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion; to have an adverse effect on the development of Russian democracy; to restore the atmosphere of the cold war to East-West relations.”

As the USSR collapsed, Mikhail Gorbachev made a concession that was astonishing in the light of recent history and

strategic realities: he agreed to allow a united Germany to join a hostile military alliance. This “stunning concession” was hailed by Western media, NATO, and President Bush I, who called it a demonstration of “statesmanship ... in the best interests of all countries of Europe, including the Soviet Union.”

Gorbachev agreed to the stunning concession on the basis of “assurances that NATO would not extend its jurisdiction to the east, ‘not one inch’ in [Secretary of State] Jim Baker’s exact words.” This reminder by Jack Matlock, the leading Soviet expert of the Foreign Service and US ambassador to Russia in the crucial years 1987 to 1991, is confirmed by Strobe Talbott, the highest official in charge of Eastern Europe in the Clinton administration. On the basis of a full review of the diplomatic record, Talbott reports that “Secretary of State Baker did say to then Soviet foreign minister Eduard Shevardnadze, in the context of the Soviet Union’s reluctant willingness to let a unified Germany remain part of NATO, that NATO would not move to the east.”

Clinton quickly reneged on that commitment, also dismissing Gorbachev’s effort to end the Cold War with cooperation among partners. NATO also rejected a Russian proposal for a nuclear-weapons-free-zone from the Arctic to the Black Sea, which would have “interfered with plans to extend NATO,” strategic analyst and former NATO planner Michael MccGwire observes.

Rejecting these possibilities, the US took a triumphalist stand that threatened Russian security and also played a major role in driving Russia to severe economic and social collapse, with millions of deaths. The process was sharply escalated by Bush’s further expansion of NATO, dismantling of crucial disarmament agreements, and aggressive militarism. Matlock writes that Russia might have tolerated incorporation of former Russian satellites into NATO if it “had not bombed Serbia and continued expanding. But, in the final analysis,

ABM missiles in Poland, and the drive for Georgia and Ukraine in NATO crossed absolute red lines. The insistence on recognizing Kosovo independence was sort of the very last straw. Putin had learned that concessions to the U.S. were not reciprocated, but used to promote U.S. dominance in the world. Once he had the strength to resist, he did so,” in Georgia.

Clinton officials argue that expansion of NATO posed no military threat, and was no more than a benign move to allow former Russian satellites to join the EU (Talbott). That is hardly persuasive. Austria, Sweden and Finland are in the EU but not NATO. If the Warsaw Pact had survived and was incorporating Latin American countries – let alone Canada and Mexico – the US would not easily be persuaded that the Pact is just a Quaker meeting. There should be no need to review the record of US violence to block mostly fanciful ties to Moscow in “our little region over here,” the Western hemisphere, to quote Secretary of War Henry Stimson when he explained that all regional systems must be dismantled after World II, apart from our own, which are to be extended.

To underscore the conclusion, in the midst of the current crisis in the Caucasus, Washington professes concern that Russia might resume military and intelligence cooperation with Cuba at a level not remotely approaching US-Georgia relations, and not a further step towards a significant security threat.

Missile defense too is presented here as benign, though leading US strategic analysts have explained why Russian planners must regard the systems and their chosen location as the basis for a potential threat to the Russian deterrent, hence in effect a first-strike weapon. The Russian invasion of Georgia was used as a pretext to conclude the agreement to place these systems in Poland, thus “bolstering an argument made repeatedly by Moscow and rejected by Washington: that the true target of the system is Russia,” AP commentator Desmond Butler observed.

Matlock is not alone in regarding Kosovo as an important factor. “Recognition of South Ossetia’s and Abkhazia’s inde-