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The 2008 Russian–Georgian war via the lens of Offensive Realism

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The Russian intervention in Georgia's breakaway republic of South Ossetia in August 2008, Moscow's first-ever use of military force against a sovereign state in the post-cold war period, deserves a theoretical explanation. By following the tenets of Offensive Realism, this article will argue that the US–Russian competition in the South Caucasus is the main cause of the 2008 Russian–Georgian war. During the 1990s, the USA passed the buck to Turkey to contain Russian influence in the South Caucasus. In the early to mid-2000s, however, the Russian–Turkish relations were improved so rapidly that the USA opted, through NATO expansion, to step in as an offshore balancer. Following Bush administration's decision to support the Georgian candidacy for NATO membership and Georgia's ill-fated attempt to seize South Ossetia, Moscow went to war to re-establish hegemony in the South Caucasus. In this way, as the theory of Offensive Realism claims, the Kremlin believes that Russian state will enhance its chances of survival in the anarchical international system.

Keywords: South Caucasus; Georgia; Offensive Realism; offshore balancer; hegemony

Introduction

In August 2008, a brief war between Russia and Georgia over the control of South Ossetia broke out, devastating the South Caucasus. Russia's intervention in Georgia's breakaway republic of South Ossetia was its first ever war against another state in the post-cold war period. Hundreds of people were killed and thousands were forced to flee their homes. In September 2009, an EU-sponsored report established that Georgia attacked South Ossetia first and then Russia over-responded. Yet, the Georgian government claims, with little justification, that Moscow had sent troops to the breakaway republic before the outbreak of the war (IIFFMCG 2009). Although the details of the war still remain foggy, Russia's triumph has raised questions that remain largely unanswered. Why did Moscow decide to use force against Tbilisi in August 2008? Was the possibility of Georgia's NATO membership that triggered the Russian response?

In the last few years, there has been a proliferation of articles and books examining the 2008 Russian–Georgian war (Allison 2008, Cornell *et al.* 2008, Niedermaier 2008, Broers 2009, Cheterian 2009, Cornell and Starr 2009, Lucas 2009, Rasizade 2009, Shearman and Sussex 2009, Tsygankov and Tarver-Wahlquist 2009, Asmus 2010).

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However, they tend to offer more description than theoretical analysis with the exception of Tsygankov's and Tarver-Wahlquist's article. Therefore, there is an urgent need to understand the causes of that war; in particular, what is behind Moscow's resurgence in the South Caucasus. Only then the international community will be able to prevent the outbreak of another war in the region.

This article aims at providing a new theoretical understanding of the 2008 Russian–Georgian war. It will be argued that Russia's decision to go to war with Georgia can be best explained by the theory of Offensive Realism, John Mearsheimer. This article claims that Washington first supported Turkey, together with the GUAM (Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova) group, as a counterbalance to Russia's influence in the South Caucasus but then, due to rapidly growing ties between Ankara and Moscow, the USA stepped in to act as an offshore balancer via NATO expansion. It will also suggest that Russia's response to Georgia's military operation in South Ossetia was not spontaneous, but a well-calculated step to re-establish hegemony in the South Caucasus. The Kremlin decided to use military force when the timing was most favorable to the Russian side.

Offensive Realism as a tool of analysis

The theory of Offensive Realism is based on five assumptions, which stress the importance of anarchy, the rationality of states, the lack of certainty about each other's intentions, survival as the primary goal, and great power possession of offensive military capabilities (Patrick 2009, p. 50). More specifically, the theory argues that the international system is anarchic, meaning that it lacks a global government and remains state-centric. States in general and great powers in particular are rational actors because they make strategic calculations. All states face the ever-present threat that other states will use force to harm or conquer them. Survival is the most important state objective. This compels them to improve their relative power positions through arms build-ups, unilateral diplomacy, and mercantile foreign economic policies. It follows that the more power a state has relative to others, the greater its chances of survival (Lieber 2005, p. 10). Also, great powers pursue expansionist policies when and where the benefits of doing so outweigh the costs. Indeed, Offensive Realism claims that great powers would not hesitate to launch wars against adversaries when it serves their interests (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 37).

Moreover, Mearsheimer argues that great powers are not satisfied with a given amount of power, but seek hegemony for security and survival. In his words, 'the pursuit of power stops when hegemony is achieved' because for great powers 'the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge by another great power' (Mearsheimer 2001, pp. 34–35). Due to the stopping power of water, global hegemony is almost impossible to achieve. Therefore, Mearsheimer claims that great powers seek regional hegemony. The American scholar defines a hegemon as 'a state that is so powerful that it dominates all the other states in the [regional] system' (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 50).

In addition, Mearsheimer argues in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* that regional hegemons will seek to influence the affairs of distant regions when a potential hegemon in that region threatens to upset the balance of power. The underlying rationale for this behavior is summed up aptly by Mearsheimer (2001):

Regional hegemonies fear that a peer competitor might jeopardize their hegemony by upsetting the balance of power in their back yard. Thus, regional hegemonies prefer that there be two or more great powers in the other key regions of the world, because those neighbors are likely to spend most of their time competing with each other, leaving them few opportunities to threaten a distant hegemon. (p. 141)

In effect, Mearsheimer describes a ‘buck-passing’ strategy under which a great power would encourage its regional allies to take the responsibility of deterring or even fighting an aggressor. There are four measures that a state can take to facilitate buck-passing (Mearsheimer 2001, pp. 158–159). First, a buck-passer could establish good diplomatic relations with the potential aggressor in order to turn its attention to the intended buck-catcher (e.g. the USSR signed with Nazi Germany the 1939 Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact to pass the buck to Western European powers). Second, a great power could keep a distance from the buck-catcher in case it fights against the aggressor state (e.g. Great Britain’s policy toward the USSR – the intended buck-catcher against Nazi Germany – before World War II). Third, a great power could improve its defense capabilities so that a potential aggressor would concentrate on the intended buck-catcher (e.g. French military buildup during the mid to late 1930s to counter German rearmament and shift Berlin’s focus onto the USSR). Fourth, a buck-passer could allow or even help another state to increase its power, so that it could confront a potential aggressor (e.g. British neutral policy vis-à-vis Bismarck’s Prussia between 1864 and 1870 in order the latter to deter Russian aggression).

While great powers (often regional hegemonies themselves) would prefer counter-hegemonic coalitions to balance an opponent in a distant region, the buck-passing strategy does not always work. In that case, a regional hegemon would act as an offshore balancer by stepping in and balancing itself the rising power. The USA and Great Britain are two typical offshore balancers; the former played that role on several occasions during the twentieth century (e.g. American participation in World War I to prevent a defeat of the Triple Entente, US military support of the Allies to contain the German and Japanese threat in Europe and East Asia, respectively, US commitment to defend West Europe during the cold war period), while the latter acted likewise throughout the nineteenth century and for much of the twentieth century (e.g. Napoleonic Wars, World War II, cold war period).

Yet, Mearsheimer’s evidence may seem plausible because he uses history selectively. His theory rests upon four cases: imperial Japan, liberal and fascist Italy, Wilhelmine and Nazi Germany, and the Soviet Union. Mearsheimer focused exclusively on great powers that for various reasons went through an aggressive period of their history, while ignoring those great powers such as Victorian Britain that adopted defensive strategies. Moreover, the theory of Offensive Realism suffers from limited geographical applicability. For example, it is debatable how much relevant is this theory within contemporary Europe where EU membership has largely diminished the possibility of a major war between great powers.¹

As the theory of Offensive Realism focuses on military conflict and territorial expansion, it could apply only to certain regions in a certain period of time. The volatile former Soviet space could possibly serve as a test case of the theory for two reasons. First, security dynamics in the former Soviet Union are driven by intense competition among great powers. Following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, great powers such as the USA and China have competed with Russia for influence

and energy resources in the Caspian Sea region and elsewhere.² Moreover, Russia under Putin has apparently aimed at establishing a new status quo in the former Soviet Union. The second invasion of Chechnya in 1999, Moscow's threat to launch a preemptive strike against Chechen rebels in Georgia's Pankisi Gorge in 2002, the Russian Caspian Sea flotilla exercises in August 2002, the establishment of a Russian military base in Kyrgyzstan in 2003, the 2007 suspension of Russia's participation in the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe Treaty, along with significant increases in the defense budget, are developments that possibly indicate Russia's effort to change the regional status quo. In that context, Russia fits the description of a great power that is going through an aggressive period as Mearsheimer described it; a great power with a 'marked power advantage over its rivals is likely to behave more aggressively, because it has the capability as well as the incentive to do so' (Mearsheimer 2001, p. 37). Despite its possible limitations, therefore, the theory of Offensive Realism can possibly provide a useful theoretical tool when analyzing Russia's decision to go to war with Georgia in August 2008.

The Russian–Georgian relationship and the South Ossetian conflict

To better understand the South Ossetian conflict, a brief historical overview is necessary. South Ossetia covers an area of about 3900 km² on the southern side of the Caucasus, separated by the mountains from Russia and extending southwards almost to the Mtkvari River in Georgia. According to the 1989 Soviet census, 98,000 people lived in the area. Ossetians accounted for approximately two-thirds (66.61 per cent) of the population and Georgians the other third (29.44 per cent); there were also small communities of Russians, Armenians, Greeks, and Jews (Gosudarstvennyi Komitet SSSR po Statistike 1990). Most Ossetians are Orthodox Christians, but there is also a sizeable Muslim minority. The modern-day South Ossetia was annexed by tsarist Russia in 1801, along with Georgia proper. Following the 1917 October Revolution, South Ossetia became a part of the Menshevik Georgian Democratic Republic. In April 1922, the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast (i.e. district) was established within the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia.

Tensions between Georgians and Ossetians began to rise in November 1988 when measures were taken by Tbilisi to promote Georgian language. The South Ossetian People's Assembly (*Ademon Nykhas*), a nationalist organization, started campaigning for the unification with the North Caucasian autonomous republic of North Ossetia which is part of Russia. In late November 1989, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a former dissident and opposition leader, organized a march of thousands of Georgians to Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, in order to 'defend' the Georgian population (Cornell 2001, p. 166). However, Ossetian nationalists and Soviet forces blocked the road to Tskhinvali and clashes took place in which several people were wounded.

The victory of Zviad Gamsakhurdia's Round Table-Free Georgian Bloc in the October 1990 elections led to a more militant phase of state-building process. The legacy of an ethnically divided state and a worsening domestic situation led Gamsakhurdia to stress national unity and strong leadership. The Gamsakhurdia government based much of its nationalities policy on the distinction between 'indigenous' people and 'guests' (Zurcher 2007, p. 135). Such policies in multi-ethnic Georgia reinforced the Ossetians' alienation from the new Georgian state despite

their religious affinity. South Ossetians had already reacted by proclaiming the area a Soviet republic on 20 September 1990. On 9 December 1990 elections took place in South Ossetia but the results were declared invalid by Tbilisi. Shortly afterwards, the crisis escalated further when the Georgian parliament abolished South Ossetian autonomy.

Fighting broke out in early January 1991 and lasted for about a month. Sporadic violence involving Georgian and South Ossetian forces continued until June 1992 when agreement on the deployment of Georgian, South Ossetian, and Russian peacekeepers was reached. As a result of the war, approximately 1000 people were killed, 60,000 Ossetians were forced to flee Georgia proper and found refuge in South and North Ossetia, as well as 10,000 Georgians from South Ossetia (UNHCR 2004). Most of the territory stayed in the hands of the separatist authorities, while some Georgian-populated villages remained controlled by Tbilisi.

From the point of view shared by most Georgians, it was Russia that orchestrated the 1991–92 South Ossetian conflict (Devdariani 2005, p. 166). Without doubt, this perception is something of an exaggeration, but the role of Russia in aggravating the conflict cannot be overlooked. Indeed, the manipulation of minority movements has been a key strategy of Moscow's policy to maintain its influence in the South Caucasus. Political support from Moscow was definitely a factor which encouraged South Ossetian separatists to be uncompromising in dealing with the central government in Tbilisi.

Eduard Shevardnadze, Georgia's second president who inherited the South Ossetian conflict from Gamsakhurdia, adhered to a prolonged process of negotiating with the breakaway republic but with no success. Although he was deeply committed to restore the territorial integrity of the Georgian state, the skilled former diplomat refused to exercise the military option in South Ossetia. As a result, the South Ossetian question became a frozen conflict.

The 2003 Rose Revolution overthrew Shevardnadze and brought to power Mikhail Saakashvili, who openly declared his intention to follow a pro-Western foreign policy. Although Putin initially endorsed regime change in Tbilisi (Baev 2008, p. 100), he soon turned against Saakashvili. From the Russian point of view, Georgia's color revolution was not a genuinely democratic event but instead it was orchestrated by the West to isolate and encircle Russia (Rumer 2007, p. 25). This view is also shared by some Western scholars. Since all color revolutions had moral and financial support from Western pro-democracy foundations, David Lane has argued that 'a form of soft political power was utilized by the West to undermine established governments' (Lane 2009, p. 115).

The Kremlin obviously underestimated Saakashvili's commitment to the restoration of Georgia's integrity. In May 2004, Saakashvili forced Ajaria's autocratic ruler Aslan Abashidze to resign and reintegrated the autonomous republic into Georgia. Although Abashidze was a Russian ally, Moscow did not support him enough despite its military presence in the area. One could have argued then that Russia was in retreat from the region. In June 2004, small-scale fighting erupted along the Georgian-South Ossetian border when President Saakashvili pledged to bring the breakaway region back under central control.

The Georgian leadership changed its strategy soon after failing to repeat the bloodless 'Ajaria scenario' in South Ossetia. In late-January 2005, the Saakashvili government presented a Peace Initiative for resolving the South Ossetian conflict at

the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe session in Strasbourg. This included broad autonomy, guaranteed language/cultural rights, and government funding for the rehabilitation of the local economy. In October 2005, the Bush administration and the OSCE expressed their support to the Georgian action plan presented by Prime Minister Zurab Noghaideli at the OSCE Permanent Council at Vienna, but was subsequently rejected by the South Ossetian authorities (Fuller 2005). However, the Georgian plan did not stop the drive for South Ossetian independence. On 12 November 2006, a referendum was held in South Ossetia, with the huge majority of ethnic Ossetians favoring independence from Georgia. At the same time, Moscow was gaining de facto control over South Ossetia by extending Russian citizenship to most South Ossetians (Fuller 2005).

The Georgian–South Ossetian relationship fell victim to rising tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi. In March 2006, Moscow banned the import of Georgian wine and started to deport Georgian citizens in early 2007. Both moves were apparently aimed at putting pressure on Saakashvili to abandon its pro-US policy, manifested by his decision to send Georgian troops in Iraq and bring Georgia closer to NATO. It should be noted that Saakashvili's drive to NATO membership was wholeheartedly supported by the Georgian parliament as shown by its unanimous voting on the issue in mid-March 2007 (Ria Novosti 2007). Although the Russian army left its military bases in Batumi, Akhalkalaki, and Tbilisi in November 2007, as agreed in the 1999 OSCE Istanbul Conference, the Russian–Georgian relations continued to deteriorate. Minor incidents, like airspace violations by Russian warplanes and skirmishes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, during 2007 and the first months of 2008 created a war-like atmosphere between the two countries.

So how did the two countries end up fighting a short, but fierce, war over South Ossetia? In late April 2008, a Russian warplane shot down a Georgian unmanned airborne vehicle flying over Abkhazia. From mid to late July, military exercises were conducted by the two countries, namely the joint US–Georgian *Immediate Response 2008* and the Russian *Kavkaz 2008*. Shooting incidents along the ceasefire line were frequent in the first week of August, leading to the evacuation of South Ossetian civilians to Russia. On the evening of 7 August, the Georgian Government declared a unilateral ceasefire, but it held only for a few hours. After intense artillery and rocket fire, in the morning of 8 August, Georgian forces launched an attack against Tskhinvali. Although the local forces were apparently taken by surprise, Moscow's response after approximately 12 hours came strong. Russian troops crossed the Caucasus Mountains and started battling Georgian troops. On 9 August, Russian army together with its Abkhazian allies opened a second front in Kodori Gorge, held by Georgian troops. Soon after, Russian troops entered western Georgia and occupied the port of Poti. The war ended on 12 August when the Kremlin announced the end of Russian military operations. Next day, however, Russian troops entered the Georgian city of Gori, withdrawing from it on 22 August. On 26 August, finally, the Russian government recognized de jure Abkhazian and South Ossetian independence.

A deep analysis of Georgia's war motives go beyond the scope of this article, but it seems that Tbilisi's military campaign in South Ossetia aimed primarily at solidifying domestic support for the Saakashvili Government, while drawing international attention to the country's ethnic conflicts. The Georgian president had already built his political strategy on the promise of reintegrating the breakaway

republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Georgia, thus facilitating the return of thousands of ethnic Georgians to their homes (Cheterian 2009, p. 158). Tbilisi also claimed, with some justification, that the 500-strong Russian peacekeeping force offered protection to Ossetian criminal gangs engaged in smuggling, while ignoring Ossetian reprisals against the remaining Georgian population (Fuller 2005). It seems that Tbilisi sought a limited war with win-win expectations: if the Kremlin did not respond to Georgian attacks, then the Saakashvili Government would have achieved the forcible reintegration of South Ossetia into Georgia; if the Russian army launched a counterattack (as it finally did), it would have been subject to accusations of invading a small pro-Western country and this could have led to either full NATO membership and/or new negotiations between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali.

The role of the USA in the five-day war is still open to speculation. It should be noted that then Deputy Assistant Secretary for European and Eurasian Affairs Matthew Bryza has insisted that Washington advised ‘the Georgian leadership not to get drawn into a trap’ (Clover 2008). On the contrary, Vladimir Putin has claimed that then US Vice President Dick Cheney and Senator McCain, the Republican candidate for president in 2008, orchestrated the war to increase McCain’s chance of winning (Traynor 2008a). Nevertheless, the Russian leadership has not produced evidence to back up this claim. The disclosure of US diplomatic correspondence during August 2008 by Wikileaks did not also shed much light on Washington’s stance in the Russian–Georgian war (Lomsadze 2010).

The USA as an offshore balancer in the South Caucasus

Valued as strategic for the US energy interests, the South Caucasus attracted much attention from both Clinton and Bush administrations. Since the discovery of substantial oil and gas resources in the North Sea in the 1970s, no new world-class deposits had been found. However, this changed in the early 1990s with a renewed assessment of Caspian Sea’s energy resources. The Caspian Sea, with its western shore forming the eastern edge of the Caucasus and its eastern shore marking the beginning of Central Asia, has been seen as a new ‘Black Gold’ Eldorado. The availability of Caspian energy resources comes at a time when world demand for oil and gas is growing, many are questioning the reliability of supplies from the Persian Gulf countries, and Western governments are encouraging the diversification of supply to ensure energy security.

However, energy does explain the US interest in the South Caucasus up to a point. Geopolitical considerations have also played a very important role in the formation of US policy vis-à-vis the South Caucasian republics. In March 1992, a classified Pentagon report leaked to the Press stated that US’s political and military mission in the post-cold war period will be to prevent the rise of a rival superpower in Western Europe, Asia or the former Soviet Union (Tyler 1992). A number of demographic, economic, and military factors (e.g. sizeable population, huge energy resources, nuclear arsenal) make Russia one of the two great powers (the other being China) that could jeopardize US privileged position as the world’s only regional hegemon. Therefore, the so-called near abroad (*bliznee zarubezhe* in Russian), defined as the former Soviet republics bordering Russia, has become an area of competition between Russia and the USA.

But the US strategy in the South Caucasus has been more complicated than one might think. According to John Mearsheimer (2001):

whenever a potential peer competitor emerged in either of those regions [Europe and Northeast Asia], the United States sought to check it and preserve America's unique position as the world's only regional hegemon . . . American policymakers tried to pass the buck to other great powers to get them to balance against the potential hegemon. But when that approach failed, the United States used its own military forces to eliminate the threat and restore a rough balance of power. (p. 237)

Indeed, Washington initially followed what Mearsheimer called a buck-passing strategy; the USA hoped that Turkey, together with some pro-Western former Soviet republics, would keep Russia in check.

Turkey maintains strong economic and political ties to the West, including membership in the OECD and NATO, a Customs Union with the European Union, while occupying a position as a leading Muslim nation. In addition, Turkey has historical and linguistic ties to Turkic and Muslim peoples of the former Soviet Union. The combination of all these factors places Turkey in a unique position as a pivot state in Eurasia (Chase *et al.* 1996, pp. 33–51).

It is hardly a surprise, therefore, that both the Bush and Clinton administrations openly encouraged the Turkish government to adopt a proactive policy in the former Soviet South. In the words of then President Bush:

Turkey and the United States have joined hands to feed mouths, rushing goods through Project Hope to needy friends in the Caucasus and Central Asia. I wish to announce that our Governments will expand that cooperation in these new Republics. We will seek new ways to help our new friends secure their independence and move quickly and peacefully to establish ties with the West. (Bush 1992)

The Kemalist model of evolution was eagerly presented by American policy-makers as the only option for the transition of Central Asian and South Caucasian republics to post-communist rule (Aras 2002, p. 21). According to Kemal Kirisci, considerable cooperation also took place between Washington and Ankara in managing ethnic conflicts in the South Caucasus (Kirisci 1998).

During most of the 1990s, the cornerstone of the US policy toward the South Caucasus was the development of the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline. In November 1999, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey signed an agreement, witnessed by then President Bill Clinton, affirming the BTC route as the Main Export Pipeline for Azeri oil exports. Despite initial opposition to the pipeline, which several oil companies criticized as too costly and uneconomical with the planned volumes from Azerbaijan, construction on the pipeline began in the autumn of 2002 and was completed in May 2005. From the American point of view, this pipeline could be a crucial step not only to unlocking urgently needed resources, but also to tying the South Caucasus (especially Azerbaijan and Georgia) to Turkey and thus undermine the Russian influence in the region.

The US buck-passing strategy worked well throughout the 1990s. Ankara supported Baku's and Tbilisi's aspirations to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures (Winrow 2009) and the Turkish army helped to modernize the ill-equipped Georgian and Azeri forces (Sezer 2001, p. 161). Also, Turkey supported the Chechen

independence movement by providing financial and possibly logistical support (Bodansky 1998). As a result, Turkish–Russian relations deteriorated sharply. As Offensive Realism claims, the USA allowed the growth in power of the intended buck-catcher (Turkey) so that it could contain the aggressor state (Russia).

In addition, Washington supported the establishment of a pro-US regional organization to check Russia's influence over former Soviet space. In October 1997, the GUAM organization was established in Strasbourg and named after the initial letters of Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and Moldova. In 1999, the organization was renamed GUUAM due to the membership of Uzbekistan, which however withdrew from the organization in May 2005, causing the restoration of the original name. In June 2001, a summit in Yalta was accompanied by the signing of GUAM's charter, which formalized the organization. The four countries have cooperated in the fields of trade, energy, transportation and low security (e.g. antiterrorism, pipeline security). The organization was supposed to be more than just a regional grouping of states; in the words of the Georgian ambassador to the US in May 2000, GUAM is 'a strategic alliance of countries with common problems and common threat perceptions' (Valasek 2000). Due to its organizational and coordination weaknesses, however, GUAM has stagnated, struggling to find a role in the post-Soviet space.

Despite its limited impact on the regional security architecture, the establishment of GUAM organization was met with great suspicion by Moscow. In 2000, the pro-Russian conference of ministers of 'foreign affairs' of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno Karabakh, and Transnistria was set up as a forum of coordination among the four breakaway republics. Moscow apparently encouraged the creation of this anti-GUAM alliance in order to undermine GUAM's chances of success. Following the signing of the so-called Baku declaration by the heads of GUAM member states to improve regional energy security and promote conflict resolution in June 2007, Moscow responded harshly. For example, Vadim Gustov, prominent member of the Federation Council, Russia's upper house of parliament, called GUAM an entity with anti-Russian policies that cannot survive without US financial backing and criticized GUAM's plans to replace Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia and South Ossetia with its own force (Blagov 2007).

The coming to power of Tagip Erdogan in 2002 ended the US–Turkish honeymoon relationship. Turkey under the pro-Islamist Justice and Development government has followed a much more balanced policy toward its neighbors. Ankara has not even hesitated to open channels of communication with Hamas and Iran. Following Turkish parliament's refusal to allow US troops to enter Iraq via Turkish territory in March 2003, the US–Turkish relations were strained. Ankara's reluctance to open a second front against Saddam was mainly connected to concerns over the status of Iraqi Kurdistan. In July 2003, the US–Turkish relations reached a low when US troops disarmed and detained Turkish special operation forces in Sulaymaniyah in Northern Iraq on charges that they were conspiring to assassinate Kurdish officials (Howard and Goldenberg 2003).

Simultaneously, relations between Russia and Turkey were improved considerably. In December 2004, Vladimir Putin became the first Russian head of state to visit Turkey in 32 years (Larrabee 2010, p. 49). The volume of trade between the two countries in 2002 was estimated at \$5 billion, \$6.8 billion in 2003, \$10.8 billion in 2004, \$15.2 billion in 2005, \$20.7 billion in 2006, \$28.2 billion in 2007, and \$37.9 billion in 2008 (Turkish MFA). Central to Russian–Turkish trade was the export of

Russian natural gas to the Turkish market. In November 2005, the inauguration of the Blue Stream pipeline, which carries natural gas from Russia into Turkey, opened a new chapter in the Russian–Turkish relations. In addition, the color revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004, respectively, brought the two countries closer politically. The Erdogan government’s lukewarm response to color revolutions (Baran 2007) did not go unnoticed by Moscow. The Kremlin reciprocated by being increasingly sympathetic to the Turkish Cypriots (Zeynalov 2009).

After more than a decade of antagonism between Ankara and Moscow, the two countries have reached a *modus vivendi* in the region. According to Shiren Hunter, ‘Turkish and Russian officials increasingly refer to their respective countries as two great Eurasian powers, indicating that the Turkish and Russian version of Eurasianism need not be competitive. Rather, they can be complementary’ (Hunter 2004, p. 370). Russia and Turkey have acknowledged each other’s interests in the former Soviet Union, a development that raised concerns in Washington. In February 2005, former Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke voiced his concern over the deepening Turkish–Russian relationship by stating that the Kremlin ‘engaged in a little-noticed charm offensive to woo our all-important (but deeply alienated) ally into a new special relationship’ (Holbrooke 2005). As a result, long gone are the days when geopolitically minded Russian leaders saw Ankara as a destabilizing force in the former Soviet south, projecting Western influence.

The US–Turkish row over Iraq and the rapidly growing ties between Russia and Turkey paved the way for an increased American involvement in the South Caucasus. Turkey was almost viewed as an unreliable ally for the embattled Americans at a time when they desperately needed to build a ring of friendly countries from Europe to Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result, the strategic value of the South Caucasus increased further. The failure of its buck-passing strategy in the South Caucasus changed Washington’s strategy in the region. According to the logic of Offensive Realism, the USA was forced to step in as an offshore balancer in order to prevent the revival of Russian hegemony.

Nevertheless, the USA neither sent its army nor established military bases in the region, as it had done in Europe and Northeast Asia during the cold war. Instead, the Bush administration revived the project of NATO expansion. The enlargement of the Atlantic Alliance into the eastern shore of the Black Sea (i.e. Ukraine and Georgia) was planned to be the main tool for keeping Moscow out of the former Soviet space. By integrating Ukraine and primarily Georgia into NATO structures, Moscow would have been prevented from interfering in their domestic affairs. More importantly, NATO membership would have extended Article five defense guarantee to Ukraine and Georgia changing fundamentally the security environment surrounding Russia.

Explaining Russia’s decision to intervene in South Ossetia

The Russian military intervention in South Ossetia was a predictable, not spontaneous, reaction to possible NATO expansion into Georgia. The key to understand Russia’s geopolitical strategy is history and geography. Russia has been invaded several times since the thirteenth century; a fact that has prompted its leaders to seek the establishment of buffer zones around the Russian heartland. For example, after the downfall of Napoleon, who had invaded Russia in 1812, the

Congress of Vienna gave most of the Duchy of Warsaw and Finland to Russia. In addition, the defeat of Nazi Germany in 1945 gave a long-awaited opportunity to the Kremlin to establish hegemony over East Europe. In practice, the region between the Iron Curtain and the Soviet borders served as a protective ring around the Russian heartland. Against this historical background, the end of communism practically meant that Russia lost an empire that was built over centuries; it is a hardly a surprise that Putin called the disintegration of the Soviet Union 'the greatest geopolitical disaster of the last century' (Allen 2005).

From the Russian point of view, the South Caucasus constitutes an area of great importance. The protection of economic interests, and particularly control over Azerbaijan's oil industry, has been a major concern for Moscow in the South Caucasus. The transportation of Azeri oil via Russian territory could have provided an opportunity for Moscow to earn large amounts of revenue and, given Russia's economic difficulties during the 1990s, such an issue soon became a matter of national security. Moscow also worried that such exports could have an adverse impact on Russia's own ability to secure increased oil and gas exports to European markets. Given its own dependence on oil and gas exports for the bulk of its hard-currency earnings, the Kremlin could not afford a reduced market share. Therefore, Moscow attempted to restrict the flow of Azeri oil via the Russian-controlled Baku-Novorossisk pipeline but finally the construction of the BTC pipeline put an end to Russian ambitions.

Although Russia's interests in the South Caucasus have been certainly economic and oil-related, significant security interests have also been at stake. The indigenous population in the North Caucasus is closely linked, both culturally and ethnically, to some ethnic groups in the South Caucasus. The 1991–92 South Ossetian conflict had, for example, dramatic repercussions in the republic of North Ossetia, within the Russian Federation; hundreds of North Ossetian volunteers fought against Georgian troops and donations were collected for the 'South Ossetian brethren' (Zurcher 2005, p. 106). In addition, the Abkhazian conflict during 1992–93 generated tension in the ethnically related North Caucasian republic of Adyghe. Furthermore, the South Caucasus occupies a strategically important position as a land bridge linking Russia with Turkey and the countries of the Middle East. Therefore, Russia's security has been tied to the South Caucasus.

The turning point in Russia's policy toward the South Caucasus, as ironic as it might seem, came in the spring of 1999 when NATO bombed Serbia. For the Kremlin, the NATO intervention in the Serbian province of Kosovo was at best legally questionable; the United Nations Security Council, where Russia has a veto power, never authorized this intervention. Moscow viewed this action as evidence of NATO transformation into a military alliance with global aims. Russian fears were reflected in the 2000 National Security Concept which stated that 'elevated to the rank of strategic doctrine, NATO's transition to the practice of using military force outside its zone of responsibility and without UN Security Council sanction could destabilize the entire global strategic situation' (Nezavisimoye Voennoye Obozreniye 2000).

The neoconservative drive to 'democratize' the greater Middle East further isolated the Russian leadership from the USA. The establishment of military bases in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan reinforced suspicion among Russians that Washington sought every opportunity for strategic gain in the former Soviet Union at the expense

of Moscow. As a result, the containment of the US/NATO presence in the region became an issue of high priority for Moscow. Putin implied this during his famous speech in Munich in 2007 when he emphasized that ‘the United States has overstepped its national borders in every way. This is visible in the economic, political, cultural and educational policies it imposes on other nations. Well, who likes this? Who is happy about this?’ (Putin 2007).

Furthermore, Moscow’s concerns over the future of post-war Kosovo were almost ignored. Despite Russian objections, the Republic of Kosova declared its independence on 17 February 2008. The newly established republic was recognized rapidly by the USA and a number of European states. Washington claimed that the Kosovo case was one of a kind; therefore it won’t set a precedent for other existing or potential breakaway regions. But the *de jure* recognition of Kosovo broke a post-war taboo about the sanctity of the existing borders in Europe at a time that Moscow still confronted Chechen separatists. Also, the Russian leadership had drawn parallels between the Kosovo situation and the unrecognized states of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (Smith, 2006, p. 4) but the West largely ignored Russian threats. Following the Kosovo recognition, for example, Konstantin Zatulin, first deputy chairman of the Duma Committee on CIS Affairs and Relations with Compatriots, argued that the independence of Kosovo presented an opportunity for Moscow to recognize the two breakaway republics (Perevozkina 2008). Such statements gave the impression that Moscow was just seeking a pretext for the recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. According to Vichen Cheterian, ‘without taking into account the events of Kosovo in February 2008, it is difficult to understand the Russo-Georgian war six months later’ (Cheterian 2009, p. 164).

The Kosovo Crisis was connected from the beginning with the question of NATO’s role in the post-cold war era. Therefore, the issue of NATO enlargement came to dominate the foreign policy agenda of Russia, which is still highly sensitive regarding the protection of its (unnatural and vast) borders. The Russian political elite has largely perceived NATO enlargement as a hostile act aimed at the encirclement of Russia. Within this geopolitical context, Moscow’s interest in Georgia largely stems from the country’s location as a strategic buffer state between Russia, Turkey and Iran, and its control is crucial to maintain Russia’s control over the South Caucasus region. In addition, Georgia is the only one of the eight southern post-Soviet republics with access to the open sea; practically speaking, Western countries could not reach the energy-rich Caspian Sea if Georgia does not collaborate.

In fact, the deterioration of the Russian–Georgian relations paralleled Tbilisi’s rapprochement with Washington. In May 2002, the Bush administration established the Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP). The 18-month GTEP aimed at preparing Georgian forces for participation in the War against Terror. With the help of 200 US military advisors, Georgian troops were trained and equipped (Shanker 2002). Moreover, the Georgia Sustainment and Stability Operations Program (GSSOP) were launched in January 2005 to assist the deployment of Georgian units in Iraq. Although both GTEP and GSSOP were small in size and value, the qualitative transformation of the Georgian armed forces was seen by Moscow and the separatist authorities as a threat to regional stability. Simultaneously, Tbilisi accelerated its drive to join NATO. In October 2004, NATO offered to the Georgian government a 2-year Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP). Through IPAP,

NATO provided advice on political, security, and military issues, science and environment, and civil emergency planning.

After NATO Council's decision to start 'intensive dialogue' with Tbilisi on 21 September 2006, Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned that the case of Georgia has a special character because of its geographical proximity to Russia and the obvious complexity of the Caucasian problems. Georgia's accession to the present untransformed NATO 'will seriously affect the political, military and economic interests of Russia' (Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2006). During an interview with *the Financial Times* in March 2008, President-elect Medvedev stated that '[Russians] are not happy about the situation around Georgia and Ukraine...I would like to say that no state can be pleased about having representatives of a military bloc to which it does not belong coming close to its borders' (Barber *et al.* 2008).

Moscow was keep receiving clear messages about the NATO expansion in spring 2008. During a White House meeting with Saakashvili on 19 March 2008, President Bush stated that 'NATO benefits with a Georgian membership...[and] Georgia benefits from being part of NATO' (Weitz 2008). Moscow's anxiety over NATO enlargement increased after the Bucharest Summit in April 2008, where Washington openly lobbied for Georgian and Ukrainian entry into the alliance. Although the Bush administration failed to convince all of its European allies, with France and Germany being the most reluctant ones to support NATO enlargement to the East, the member states finally reached a decision by which they:

agreed that these countries [Georgia and Ukraine] will become members of NATO. Both nations have made valuable contributions to Alliance operations... Membership Action Plan (MAP) is the next step for Ukraine and Georgia on their direct way to membership... we make clear that we support these countries' applications for MAP. Therefore we will now begin a period of intensive engagement with both at a high political level to address the questions still outstanding pertaining to their MAP applications. (NATO 2008)

Some observers (Cornell 2008, O'Donnell and McNamara 2008) postulated that, by deferring a decision to extend a MAP to Georgia, NATO appeased Moscow and encouraged a Russia's invasion of Georgia. Although the awarding of a MAP would have certainly stressed NATO's determination to integrate Georgia, there are no reasons to believe that such a development would have prevented Moscow from assisting the breakaway republic of South Ossetia.³ Given Russia's national interests at stake, it is reasonable to argue that Moscow would have come to South Ossetia's aid anyway. In fact, the decision to keep the prospects of Georgian membership on the table served to reinforce Russia's fears about NATO encirclement. In the days after the Bucharest Summit, the Saakashvili government's rhetoric was triumphant. In an interview with the TV station Rustavi 2, he said that 'the NATO summit gave us the political and legislative guarantee of membership. No other country has ever achieved that' (Kiguradze 2008). Despite some disappointment, most Georgian officials believed that the country was still on track to achieve, sooner or later, NATO membership.

Although it was obviously pleased that NATO did not offer a MAP to Ukraine and Georgia, Moscow was still deeply suspicious of the Alliance's plans to expand eastwards. Putin himself, after the conclusion of the Bucharest Summit, stated that

NATO enlargement ‘is a direct threat to the security of our country . . . we have heard promises previously on the subject of expansion, but for us there’s no clarity about NATO’s future intentions’ (Evans 2008).

The sending of 1000 US troops to participate in the US–Georgian military exercise called *Immediate Response 2008* probably convinced the Kremlin about the seriousness of US commitment to Georgia’s NATO membership. Therefore, the Kremlin felt that it was time to act.

According to Dmitri Trenin, an authority in Russian foreign policy:

Russian strategic policymakers . . . respect what they regard as the laws of Realpolitik. They believe that all nations seek to expand their influence, and in order to do so they rely on their power, both hard and soft. In their view, military force is a usable tool of foreign policy, and war can be a legitimate extension of policy: war prevention is not enough. (Trenin 2007, p. 35)

The speed and strength of the Russian response to Georgia’s military operation in South Ossetia indicated that the Kremlin had been long prepared for such a war in order to change the regional status quo in its favor.

With the ‘liberation’ and de jure recognition of South Ossetia, resurgent Russia has paid the West back in the same coin for the Kosovo recognition. But this is more than just tit-for-tat action. Since the Kremlin could have never been certain about the US intentions in Georgia, it sought to re-establish hegemony over the South Caucasus in order to attain security. In Ronald Grigor Suny’s words, ‘Russia wants to be the regional hegemon, not the imperial overlord, of the southern tier’ (Suny 2007, p. 68). Following the Georgian defeat, thousands of Russian troops are stationed in the breakaway republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On 17 September 2008, Moscow signed treaties of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance with both Abkhazia and South Ossetia which included a Russian security guarantee. As a result, at least 7600 Russian troops are stationed in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, more than twice the number based there before the August 2008 war (Rasizade 2009, p. 17).

By controlling South Ossetia, the Kremlin has maintained a stronghold at the heart of Georgia (only about 100 km from Tbilisi); by controlling Abkhazia, Russia has effectively added 215 km to its coastline along the Black Sea. Georgia now enjoys limited sovereignty and the prospects for NATO membership are dim (Traynor 2008b). Moreover, Azerbaijan has returned to a more neutral policy criticizing the West for its failure to solve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and reaching out to Russia (Abbasov 2009). The ever growing ties between Yerevan and Moscow (Grigoryan 2010) complete the picture of a resurgent Russia that currently dominates, as a Mearsheimerian hegemon, the regional system of the South Caucasus. After rising to the status of a regional hegemon, Russia will also increase its relative power vis-à-vis its main competitor, the USA. Thus, the Kremlin believes that Russia will enhance its chances of survival in the anarchical international system.

The offensive realist explanation can also address why the Russian forces did not march on and occupy Tbilisi and the rest of the country. At that time, Saakashvili remained popular and his removal from power would have not served the Russian interests. The occupation of Georgia could have led to massive resistance and

dramatic deterioration of relations with the West, while the benefits from this action would have been insignificant. Therefore, the Russian forces were restricted to securing South Ossetia.

Having said that, there is no doubt that additional factors played a role in Moscow's decision to use military power against Georgia for which the theory of Offensive Realism cannot account. Putin's personal antipathy toward Saakashvili (Levy 2009), Russian considerations of honor and prestige as a great power (Tsygankov and Tarver-Wahlquist 2009), and human rights concerns for ethnic Russians (Shearman and Sussex 2009) probably shaped the Kremlin's decision to launch a counter-attack.

In any case, Georgia's assault against South Ossetia opened a rare window of opportunity for action which could not be lost. This action was clearly decided, as Offensive Realism claims, on a cost-benefit basis. The (potential) benefits outweighed (potential) costs. It seems that four factors counted in the Russian calculations in favor of an armed intervention in South Ossetia: Russia's pivotal role in the Iranian nuclear standoff, lack of a formal US defense commitment towards Georgia, US preoccupation in Iraq and Afghanistan and record-high oil prices.

Iran's nuclear program, which has been pursued with Russian assistance, dominated the US–Russian security agenda during 2005–2008. Different perspectives over the Iranian nuclear issue produced tensions in the US–Russian relations (Rumer 2007, p. 37). Whereas American officials have espoused regime change and economic sanctions as key tools for containing the Iranian regime, Russians have emphasized the benefits of international political pressure linked to multilateral negotiation. Nevertheless, Washington has understood that the participation of the Russian government is an almost necessary precondition for the success of any effort to solve peacefully the Iranian puzzle (Kipp 2009, p. 72). Therefore, the USA had prioritized Iran over developments in the South Caucasus.

In addition, the US Government had not signed a security treaty to defend Georgia, so the Kremlin logically calculated the risk of direct confrontation with US forces as insignificant. It should be mentioned that the US troops that had participated in the US–Georgian military exercise *Immediate Response 2008* departed from Georgia at the end of July. In his book entitled 'A Little War That Shook the World', Ronald Asmus raised an interesting point about how Putin during the US–Russian summit in Sochi, which took place a few days after the 2008 Bucharest summit, could have misinterpreted Bush's silence to his anti-Georgia remarks as a 'green light' to act against Tbilisi (Asmus 2010, p. 140). In other words, Washington was never seriously committed to Georgia's territorial integrity and the Russians knew that before deciding to take action against Tbilisi.

The Russian leadership also came to the conclusion that, at the time of the intervention, the War on Terrorism had overstretched the USA, both economically and militarily. In addition to the financial burden, the increased number of Iraqi war casualties had given rise to voices calling for a more restrained foreign policy (Logan 2007). During 2008, President Bush faced strong domestic criticism for his handling of the Iraq war and the lowest approval ratings of all time. If the history of the US–Soviet relations is an indicator, the American leader would have not risked a nuclear war with Russia over the fate of a small country in the South Caucasus.

Against this background of geopolitical instability, oil price for Brent rose to a record of \$147 on 11 July 2008 (BBC News 2008). As a result, billions of dollars were

pumped into the Russian economy. High oil prices also increased Moscow's leverage over its EU trade partners. The European Union depends on Russia for more than a third of its oil imports (Eurostat Press Office 2008). Flush with petrodollars, the Kremlin embarked on an armed confrontation with Georgia knowing that Brussels had limited crisis management capabilities. Despite Tbilisi's claims (German 2009, p. 352), Russian troops were careful enough to avoid any damage to Georgia's pipeline infrastructure. In this way, Moscow acknowledged Western energy interests in the region given that most of oil transported through the BTC pipeline ends up in European refineries. Put simply, neither Moscow nor Brussels had an interest to jeopardize their energy relationship over South Ossetia.

Conclusion

The article utilized Offensive Realism to explain the Russian invasion of Georgia in August 2008. This theory focuses on the actions of great powers which seek regional hegemony in order to achieve security. Despite some weaknesses, the explanatory value of Offensive Realism is high. Russia as a great power aims at ensuring its security so, according to the logic of Offensive Realism, has predictably followed expansionist policies against smaller states like Georgia.

The USA attempted to prevent Russia from controlling the strategically important region of the South Caucasus, first by formulating a buck-passing strategy involving primarily Turkey, and then by stepping in themselves as an offshore balancer and attempting to balance Russia. Unlike past cases of offshore balancing, however, the USA did not send large numbers of troops to the region or establish military bases; instead, the Bush administration advocated NATO's expansion into the South Caucasus. But US support for Georgia's NATO membership only backfired as it increased concern among Russian policymakers regarding the 'true' US policy goals in the former Soviet Union.

No matter what were the factors initially compelling Moscow to play an active role in the Georgian–Ossetian conflict, Russian involvement in the 2008 war aimed mainly at the sabotage of Tbilisi's efforts to join NATO. The expansion of NATO eastwards has been perceived by the Kremlin as a great threat to Russian security. Keeping the Abkhazian and South Ossetians issues unresolved seems to be a way of keeping Georgia's NATO plans in check. According to the dictates of Offensive Realism, Russia fought a war against a much weaker opponent in order to become the regional hegemon and thus increase its chances of survival in the anarchical international system. The timing of the Russian intervention was well-calculated. Four factors seemed to count on Russia's favor: the Bush administration's non-commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity, the US engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan; Russian pivotal role in the Iranian nuclear puzzle, and high oil prices.

Notes

1. Mearsheimer has argued that great power competition will re-emerge in Europe after the end of the cold war. More specifically, he has predicted that Germany or Russia could attempt to become the regional hegemon in a multipolar Europe. Yet, his predictions have failed to materialize (see Mearsheimer 2001, pp. 394–396).

2. On the US–Russia–China competition in the Caspian Sea (see Ebel and Menon 2000, Chufrin 2001, Nation and Trenin 2007).
3. On the Russian preparations for war see Felgenhauer 2008.

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