

Cheney, Bush and the Georgia crisis

by Andrew Murray

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The conflict now unfolding across Georgia with terrible human consequences is a tipping point in the global “long war” of the last seven years.

Make no mistake, it is a conflict which can only be understood in the context of the same war already causing carnage in Iraq, Afghanistan and Somalia and menacing Iran.

That is to say, it is a further conflict which has its ultimate cause in the ambitions of the US ruling elite to impose a global hegemony.

It differs from the other fronts in the war in that the aspect of inter-imperialist conflict is the main determining factor in the Georgian crisis.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have borne the stamp of wars of neocolonial aggression. The question of the sovereignty of the people resisting invasion and occupation is the main one, whatever other cross-currents there may be.

Of course, there have been differences between great powers over Iraq, as there were over the Yugoslav war of 1999. But these differences have remained at the diplomatic level.

In the Georgian crisis, this balance is reversed. National independence is an issue, but not in the same way.

The peoples of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the two disputed regions, do not wish to be ruled from Tbilisi, but the idea of full national independence has not been raised and is, particularly in the former case, scarcely practical.

Georgia will, on the other hand, claim to be asserting its national independence from Russia. Yet it is led by a government which has fully dissolved the country’s independence into an alliance with the US, turning it into the explicit and avowed instrument of George Bush’s global policy.

And it surely had the green light from Washington before embarking on its sudden effort to conquer South Ossetia by force last week, sparking the crisis by shelling civilians whom it regards as its own citizens and Russian peacekeepers into the bargain.

Thus, the confrontation between South Ossetia and Georgia became immediately a confrontation between Russia and the US. “Russia’s aggression must not go unanswered,” Dick Cheney announced on Monday.

Pausing perhaps from trying to figure out how he can yet get his war with Iran going before leaving office, the US vice-president has returned to the original Project for a New American Century handbook in his response to the crisis.

It has been an explicit aim of the neoconservative faction in the US establishment to

prevent any reintegration of the “former Soviet space.” The sole superpower aims to stay the sole superpower, which means, among other things, stopping Russia reviving as a rival superpower.

Therefore, those peoples who, like the South Ossetians, have found themselves stranded on the wrong side of what became interstate boundaries overnight with the collapse of the Soviet Union cannot be permitted to reintegrate with Russia even if it is their overwhelming desire to do so.

Conventional wisdom will put the conflict down to “enduring territorial and ethnic hatreds,” in the *Sunday Telegraph’s* words, or “historic grudges,” in those of the *Observer*. These are convenient liberal bromides—the real enduring tradition here is great-power rivalry.

In fact, Ossetians and Georgians rubbed along all right in Soviet times, at least in part because neither was in a position to lord it over the other. South Ossetians could form part of Soviet Georgia while their kin on the other side of the barrier of the Caucasus mountains in North Ossetia could be a constituent element of Soviet Russia because they were all, ultimately, Soviet. And people of all the various nationalities of Georgia intermingled with little friction.

That was before the break-up of the Soviet Union and Georgia attaining first its independence and, more recently, the status of fully fledged US satellite.

The latter development suits not just neoconservative strategy—to avoid the consolidation of any rival power centre by keeping the world a patchwork of diminutive states wherever possible—but also helps Cheney’s energy policy.

Georgia sits astride the only pipeline sending oil westward from the Caspian Basin that does not pass through Russian territory. For that reason, Bush has showered special attention on Georgia’s government which, like all its post-1991 predecessors, came to office via a coup rather than election.

Despite this and the suppression of opposition political activities last November, the Tbilisi government has been hailed as a “pro-Western democracy,” as if the two aspects were inextricable. It is, of course, the “pro-Western” element which is decisive for Washington if one or the other has to be discarded.

Hence President Saakashvili announcing that the Russian attack on his country was an “attack on the US itself” and one of his spokesmen asserting that, if Russians are allowed into South Ossetia today, they could turn up in any European capital tomorrow.

In seeking to spread the conflict, Cheney has material to work on. The statement by the Ukrainian government, most likely after consultation with the White House, that it would drive the Russian navy out of its historic Crimean base in Sevastopol would certainly provoke a clash if an attempt was made to act on it.

The “pro-Western” Ukrainian government is only able to utter this threat in the first place because the Crimea was moved to Soviet Ukraine from Soviet Russia somewhat arbitrarily by Khrushchov in the 1950s.

This mattered little at the time, but it has become a running sore since 1991, as the population would rather be in Russia again. Indeed, they turned out in vast numbers to protest at a visiting US military “training mission” last year.

There is also a very substantial minority of ethnic Russians in the Ukraine who would probably welcome closer ties with the Russian Federation.

These potential flashpoints highlight the fact that, in many cases, the formerly internal borders between Soviet republics do not work as interstate boundaries. They are a consequence of the indecent haste with which Boris Yeltsin and his cronies liquidated the Soviet Union the better to get their hands on the levers of power in Russia.

Not only are there national minorities, often Russian, now in the “wrong” state, there are also peoples who, having neither the means nor even the aspiration to set up fully fledged nation-states of their own, felt much more at ease in a large multinational federation than they do in a smaller nation-state dominated by a single national group.

Since one of the undoubted successes of the nationalities policy of the Soviet Union was its promotion of the cultural, linguistic and educational development of each ethnic group, no matter how small or how historically marginalised it had been, all now have both an enhanced awareness of their distinctive rights and the means of articulating them.

This could all be resolved peacefully were the US not hell-bent on using every difficulty and difference as a lever to keep its putative Russian rival weak and “in its box.”

This is a recipe for an unending series of escalating conflicts as Russia strengthens itself and seeks to reassert its role—sometimes, no doubt, with right on its side and sometimes not.

Ultimately, the matter of principle is reasonably clear. Ossetians and Abkhazians do not want to be governed from Tbilisi, just as Georgians do not want to be governed from Moscow. Let each define their own future, within or outside the Russian Federation, free from coercion.

But there is absolutely no positive part to be played by a duplicitous and power-hungry US administration stoking up trouble in yet another part of the world.

The anti-war movement has long warned that the conflicts in the Middle East and south Asia, dreadful as they have been and are, would most likely only be the foothills of a still bigger war unless the US drive to world hegemony was decisively challenged.

We are now out of the foothills and progressing towards a situation that more unmistakably bears comparison with 1914. More than ever, the need for Britain to break with Cheney’s foreign policy and challenge the slide to ever-widening war is the main imperative.