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## Pushing NATO to Russia's Southern Flank

By Jonathan Marshall

September 12, 2016

A Republican leader calling for a new military base in Georgia is hardly newsworthy — the state already has more than a dozen such installations. But when it's the speaker of parliament in the country of Georgia, who belongs to that nation's Republican Party calling for a U.S. military base on Russia's southern border, and for a constitutional amendment to guarantee his country's commitment to NATO, that should raise some eyebrows.

Although major U.S. papers didn't report that news this month, it reflects another escalation of NATO's dangerous confrontation with Moscow. Eight years ago, Georgia's intense campaign to join NATO — combined with its reckless aggression against the breakaway territory of South Ossetia — helped spark a brief but bloody war with Vladimir Putin's Russia.

Today, the U.S.-led military alliance is once again promoting its expansion plans in Georgia and other countries on Russia's periphery as if the Cold War had never ended.

On Sept. 7, ambassadors from all the NATO countries drove along George W. Bush Avenue to downtown Tbilisi, Georgia's capital, to meet with Georgian leaders about security cooperation and progress toward the country's full integration into NATO.

At the end of the two-day visit, NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg declared “the bonds between NATO and Georgia are stronger than ever.” His news release noted that “the Alliance is

committed to helping Georgia move towards NATO membership,” and that “NATO experts in Georgia are providing advice on defense planning, education and cyber security, while Allies have increased joint training and exercises with Georgian troops.”

Just days earlier, the U.S. Marine Corps announced that it had joined “NATO allies and partners from the Baltics and Black Sea regions” in the Republic of Georgia to conduct live-fire military exercises with heavy tanks, armored vehicles, and anti-armor TOW missiles. And in July, Secretary of State John Kerry visited Georgia before joining President Obama at a NATO meeting in Poland to sign a new security cooperation agreement with Georgia.

All of these moves followed President Obama’s request to Congress in February to quadruple U.S. military spending in Europe next year, including military equipment to help Georgia in “countering Russian aggression.” Days later, NATO dispatched ships and sailors to Georgia for joint naval exercises in the Black Sea.

Moscow’s ambassador to NATO complained, “NATO is trying to draw us into a state of Cold War by inflating the myth about the threat from the East and justifying the necessity to deter Russia.”

### **NATO and the Roots of Conflict**

NATO’s relentless expansion toward Russia — in violation of promises by Western leaders a quarter century ago — is a major cause of recent dangerous military escalation by the world’s major nuclear powers. In 2008, NATO extended membership invitations to both Georgia and Ukraine — two countries on Russia’s direct borders. George Friedman, CEO of the private intelligence firm Stratfor, explained that year why Moscow reacted with such hostility:

“US Presidents George H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton had promised the Russians that NATO would not expand into the former Soviet empire. That promise had already been broken in 1998 by NATO’s expansion to Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic — and again in the 2004 expansion, which included not only the rest of the former Soviet satellites in what is now Central Europe, but also the three Baltic states, which had been components of the Soviet Union.

“The Russians had tolerated all that, but the discussion of including Ukraine in NATO represented to them a fundamental threat to Russia’s national security. It would, in their calculations, have rendered Russia indefensible and threatened to destabilize the Russian Federation itself. When the United States went so far as to suggest that Georgia be included as well, bringing NATO deeper into the Caucasus, the Russian conclusion — publicly stated — was that the United States in particular intended to encircle and break Russia.”

Conflict with Russia ensued that August when, according to official E.U. investigators, Georgia’s authoritarian president, Mikheil Saakashvili, ordered the shelling of the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali, massacring civilians (and Russian peacekeepers) with cluster munitions. The resulting five-day war with Russia killed 850 people and displaced 100,000.

South Ossetia and nearby Abkhazia had broken away from Georgia in the early 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Their inhabitants were alarmed by the fanatical nationalism of Georgia's thuggish first president, who declared that subversive minorities "should be chopped up [and] burned out with a red-hot iron from the Georgian nation." South Ossetia alone lost more than one percent of its population to Georgian arms in 1991 and 1992.

President Saakashvili's attempt to retake that territory in 2008 reflected his understandable overestimation of Washington's willingness to back him up. Perhaps he listened too much to his paid lobbyist Randy Scheunemann, a neoconservative leader and chief foreign policy adviser to U.S. presidential candidate John McCain. Hardly had the war begun than McCain and other hawks rushed to blame Russia as the aggressor. The Arizona senator declared, "we are all Georgians."

In addition, the New York Times observed just days after the war broke out, "The United States took a series of steps that emboldened Georgia: sending advisers to build up the Georgian military, including an exercise last month with more than 1,000 American troops; pressing hard to bring Georgia into the NATO orbit; championing Georgia's fledgling democracy along Russia's southern border; and loudly proclaiming its support for Georgia's territorial integrity in the battle with Russia over Georgia's separatist enclaves."

Saakashvilli may also have calculated that Israel, a major arms supplier to Georgia, would use its political clout to get Washington to intervene against Russia. Georgia's defense minister, a former Israeli, said "We are now in a fight against the great Russia, and our hope is to receive assistance from the White House because Georgia cannot survive on its own."

The Bush administration airlifted 1,800 Georgian troops from Iraq and guarded Tbilisi airport against Russian attack but did not save invading Georgian forces from defeat.

### **Fueling a New Cold War**

Although Russia came out ahead, some Russian analysts concluded that their failure to teach Georgian leaders enough of a lesson in 2008 contributed to the recent conflict in Ukraine, where a violent putsch in 2014 installed an anti-Russian regime bent on joining NATO. As one Russian expert at Moscow State University observed last year:

"The Saakashvili regime survived, it was not punished. What is happening in Ukraine is a direct result of the fact that in 2008 we did not pursue things in Georgia to the end. The junta in Kiev feels that it has absolute impunity, it is confident that Russia will not overthrow and punish it. That is why it is so brazen. And the West, seeing that Russia did not stick it out to the end, decided that it can do what it wants in Ukraine."

(Lending support to that view, former President Saakashvili decamped last year for Ukraine, after being charged at home with a variety of offenses including embezzlement, violent crackdowns on opposition protests and the illegal seizure of a critical TV channel. The Kiev regime appointed him governor of the Odessa region and he has since become a major national political figure.)

In the West, the 2008 war fueled more anti-Russian sentiment, despite the consensus of most authorities that Georgia initiated the conflict. NATO roundly condemned Russia for recognizing South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states, setting the stage for continued tension for Moscow. In 2009, the newly elected President Obama began a training program for Georgian military forces.

In 2011, McCain's buddy, South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham, engineered a unanimous voice vote of the U.S. Senate to condemn Russia for recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (a vote that scandalized not only Moscow but conservative commentator Patrick Buchanan).

The same year, Hollywood actors Andy Garcia (playing Saakashvili), Val Kilmer and Heather Graham starred in the movie bomb "5 Days of War," co-produced by a Georgian minister, about "a small country fighting for independence and freedom."

Meanwhile, the neo-conservative opinion editors of the *Washington Post* have stoked the fires by running columns championing Georgia's "enthusiastic embrace of Westernization," its key role as a bulwark against Russian "domination" and "hegemony," and the importance of hastening its entry into NATO.

The *Post* even ran a column by Saakashvili brazenly accusing Putin of trying to conquer Georgia in 2008, citing parallels with Nazi Germany's occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1938. The paper's own editorial writers call for "tougher sanctions" against Russia to "deter Mr. Putin from taking further aggressive action" against Georgia and other neighboring countries.

Georgia's ability to glean so much fawning attention becomes less mysterious in light of the fact that it is one of the top 10 foreign spenders on lobbying in the United States, including a \$50,000 monthly retainer to the uber-lobbying firm, Podesta Group.

Among the few dissenters are foreign policy "realists" like the CATO Institute's Ted Galen Carpenter, who have the temerity to question the rationale for NATO in the post-Soviet age. Citing the cost and danger of growing U.S. commitments to that alliance, he wrote last month, *a propos* of countries like Georgia:

"The only thing worse than committing the United States to defend a small, weak, largely useless ally is doing so when that ally is highly vulnerable to another major power. . . Alliances with such client states are perfect transmission belts to transform a local, limited conflict into a global showdown between nuclear-armed powers."

His words have gone largely unheeded. America's dangerous commitment to Georgia is taking place nominally in public but far below the radar of most voters. So let me propose a serious question for the next presidential debate: "What would you do, if you were elected, about Tbilisi?"