

Russia, Georgia, and the Kosovo Connection

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By selectively turning principles into propagandist slogans for scoring points, the United States no longer occupies the political high ground. Washington's lectures sound like hectoring, not sincere admonitions that could sway international public opinion and restrain Russian actions.

In Russia even more than in America, "Kosovo" rhymes with "I told you so."

Many Americans don't realize that the former Serbian province of Kosovo, which broke away in 1999 after US-led NATO forces bombed Serbia for 78 days, helped set the stage for the recent conflict between Russia and neighboring Georgia.

But Russian leaders, who like most leaders care intensely about what happens at their borders (Georgia) and to their longtime allies (Serbia), warned earlier this year that support for Kosovo's independence would set a precedent that could trigger separatist conflicts in places like Georgia.

It was a warning that Washington and several of its European allies foolishly, even recklessly, failed to heed.

In negotiations over the final status of Kosovo, which had been under United Nations jurisdiction since 1999, Serbia promised the province autonomy but not independence.

While many observers questioned Kosovo's readiness for independence, given corruption in its civil administration and the murderous campaign of ethnic cleansing waged by Albanian nationalists against Serbs in their midst, Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence on February 17.

Although Kosovo's move arguably violated UN Security Council Resolution 1244, which recognized Serbia's ultimate sovereignty, many NATO countries including the United States sided with Kosovo.

"The Kosovars are now independent," declared President Bush.

Humiliated by NATO's military intervention in 1999, Russia now chafed at the political intervention of NATO countries in favor of Kosovo's secession, which Russian President Vladimir Putin condemned as "immoral and illegal."

Russian leaders warned that unilateral recognition of Kosovo's independence would open a "Pandora's box" by appearing to support similar claims by other separatist movements in some 200 regions of the world.

The Russian Foreign Ministry declared, "Those who are considering supporting separatism should understand what dangerous consequences their actions threaten to have for world order, international stability and the authority of the U.N. Security Council's decisions that took decades to build."

Outside of NATO, many countries sided with Russia's statement of principles.

Surprisingly, one of the most outspoken was Russia's hostile southern neighbor, Georgia. And the reason wasn't hard for experts to fathom.

As Richard Weitz at the Hudson Institute noted at the time, Russia could seize upon Kosovo as a precedent for fomenting separatist movements in the former Soviet republics, including South Ossetia's drive for independence from Georgia in the Caucasus.

Jonathan Eyal, director of international security studies at the Royal United Services Institute, warned similarly, "if the Kosovo precedent is used, the Russians can also recognise ethnic Russian enclaves in places such as Georgia or Moldova. What's good for Kosovo is good for other places as well."

Their unheeded warnings have just come to pass, at the expense of thousands of dead and wounded.

Just as NATO justified its intervention in 1999 as a humanitarian defense of Kosovo's ethnic Albanians against Serbian atrocities, so Russia said it came to the defense of South Ossetia, which suffered terrible atrocities at Georgian hands in the early 1990s, after Georgian troops shelled its capital earlier this month.

In addition to Kosovo, Russia can justify its intervention on behalf of South Ossetia by pointing to any number of other precedents set by the United States: the Bush administration's doctrine of preemption, its invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, its silence in the face of Israel's invasion of Lebanon, and many more.

What difference do all these precedents and broken principles make?

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In short, by squandering its moral authority, the United States has unilaterally disarmed itself of "soft power" that was once one of our greatest weapons. And Kosovo was one of the fields upon which the United States laid down its moral arms.

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