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The Putin Doctrine

Coming to terms with Ukraine's new geopolitical realities

Taras Kuzio Business Ukraine

This month is the fortieth anniversary of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, with Moscow's justification later defined in the West as the Brezhnev Doctrine. A new version of this imperial posturing is now beginning to gain international notoriety in the wake of the Russian invasion of Georgia. This "Putin Doctrine" consists of four inter-locking policies: provoking ethnic clashes, introducing its own troops as so-called "peacekeepers", distributing Russian passports and arming separatists. The Crimean peninsula has an ethnic Russian majority, 10,000 Russian Black Sea Fleet personnel and a regional parliament dominated by the pro-Russian Party of Regions.

Posing a threat to all post-Soviet societies

The Putin Doctrine's assertion of the right to intervene in defence of Russian minorities is a direct threat to Ukraine, Latvia and Estonia where Russian speakers (in Russian parlance "compatriots") number around a third of the population. Ukraine's Crimea or Estonia's Narva could be the next flashpoints. Russia has said that it plans to hold a referendum in Georgia's separatist enclaves, no doubt modelled on that it held in Chechnya three years ago to international disdain, that would support their independence, or annexation by Russia. This element of the Putin Doctrine could in turn be applied to other frozen conflicts in the former Soviet Union or to the Crimea. As a result, the Georgian-Russian crisis has important strategic ramifications for Ukraine. Although Ukraine and Georgia are separated by geography both leaders, Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili and Ukraine's Viktor Yushchenko, came to power within the space of one year in near-identical popular uprisings against electoral fraud that came to be known as the Rose and Orange revolutions. Many Russians, exposed to state-controlled television, believed the neo-Soviet line that these revolutions were part of a US-conspiracy to surround Russia and move into its 'rightful' sphere of influence. NATO enlargement was in Russia's eyes the

second stage in this US-backed conspiracy to undermine Russia.

A colour revolution double act

Mr. Saakashvili and Mr. Yushchenko are also close personal friends and allies who have given each other sustenance and moral support in the face of Russian antagonism and adversity. Mr. Saakashvili stood on the Maidan during the Orange Revolution and spoke to the protestors in Ukrainian. Earlier that year during Ukraine's most violent electoral campaign to date, Mr. Yushchenko and Mrs. Tymoshenko visited Mr. Saakashvili in Georgia.

With Russian tanks poised perilously close to the Georgian capital Tbilisi, Mr. Yushchenko, together with the leaders of Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia, told a mass rally of Georgians that they stood united in the face of Russia's new imperialism. All six countries had their own individual centuries of despotic rule by Tsars and Commissars. Mr. Yushchenko was the most courageous of the five: after all, the other four countries were members of NATO and could, if Russia attacked their countries, count on NATO's article five to defend them.

Ukraine and Georgia: A post-Soviet partnership

If Georgia is forced into losing sovereignty over South Ossetia, the Saakashvili regime could be overthrown and replaced by a regime more pliant to Moscow. Pro-Russian Georgian leaders (implicated in assassination attempts on former President Eduard Shevardnadze) are waiting in Moscow for such an opportunity to return. The removal of Mr. Saakashvili would be a personal blow to President Yushchenko. However, it is important to remember that Ukraine and Georgia's close relationship predates the rise of Saakashvili and Yushchenko, who are portrayed by Russia's leaders and state-controlled media as mere American stooges. Their predecessors, Eduard Shevardnadze and Leonid Kuchma, may have sought to be more accommodating to Russia but nevertheless relations between the Tbilisi-Kyiv axis

and Moscow remained continually strained.

Russia's accusations that Ukraine had armed Georgian forces attempts to pin the blame on Saakashvili-Yushchenko but ignores the fact that military cooperation between both countries has existed for over a decade. Communist Party leader Piotr Symonenko said during the height of the Georgian-Russian conflict that he thought there was a need to institute criminal charges over the illegal transfer of weapons to Georgia. What these accusations ignore is that, "military-technical cooperation between Ukraine and Georgia, which has taken place over the last 15 years, took place within the parameters of international law." (Zerkalo Nedeli, August 9).

Arms supplies to Georgia began under President Leonid Kuchma and President Shevardnadze and over a decade before Mr. Yushchenko and Mikheil Saakashvili came to power. Ukraine trained Georgian officers including officers trained to use anti-aircraft systems. Cooperation increased during the Anatoliy Kinakh and Viktor Yanukovich governments of 2001-2004. Both of them were in power when Ukraine exported anti-aircraft defense systems to Georgia in 2002. Georgia allocated USD 12 million for their purchase from Ukraine and they were stationed on the Georgian-Russian border. Mr. Kinakh publicly admitted to the existence of the arms deal with Georgia.

The Kremlin and GUAM: Fear and loathing

The GUAM grouping (named after its members Georgia, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Moldova) regional alliance that so infuriated Russia was set up by Mr. Shevardnadze and Mr. Kuchma and inaugurated with great fanfare at NATO's fiftieth anniversary summit in Washington DC. GUAM received strong encouragement from the US. High levels of US military cooperation with Georgia and Ukraine long predate the two countries' colour revolutions.

During the recent conflict Ukraine was the only CIS country to openly come out in support of embattled Georgia. This is not

FRIENDS IN ADVERSITY: PRESIDENTS YUSHCHENKO AND SAKASHVILI ARE PERSONALLY CLOSE AND THEIR POLITICAL ALLIANCE HAS BEEN STRENGTHENED BY HOSTILITY FROM THE KREMLIN. MR. YUSHCHENKO WAS QUICK TO DEMONSTRATE HIS SUPPORT FOR GEORGIA DURING THE RECENT RUSSIAN INVASION, VISITING THE GEORGIAN CAPITAL IN A PUBLIC SHOW OF SOLIDARITY



IMAGE: UNIAN

surprising for common wisdom in Kyiv is that Ukraine could be the next target for the Putin Doctrine. One of the strategic imperatives behind the creation of GUAM was the presence of frozen conflicts in three of its members, Georgia, Azerbaijan and Moldova, and Russian territorial claims against Ukraine's Crimea and Sevastopol. If South Ossetia and Abkhazia are to be recognised as independent by Russia, as seems likely, then what of the Trans-Dniestr and Crimea?

The fall, or severe weakening of the Saakashvili regime through a post-conflict economic crisis, would destroy the already fragile GUAM regional group. Uzbekistan left it in 2005 and Moldova, led by a Communist president willing to negotiate deals with Russia over its separatist Trans-Dniestr enclave, has become a neutral and passive member of GUAM. A pro-Russian Georgian regime would not remain in GUAM and the organisation would therefore collapse, demolishing

plans unveiled at a June Kyiv summit for an energy corridor from Azerbaijan to Ukraine and central Europe.

An end to alternative energy options?

The Georgian-Ukrainian alliance has focused on alternative sources of energy to reduce dependency on Russian oil and gas. A GUAM summit in Kyiv two months ago produced detailed plans to make operational the Odesa to Brody pipeline with Azeri oil supplied through Georgia to Ukraine and Poland. Russia's illegal occupation of Georgia close to the pipeline threatens the energy independence of these countries and indirectly, therefore, energy security for Europe.

The Putin Doctrine's next target could be the Crimea. The State Duma made territorial claims against Sevastopol as recently as two months ago. During NATO's Bucharest summit then-President

Vladimir Putin warned that Ukraine's alleged "fragility" would lead it to disintegrate if it joined NATO, implying that Russia would use the Crimean card to try and halt Ukraine's NATO membership.

Communists raise the spectre of separatism

Crimean KPU leader Leonid Grach has threatened to support the peninsula's secession from Ukraine if it joined NATO. This view was criticised by the head of parliament's committee on European Integration and deputy leader of the Our Ukraine faction Borys Tarasiuk. Crimea's Communists, which are a regional branch of the KPU, played a positive role in the 1990s in supporting Ukraine's territorial integrity and adopting the 1998 pro-autonomy constitution.

The Simferopol city council voted on July 24 to declare itself a 'territory free from NATO'. The vote was supported by the 'For Yanukovich' faction and national Bolshevik-oriented Natalia Vitrenko bloc. The Party of Regions has to tread carefully in playing with Ukraine's territorial integrity for it would lose votes in eastern Ukraine if it began to play, like the KPU and Vitrenko bloc, with separatism.

Russian Communist leader Gennadiy Zyuganov arrived in the Crimea during the Ossetian crisis to hold negotiations with Crimean Communists on a "joint anti-NATO struggle." Mr. Zyuganov said the Saakashvili regime is undertaking "state terrorism" with the support of the US and NATO. Mr. Zyuganov supported the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as long-standing support for Sevastopol's transfer to Russia.

Sevastopol and the Black Sea Fleet

Black Sea Fleet vessels were involved in naval action in the Georgian crisis, including landing troops in Georgian territory outside the separatist enclaves in Poti where they sank Georgian naval vessels. President George Bush said that, "We're concerned about reports that Russian forces have entered and taken positions in the port city of Poti, that Russian armoured vehicles are blocking access to that port, and that Russia is blowing up Georgian vessels."

Black Sea Fleet personnel have illegally taken part in anti-NATO and anti-American rallies in the Crimea. Two years ago these violent rallies forced the cancellation of

annual US-Ukrainian military exercises which was humiliating for Ukraine and damaged its chances of entering NATO. US-Ukraine military exercises held under In the Spirit of Partnership for Peace and NATO Partnership for Peace (PfP) exercises had been held annually since the mid 1990s. Ukraine was the first CIS country to join NATO's newly launched PfP in January 1994. Without doubt it is Georgia and Ukraine's long-standing support for NATO membership that has most infuriated Russia. Following their democratic revolutions, both countries speedily entered NATO's Intensified Dialogue on Membership Issues and sought to enter Membership Action Plans (MAP) first at the 2006 Riga summit and, failing that, at this year's Bucharest NATO summit.

NATO doubters may find their hand forced

Bitterly divided in Bucharest, NATO opted to compromise by not extending invitations while stating, "NATO Allies welcomed Ukraine's and Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations for membership and agreed that these countries will become members of NATO." NATO's unwillingness to offer Georgia and Ukraine MAPs may have sent the wrong signal to Moscow that the organisation was divided over extending its security umbrella into what Berlin and Paris still seem to recognise as Russia's sphere of influence.

Russia's provocation of Georgia into a conflict through its illegally armed South Ossetian proxies, coupled with Moscow's blatant disregard for Georgian sovereignty, has probably swung the balance in favour of those NATO members who support extending MAPs to Georgia and Ukraine. Russia's refusal to withdraw completely to pre-conflict lines, its demands for a security zone inside Georgia proper while permitting ethnic cleansing and war crimes by Ossetian paramilitaries has turned many Russophile and fence sitting NATO members towards the pro-NATO membership camp.

Kremlin in danger of over-extending its reach

In other words, the Putin Doctrine, like its Brezhnev predecessor, may have over-extended itself. Russia's brazen imperialism in Georgia may have changed the minds of enough NATO fence sitters in support of the US and the eastern Europeans who support NATO membership for Georgia and Ukraine. British Conservative Party and opposition

leader David Cameron, who is riding high in the polls and set to head Britain's next government, wrote in The Daily Telegraph, "we should accelerate the path to NATO membership for countries like Georgia, and other democracies like Ukraine, if that is what they wish. The lack of clarity about Georgia's prospects of joining NATO contributed to the present crisis. It encouraged Russia to believe it could intimidate and bully because the West was divided and uncertain."

Ukraine's elites also have to adjust to the reality of the Putin Doctrine. While Mr. Yushchenko's actions in the crisis have proven to be patriotic and statesmanlike, his secretariat have continued to act in a manner inconsistent with Ukraine's national interests. The secretariat accused Prime Minister Tymoshenko of treason for allegedly negotiating secretly with Russia, a ridiculous and unsubstantiated charge reminiscent of the worst of Soviet propaganda. Ukraine has no right to demand that NATO support MAP's for itself and Georgia in December if the presidential secretariat, at the same time, continues to fan the flames of political instability.

Will the West opt for a bold response?

In four months NATO has the opportunity to rectify its mistake in Bucharest by supporting two young democracies and inviting Georgia and Ukraine into MAPs. By inviting Georgia and Ukraine into NATO the organisation accomplishes two important steps. It would ensure that their democracies can continue to flourish in a secure environment. It would also avert a more serious threat to international order and European security if the Putin Doctrine were applied to Ukraine. In December, in addition to the NATO meeting, the 1997 Russian-Ukrainian treaty comes up for renewal and many Russian leaders are arguing against renewing it. Russia's failure to renew the treaty would constitute a re-opening of its territorial claims against Ukraine. This would be a serious violation of Russia's signature to the 1994 agreement providing security assurances to Ukraine in exchange for its nuclear disarmament. ●

Taras Kuzio is editor of Ukraine Analyst and adjunct professor in the Institute of European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, Carleton University, Ottawa, where he teaches on Post-Communist Transitions and Democratic Revolution