

**Strategic Interests: NATO and The Russo-Georgian War of 2008**

**By**

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**Abstract**

The Russo-Georgian War of 2008 was a multifaceted international conflict that was indicative of tension between dominant global powers in a post-Soviet Europe. Although Georgia entered the American consciousness around 2008, the United States was no stranger to Georgian politicians nor ignorant to the strategic power and financial interests that lay in Georgia. Following the outbreak of war between Georgia and Russia in 2008, George W. Bush made several speeches regarding his support for Georgia and his disdain for “unprovoked Russian violence.” This paper aims to provide a contrary depiction of the war and the United States’ intentions in Georgia through research that explores Georgia’s political past, the tumultuous relationship between Russia and the United States, NATO encirclement, and the strong case for Georgian aggression in 2008. Although the conflict has been painted in a myriad of ways that point the blame in varying directions, the movements, behaviors, and flaunting of American politicians, businessmen, and foreign interest groups can hardly be ignored in relation to this conflict. This paper intends to analyze the potential motives of major players like the United States that were involved in the Russo-Georgian War in an attempt to further their own strategic interests.

## US – Russia Relations and NATO Encirclement

Under the administration of George Herbert Walker Bush in 1990, the conversation regarding NATO and its place in global geopolitics was fraught with tension. In Europe, Germany was undergoing a period of unification after the fall of the Berlin Wall, which prompted several summits between the leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union, among other reasons. The unification of Soviet occupied East Germany and NATO-organized West Germany represented the de-escalation of Cold War hostility that had been so recently characterized United States foreign policy. The democratization that Gorbachev implemented in the Soviet political system and his efforts to de-escalate foreign tensions largely contributed to this, as well.<sup>1</sup> Among these conversations about the future of a unified Germany, U.S. officials met with Soviet leaders to discuss the possibility of Germany joining NATO and the Soviet's concerns regarding future NATO expansion.

The Soviets understood that NATO had been more than a simple Western security alliance since its creation, which was rooted in opposition to the Soviet threat and the threat of communism in Europe. The organization's integrated military structure helped counter the Warsaw Pact and to intimidate the Soviet Union as an arm of the United States during the Cold War. The repeated use of the term 'aggression' ad nauseam in Harry S. Truman's 1949 speech at the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty could be considered the first use of this general motif that the United States would use for more than 50 years to describe Soviet/Russian behavior.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Department of State, "Gorbachev and New Thinking in Soviet Foreign Policy, 1987-88."

<sup>2</sup> Truman, Harry S., "Address given by Harry S. Truman on the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization."

The rhetorical device of “aggression” is often used to strategically frame and justify the interests of the United States while simultaneously creating an enemy in the Soviet Union.

The Soviets were afraid that Germany joining NATO would impose another nearby military presence upon the Soviet Union and needed the West to agree that Germany would not become another military arm of the organization created to oppose it.<sup>3</sup> This agreement and even further assurances were given to the Soviet Union in 1990 by various U.S. officials. On February 9<sup>th</sup>, 1990, Robert Gates, CIA analyst soon to become CIA director the following year, met with Vladimir Kryuchkov, head of the KGB, and assured him that Germany’s joining NATO would be the best decision for the future of Germany without threatening the USSR in any way. Gates stated that the best approach would be to follow the ideas of Helmut Kohl, the West German Chancellor, and Hans-Dietrich Genscher, the West German Foreign Minister. They had proposed that Germany could remain a NATO member without NATO troops moving further east, thereby not posing a threat to the USSR. About this agreement Robert Gates said, “It seems to us to be a sound proposal.”<sup>4</sup> If any doubt remained about the United States’ agreements with the Soviet Union regarding NATO expansion, the sitting Secretary of State James Baker met with Mikhail Gorbachev in February 1990 to make the same claims. James Baker guaranteed that “not an inch of NATO’s present military jurisdiction will spread in an Eastern direction.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Defense Planning Guidance and NATO Transformation**

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Dept of State, “Strategy for NATO’s Expansion and Transformation,” 1993.

<sup>4</sup> National Security Archive, “Memorandum of conversation between Robert Gates and Vladimir Kryuchkov in Moscow,” Feb 9, 1993.

<sup>5</sup> National Security Archive, “Memorandum of conversation between Mikheil Gorbachev and James Baker in Moscow,” Feb 9, 1993.

With these guarantees in mind, the Soviet Union allowed Germany to be absorbed into the NATO alliance, but the U.S.'s promise of not expanding NATO eastward would be broken in the years to come. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, many territories that were previously Soviet-occupied, or aligned with the USSR during the Cold War, were now sovereign and provided the United States an opportunity to capitalize on the downfall of the Soviet Union. A document created in 1992 by the National Security Council, titled "Defense Planning Guidance", outlines the geopolitical interests of the United States at the time.

Supervised by Paul Wolfowitz, the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, the document again uses the key device of "aggression" to describe what the United States intends to defend against with increased military funding for a "future that is particularly uncertain."<sup>6</sup> The contradictions in the guidance plan are glaring as it walks a thin line between building more lasting connections with Russia while stating that increased military preparation measures are an absolute necessity. The plan even paints Russia as the "only power in the world with the capability of destroying the United States." As the document lays out a map for lasting U.S. global presence and influence with operational bases overseas for rapid deployment, it also discusses, in the face of the agreement made a couple of years prior, the expansion of NATO into Eastern and Central Europe. The reason provided for these measures was the seemingly eternal persistence of the "Soviet threat" to the security of Europe. Even while Russia was in the process of withdrawing from Germany, Poland, Southeast Asia, and its previous overseas territories, the DPG is adamant about the threat of "Russian aggression". From the perspective of the former Soviet Union, it seemed apparent that not only was the United States not going to honor its agreement during the unification of Germany, but they were actively planning to encircle Russia

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<sup>6</sup> National Security Council, "Defense Planning Guidance," 1992.

with NATO allies. Even though the Soviet Union had fallen, and the Cold War had ended, the United States continued at this wartime pace by leveraging their strategic foothold in Europe.

In a 1993 document authored by the United States Department of Defense titled “Strategy for NATO’s Expansion and Transformation”, we see a plan for the inclusion of future countries in the NATO alliance. Listed in phase four of this plan, which would have taken place by 2005, is the membership of Russia in NATO along with Ukraine and Belarus. At first glance this document seems to illustrate the improvements in foreign affairs between Russia and the United States. Yeltsin is highlighted for his agreeable nature and his understanding of Poland wanting to be admitted into NATO, but the catch, as usual, is American suspicion about Russia’s inherent aggression. In one of the memo’s final paragraphs, it is stated that if Russia should “return to totalitarianism” or become “a threat to other nations in the region”, they shall not be phased in to NATO, even stating “this need not be seen as a threat to Moscow”.<sup>7</sup>

In the context of the humiliation from the broken promises made during the unification of Germany, of which Yeltsin was aware and mentioned in letters to Bill Clinton, the document’s caveat regarding Russia’s aggression raises suspicion.<sup>8</sup> To the American public, possibly even the American government, the threat of Russian aggression has been so commonly referred to that it would not seem inappropriate to assume it may reappear. From the perspective of the Russians, understanding that the United States plays fast and loose with the term “aggression” and that it is, at least, capable of deception to further their geopolitical interests, it is not illogical to assume that the United States never truly intended to incorporate Russia into the NATO alliance. Whether Yeltsin understood this in 1993 is doubtful; however, he was cordial with the Clinton

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<sup>7</sup> U.S. Dept of State, “Strategy for NATO’s Expansion and Transformation,” 1993.

<sup>8</sup> National Security Archive, “Retranslation of Yeltsin Letter on NATO Expansion,” Oct 9, 1993.

administration and seemed accepting of Poland's interest in NATO. But other Russian officials, particularly in Parliament, and many in the Russian population did indeed fear NATO expansion due to the risk of, "...end[ing] up on the wrong side of a new division of Europe."<sup>9</sup> It is no secret that many in Russia took an alternative stance than Yeltsin about Western values, institutions, and the intentions of NATO expansion. A newly elected chairman on the St. Petersburg City Council's International Relation Committee in 1993, named Vladimir Putin, would become one of these people.

The "Defense Planning Guidance" and the "Strategy for NATO's Expansion and Transformation" represent the puppeteering of a new order through the political-military alliance of NATO and the demonization of the Russian/Soviet Federation. What is revealed in these documents is the United States' geopolitical intention to become the dominant global superpower and cripple the strength of Russia or any adversary that amasses enough power to contend with it. Russia, being the main antagonist to these plans, therefore must be encircled by NATO allies and U.S. weapons to ensure that it is not a threat to U.S. dominance. One segment in the Strategy for NATO's Expansion memo reads, "The challenge for NATO over the next generation – containing and co-opting Russian power – is similar to one of NATO's core purposes in the last generation."<sup>10</sup> Statements such as these resemble antiquated foreign policy elements and the dire tone of George Kennan's 1946 "Long Telegram" or Cold War containment theory.<sup>11</sup>

The United States has often accused Russia, in modern memory as well, of acting in a hostile manner that is not characteristic of this modern half-century. "Such an action is unacceptable in

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<sup>9</sup> National Security Archive, "Cable from American Embassy Moscow to Secretary of State," Oct 20, 1993.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. Dept of State, "Strategy for NATO's Expansion and Transformation," 1993.

<sup>11</sup> George Kennan, "The Long Telegram, from George Kennan in Moscow to the Secretary of State," Feb 22, 1946.

the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” George W. Bush declared regarding the Russia’s militaristic response during the 2008 Georgian War. All the while, the United States deployed 33,000 additional troops to Afghanistan that next year and found that, “...overall violence and instability in Afghanistan intensified.”<sup>12 13</sup> The list of hypocritical judgements laid upon Russia by the United States is numerous, and especially considering their continued affinity for Cold War schools of thought about relations with Russia.

It is not unusual for documents of this nature to use contradictions when discussing the future of Russian and American diplomacy. The need for any enemy, or a future enemy, at this time was crucial to American strategic affairs and the duality found in these documents likely sheds light on the contrast between the cooperative nature of Moscow and America’s intentions of portraying Russia as perpetually poised to strike. The documents sometimes appear optimistic about the future of Russian and American diplomacy, especially during Yeltsin’s failing regime, but often contain small segments that express concerns and apprehensions about Russia due to its aggressive nature. What leads to the conclusion that these concerns about aggression are not based in reality is the recurring use of the motif throughout the long relationship between these two states. Russian aggression has been used as a loophole for the United States to seize a strategic opportunity at the expense of Russia appearing as the aggressor.

The Vietnam War was framed in this way: that the spread of communism, by way of the domino effect, would eventually lead to a communist Southeast Asia and thereby increase the Soviet Union’s communist empire.<sup>14</sup> The Russo-Georgian War of 2008 was portrayed by the

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<sup>12</sup> National Archives and Records, “President Bush Discusses Situation in Georgia,” Aug 11, 2008.

<sup>13</sup> National Security Archives, “U.S. Embassy (Kabul) Cable 3594, ‘Subject: Looking Beyond Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan,’” Nov 9, 2009.

<sup>14</sup> Luxembourg Centre for Contemporary and Digital History, “The Vietnam War.”

United States as yet another instance of unprovoked Russian aggression. “Russian aggression” was even cited verbatim by Joe Biden in 2024 as what incited the Ukraine War.<sup>15</sup> The various instances of the United States using this trope do not imply that Russian aggression is unreal but instead begs the question of how Russian aggression could be used to spin the truth in a way that benefits the foreign interests of the United States. If Russia is perpetually framed as the enemy during foreign conflict, there is reason to believe that the American public would be increasingly inclined to support the ongoing battle against the “evil empire” America has been fighting since the end of World War II.

In 1999, at the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the signing of the North Atlantic Treaty, Bill Clinton gave a speech, saying, “Today, we are joined by the leaders of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic whose descent into darkness helped to spark NATO's creation. Today, they are a part of NATO, pledged to defend what was too long denied to them... welcome to NATO, welcome home to the community of freedom.”<sup>16</sup> This expansion of NATO officially marked the first time the U.S. broke its promise not to expand eastward.

In the steps of his predecessor, the newly sitting President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin remarked, “We believe we can talk about more profound integration with NATO but only if Russia is regarded an equal partner. You are aware we have been constantly voicing our opposition to NATO's eastward expansion.” In this BBC interview the following year, after NATO accepted the three new members, Putin even stated that he would not like to view NATO as the enemy and could see an equal partnership as a compromise if Russia joined NATO.<sup>17</sup> The

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<sup>15</sup> U.S. Embassy and Consulates in Russia, “Statement from President Joe Biden on Russia’s Attack on Georgia,” Nov 29, 2024.

<sup>16</sup> NATO, “Speech by William J. Clinton, President of the United States, at the Commemorative Ceremony of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of NATO,” Apr 23, 1999.

<sup>17</sup> BBC News, “BBC Breakfast with Frost Interview: Vladimir Putin,” Mar 5, 2000.

very next day, the NATO Secretary General, Lord Robertson, shut down any idea of Russia joining NATO in the future by releasing a statement directly referencing the BBC interview, saying, “At present Russian membership of NATO is not on the agenda.”<sup>18</sup> As much as NATO and the United States have discussed improving relations between Russia and themselves, they seem reluctant to make any decisions that mirror this sentiment. Putin’s admittance of his desire to be a part of NATO and NATO’s prompt response assisted in stoking the flame between NATO and Russia.

It seems clear from speeches given by Putin that his mind had changed about NATO’s intentions since he began to mention that NATO often ignores the opinions of the international community.<sup>19</sup> George Kennan, in 1997, after evolving political opinions since his position as Deputy Chief of Mission at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow in 1946, now an observational voice on foreign policy, stated, “...expanding NATO would be the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era... to restore the atmosphere of the Cold War to East-West relations, and to impel Russian foreign policy in directions decidedly not to our liking.”<sup>20</sup> Given Kennan’s career during the inception of the Cold War and his dominant influence on the creation of containment theory in 1946, his warning about NATO expansion had impending undertones. Thomas L. Friedman, a New York Times columnist and advocate for Kennan’s perspective on NATO expansion, mentioned sarcastically in a column that if NATO truly cared about spreading

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<sup>18</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Statement by Lord Robertson, NATO Secretary General, on Acting President Putin’s Interview with the BBC,” Mar 6, 2000.

<sup>19</sup> President of Russia, “Annual Address to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation,” *the Kremlin*, April 3, 2001.

<sup>20</sup> Georgia Kennan, “A Fateful Error,” *New York Times*, Feb 5, 1997.

democracy, they would focus on Russia, as it could be considered one of the most important democracies in the modern world since the fall of the USSR.<sup>21</sup>

In 2008, months before fighting would erupt in South Ossetia and across the Georgian border, Vladimir Putin, at the Russia-NATO council, made disgruntled comments about NATO expansion in light of the Bucharest Declaration, which discussed the admittance of Georgia and Ukraine into NATO.<sup>22</sup> Using words like “provocation” and noting that Russia will respond by protecting its security, he stated that tensions would only increase until NATO decides to work together with Russia.<sup>23</sup> With the future conflict in Georgia occurring only months after Putin’s speech it becomes difficult not to remember the warning made by 92-year-old George Kennan 11 years prior: “Such a decision [NATO expansion] may be expected to inflame the nationalistic, anti-Western, and militaristic tendencies in Russian opinion.”<sup>24</sup>

### **The Rose Revolution and Leading Up to War**

By 2008, the deepening relationship between Georgia and the West was causing friction with its larger northern neighbor, Russia. After the Bucharest Declaration, which confirmed that the West had its eyes on Georgia and Ukraine for NATO membership, Russia felt that these two countries, given their history as former Soviet republics, were too important to be allowed membership in the NATO alliance. These two nations appeared to be significantly more important in the eyes of Russia, as seen in the stark difference in both Russian response and leadership approach following the admission of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic into

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<sup>21</sup> Thomas L. Friedman, “Ohio State II,” *New York Times*, Mar 3, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Bucharest Summit Declaration,” Apr 3, 2008.

<sup>23</sup> President of Russia, “President Vladimir Putin Addressed a Meeting of the Russia-NATO Council,” Apr 4, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> Georgia Kennan, “A Fateful Error,” *New York Times*, Feb 5, 1997.

NATO. The possibility of NATO influence at Russia's border made this situation fundamentally different, and it was clear that the casual consideration of the two previous Soviet Republics into NATO at the Bucharest Summit had crossed a line that the Soviet's had long warned about.

The second president of Georgia following the collapse of the Soviet Union was Eduard Shevardnadze, who served as the Soviet Union's Foreign Minister until 1990. Shevardnadze worked under the Gorbachev administration and had already begun building relationships with U.S. officials before he served as Georgian president. He largely contributed to the improvement in relations between the Soviet Union and the United States at the end of the Cold War and subscribed to Gorbachev's westernized political reformation in the Soviet Union.<sup>25</sup> His discussions with U.S. leaders like James Baker and George Shultz are marked by mutual respect and optimism.<sup>26</sup> It is no surprise, then, that his tenure as Georgian president was Western-leaning and characterized by close ties to the United States, until the West ultimately backed his opposition during the Rose Revolution. His relationship with Russian officials during his presidency was tense, given his role during the collapse of the Soviet Union.<sup>27</sup>

Before the Rose Revolution, the United States was already involved in Georgia on many fronts. Georgia's strategic position for oil in the Caspian Sea had piqued the interest of Washington and, under the Clinton administration, began the construction of an oil pipeline that would stretch from the oil fields in Baku, Azerbaijan, to the Turkish port in Ceyhan, and from there to Western markets. State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary of State, Matthew Bryza, explained the importance of Georgia to the United States in a hearing before the Commission on

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<sup>25</sup> National Security Archive, "The Shevardnadze File: Late Soviet Foreign Minister Helped End the Cold War," July 24, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> National Security Archive, "Memorandum of Conversation," July 31, 1985.

<sup>27</sup> Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, "Georgia's Rose Revolution," 2004.

Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Georgia matters to us. It mattered to us in the beginning of the last decade, in the ’90s, initially in a strategic way because of oil and gas pipelines. That’s how many people in Washington first drew their attention to Georgia.”<sup>28</sup> In a United Nations press conference about the pipeline in 2006, it was estimated the project could deliver more than a million barrels of oil to energy-consuming markets, and be considered one of the significant energy sources of the future world market.<sup>29</sup> For this pipeline to exist, it would need to run through Georgia, specifically through the capital in Tbilisi, meaning a cooperative leader in Georgia would certainly align with U.S. interests.

Not that Shevardnadze was uncooperative with the United States; he was willing to comply with the CIA’s Extraordinary Rendition program along with around fifty other countries. During the years of 2002 and 2003, the Georgian government, and in some cases the Georgian mafia, detained and sold individuals of interest to the CIA. These individuals were then shipped to black sites or secret CIA detention centers and subjected to enhanced interrogation techniques that often included extended periods of torture.<sup>30</sup> While this does not demonstrate motive for U.S. intervention during the Russo-Georgian conflict, it does express the lengths of influence the United States had in Georgia only a few years prior to the war. The extraordinary rendition program is also indicative of what Georgian leaders were willing to do to be in Washington’s good favor.

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<sup>28</sup> Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Russia, Georgia, and the Return of Power Politics,” Sep 10, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> United Nations Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, “Press Conference on the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Oil Pipeline,” July 13, 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Amrit Singh, *Globalizing Torture: CIA Detention and Extraordinary Rendition* (New York: Open Society Foundation, 2013), 36, 43, 48.

The United States was also invested in Georgia for the war against terrorism following the 9/11 attacks in 2001. Shevardnadze condemned the terrorist attacks against the U.S. and offered “airspace and territory” to U.S. troops in Afghanistan, along with sending Georgian troops to Afghanistan in 2003 and 2009.<sup>31</sup> Russia and Putin also voiced their support for the United States after the 2001 terrorist attacks and allowed the United States to use their overseas bases for counterterrorism operations. The two states also participated in sharing intelligence against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda at this time and although Russia extended the olive branch as global tensions about NATO increased, it did not convince the United States that Russia was a trustworthy ally. This sentiment was reiterated in 2009, after the conflict and blame was placed on Russia for the 2008 war, Russia allowed U.S. troops and weapons to be moved through their territory for the ongoing Afghanistan War.<sup>32</sup>

Regardless of Shevardnadze’s clout in Washington, the domestic issues in Georgia reached a boiling point in 2003 during the Rose Revolution. The conditions in Georgia for much of Shevardnadze’s presidency could be described as dismal. The lack of law enforcement in the country was highlighted by the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe with emphasis on increased mob violence and violence towards minorities.<sup>33</sup> The government eventually became unable to provide its people with heat or electricity during the long and severe winters in Georgia.<sup>34</sup> The population was also aware of the widespread corruption within the government and started to accuse Shevardnadze of participating in corruption personally.<sup>35</sup> One of his outstanding proteges and political figures who worked to combat the corruption in Georgia

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<sup>31</sup> Congressional Research Service, “Georgia: Recent Developments and U.S. Interests,” June 21, 2013.

<sup>32</sup> John J. Kruzel, “Russia Allows Transit for Afghanistan-Bound U.S. Troops,” *U.S. Army*, July 7, 2009.

<sup>33</sup> Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Shevardnadze Urged to Act on Violence Against Congregations,” Oct 18, 2002.

<sup>34</sup> Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Georgia’s ‘Rose Revolution’,” July 1, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Georgia’s Rose Revolution,” 2004.

was Mikheil Saakashvili. The heir apparent to the Georgian presidency and graduate of George Washington University and Columbia Law School, Saakashvili fronted an opposition movement against his ex-mentor along with Zurab Zhvania and Nino Burjanadze. Some students that were fed up with Shevardnadze's administration started a group called "Kmara" or "Enough" that was closely tied to an American NGO called the Liberty Institute. Funded by George Soros, American investor and billionaire, through his Open Society Institute and the United States Agency for International Development's Eurasia Foundation, the Liberty Institute instructed these students on how to topple a government.<sup>36</sup>

The students began by meeting at the Liberty Institute to discuss ideas about democracy and justice, but shortly after Levan Samishvili, director of the Liberty Institute, visited Serbia to study revolutionary tactics, the group's goals shifted. Samishvili decided that by studying the Serbian tactics of peaceful revolution, they had found a set of skills they needed to develop and train youth activists in different Georgian provinces.<sup>37</sup> This extra support from students provided further assistance to Saakashvili during the coup and demonstrates the West's interest in his uprising. Along with the Liberty Institute, the U.S. government-funded non-profit organization the National Endowment for Democracy was noted for encouraging Saakashvili with the same methods the Liberty Institute was currently employing to topple a regime. Additionally, the U.S. Ambassador in Tbilisi, Richard Miles, was also accused of supporting the opposition to Shevardnadze.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Hugh Pope, "Pro-West Leaders in Georgia Push Shevardnadze Out," *The Wall Street Journal*, Nov 24, 2003.

<sup>37</sup> Olena Niklayenko, *Youth Movements and Elections in Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 125-54.

<sup>38</sup> George Melloan, "Putin is Not Amused by the Coup in Georgia," *The Wall Street Journal*, Dec 2, 2003.

As the votes for the November 2003 Georgia election were being counted, a prominent news channel in Georgia called Rustavi-2 began covering news of protests concerning election fraud and even proved it on a large scale during the coverage of the election. This media outlet was given grants by the United States Agency for International Development's Eurasia Foundation and covered the election with a strong bias against Shevardnadze.<sup>39</sup> With the popular media behind the cause, the revolution peacefully swept the Shevardnadze regime out of government and soon elected his protégé and leading member of the opposition, Mikheil Saakashvili, into power.

Leading up to the war, the United States took advantage of the fact that the new Georgian leader was more pro-West than the last and began training, funding, and improving the military of the Georgian state. The Georgia Train and Equip Program (GTEP) deployed U.S. Marines to Georgia for periods longer than a year with the intention of teaching western military standards to Georgian troops in order to assist with "counterterrorism."<sup>40 41</sup> Georgia's overall defense budget changed radically from 1.4% of the country's GDP in 2004 to 9.2% in 2007.<sup>42</sup> What raises suspicion is that this is significantly higher than the 2% defense investment guideline that NATO had declared an unofficial rule for NATO allies in 2006.<sup>43</sup> Why was the United States breaking its own rules to establish a larger military presence in the previous Soviet Republic a few years before the conflict in 2008? And why was the U.S. amassing a larger military presence on the Russian border in the face of direct Russian opposition to this? Regardless, the pro-

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<sup>39</sup> David Anable, *The Role of Georgia's Media- and Western Aid- in the Rose Revolution* (Harvard College: Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics, 2006), 9.

<sup>40</sup> Phil Mehringer, "GTEP, A Unique Mission for the Corps," *Marine Corps Forces Europe and Africa*, Jan 22, 2003.

<sup>41</sup> *Civil Georgia*, "U.S. Boosts Successful Military Cooperation with Georgia," Aug 5, 2004.

<sup>42</sup> World Bank Group, "Military Expenditure (% of GDP) – Georgia."

<sup>43</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "Defense Expenditures and NATO's 2% Guideline," Apr 3, 2025.

Western sentiment in the previous Soviet Republic further inflamed Putin and there are reasons to believe that Russia expected Georgia to attack South Ossetia and planned accordingly.<sup>44</sup> This separatist region of Georgia had been under Russian support and organization since the 90's, along with the other separatist region of Abkhazia, since it declared its independence from Georgia. South Ossetia has a history of conflict with Georgia, but the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 distinguished itself as one of the most controversial and significant instances of geopolitical confrontation since the Cold War.<sup>45</sup>

### **Russo – Georgian War of 2008**

While tensely disputed, in accordance with the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, U.S.-trained Georgian forces attacked the secessionist region of South Ossetia on August 7, 2008. For a time, and still in some historical documents about this conflict, there was much discussion surrounding which state invaded first, but the consensus seems to conclude that Georgia invaded the capital of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, before Russia invaded Georgia.<sup>46</sup> While many documents corroborate the initial invasion by Georgia, the reasons why Georgia decided to invade South Ossetia are debatable. Before the Georgian invasion, earlier on August 7, South Ossetia reported a massive artillery attack upon their capital by Georgian forces, who responded by saying South Ossetia had also launched attacks at several Georgian villages. The official statement by Saakashvili at the time was that the continued unprovoked shelling of Georgian villages by the South Ossetian military “forced” the Georgian invasion of South

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<sup>44</sup> Gleb Bryanski, “Russian Generals Attack Medvedev over Georgia War,” *Reuters*, Aug 8, 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Chris Baldwin and David Cutler, “Chronology: Conflict Between Georgia and South Ossetia,” *Reuters*, Aug 8, 2008.

<sup>46</sup> C.J. Chivers and Barry Ellen, “Georgia’s Claims on War with Russia Questioned,” *New York Times*, Nov 7, 2008.

Ossetia.<sup>47</sup> But certain stories from different perspectives on the first night of the war raise other questions.

Commander of the Georgian Peacekeeping Forces, Brigadier General Mamuka Kurashvili, for example, justified the first Georgian artillery attack by stating the intentions were to restore constitutional order in South Ossetia, although the Georgian government promptly described this statement as unauthorized.<sup>48</sup> Ex-British Army officer and senior OSCE representative in Georgia, Ryan Grist, spoke about the Georgian attack saying, “It was clear to me that the attack was completely indiscriminate and disproportionate to any, if indeed there had been any, provocation. The attack was clearly, in my mind, an indiscriminate attack on the town, as a town.” The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) has 56 member countries and functions to prevent any outbreaks of war in Europe’s conflict zones. It was reported that Ryan Grist resigned “under unclear circumstances” as senior OSCE representative soon after giving these controversial statements about the war.<sup>49</sup> These statements were also corroborated by other OSCE monitors stationed near the areas that Georgia accused South Ossetia of bombing, saying that no bombing was heard at the time described.<sup>50</sup> Grist would later go on BBC and declare how OSCE had worked in South Ossetia for countless years and truly had a feeling for what was happening on the ground.<sup>51</sup>

The Russians responded to the attack on South Ossetia the 8th of August with an iron fist assault that extended into Georgia’s territory. Russian troops were already stationed in Tskhinvali

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<sup>47</sup> Jim Nichol, “Russia-Georgia Conflict in South Ossetia: Context and Implications for U.S. Interests,” *WikiLeaks*, Oct 24, 2008.

<sup>48</sup> Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, Sep 2009.

<sup>49</sup> C.J. Chivers and Barry Ellen, “Georgia’s Claims on War with Russia Questioned,” *New York Times*, Nov 7, 2008.

<sup>50</sup> *Civil Georgia*, “NY Times: Georgia Claims on War Called into Question,” Nov 7, 2008.

<sup>51</sup> *BBC News*, “OSCE ‘failed’ in Georgia Warnings,” Nov 8, 2008.

for their peacekeeping operations and as more poured in through South Ossetia they also mounted airstrikes using their Black Sea fleet.<sup>52</sup> The Russian counterattack was not simply directed at the troops attacking South Ossetia; instead, clearly, a strategic decision was made to attack Georgia proper. Airstrikes began in areas of central Georgia like Gori, the agricultural region known as “Georgia’s breadbasket”, where 60% of agriculture was destroyed.<sup>53</sup> Other targets of interest to the Russian military during the counterattack included military infrastructure in Senaki, Poti, and Tbilisi, railroad tracks, and U.S. intelligence and military equipment. A former CIA official told British journalist Andrew Cockburn, “They destroyed about a billion dollars’ worth of equipment in the first few hours, that was a high priority for them.”<sup>54</sup>

By August 10, it is reported that around 14,000 Russian troops had retaken Tskhinvali and the devastation that continued in Georgia was tremendous as Russia spent the next days marching up to Tbilisi, Georgia’s capital. Russian forces stopped about thirty miles short of Tbilisi after taking the city of Gori when Dmitry Medvedev, only elected Russian president five months prior, announced that he had ordered an end to operations in Georgia in order to restore peace, and that the aggressor had been punished.<sup>55 56</sup> The Russian response seemed to aim at minimal global political fallout while also securing the most power over Georgia as possible. The ceasefire was brokered by Nicolas Sarkozy, the president of France, that same day, August 12, and the five-day war officially concluded. Around 850 people were killed because of the Russo-Georgian War and about 35,000 Georgians, already in terrible conditions before the war, became

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<sup>52</sup> International Committee of the Red Cross, “Georgia/Russia Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in South Ossetia,” 19.

<sup>53</sup> Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Georgia Rebuilds: After the August Conflict with Russia, Political and Economic Challenges Remain,” Nov 19, 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Andrew Cockburn, “The Bloom Comes off the Georgian Rose,” *Harper’s Magazine*, Oct 31, 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Sarah Pruitt, “How a Five-Day War with Georgia Allowed Russia to Reassert Its Military Might,” Aug 8, 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Jim Nichol, “Russia-Georgia Conflict in South Ossetia: Context and Implications for U.S. Interests,” *WikiLeaks*, Oct 24, 2008, CRS-7.

homeless.<sup>57</sup> As a result of the war, Russia officially recognized the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, and in a letter to the OSCE explained their perspective of defending against Saakashvili's aggression.<sup>58</sup>

Both countries that participated directly in this conflict used cluster munitions, which are considered a war crime as they were used in civilian-populated areas. But in a BBC article by Tim Whewell, more war crimes are attributed to Georgia during this conflict. Ryan Grist, who was in direct contact with three OSCE monitors when Georgia shelled South Ossetia, recalled that civilian areas and infrastructure were initially targeted.<sup>59</sup> During these first bombings Georgia targeted and killed Russian peacekeeper forces stationed in South Ossetia, which the International Committee of the Red Cross concluded provided a "reasonable basis" for the existence of a separate instance of a Georgian war crime.<sup>60</sup> Additionally, the use of "indiscriminate force" by Georgian forces against civilian targets is noted by BBC and the Human Rights Watch in 2009. According to the HRW, South Ossetia forces had been firing on Georgian military forces while the Georgian military fired "Grad rockets", considered indiscriminate when used in civilian areas, and machine guns at buildings with civilians inside them.<sup>61</sup> BBC eyewitnesses described Georgian tanks firing directly at apartment buildings and shooting at fleeing civilians in Tskhinvali. The Moscow director of the Human Rights Watch discussed the targeting of basement areas, common civilian hiding places, by Georgian tanks and predicted the estimated cost of civilian lives in South Ossetia to be around 300 to 400. An eyewitness in Tskhinvali, who lost her 21-year-old son while hiding in their cellar, recalled how

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<sup>57</sup> Sarah Pruitt, "How a Five-Day War with Georgia Allowed Russia to Reassert Its Military Might," Aug 8, 2018.

<sup>58</sup> Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, "Statement by Mr. Anvar Azimov," Aug 28, 2008.

<sup>59</sup> Tim Whewell, "What Really Happened in South Ossetia?," *BBC News*, Nov 12, 2008.

<sup>60</sup> Dr. Elem Khairullin, "Georgia: Attacks Against Peacekeepers."

<sup>61</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Human Rights Watch Concerns and Recommendations on Georgia," April 22, 2009.

Georgian forces were wearing NATO uniforms throughout the invasion. “How can you trust those people now?” she stated, “What possible friendship can there be?”<sup>62</sup>

Saakashvili’s attempt at reconquering South Ossetia was clearly risky, but, upon closer examination, may be characteristic of Saakashvili’s temperament. Andrew Cockburn discusses Saakashvili’s boasting before the war took place and even mentions a Georgian politician who declared Saakashvili really believed he could win the war.<sup>63</sup> The deputy defense minister of Georgia admitted that they did not believe Russia would respond with a counterattack.<sup>64</sup> Shortly following the war, protests erupted in Tbilisi against Mikheil Saakashvili for “starting a war that Georgia could not win.”<sup>65</sup> It is also worth mentioning that Saakashvili faced several years in prison after he lost power in Georgia in 2013 for embezzling around 9 million dollars for “luxury” spending, along with other domestic human rights violations concerning the dispersal of a protest in 2007.<sup>66</sup> Saakashvili called these judicial attacks politically motivated. He was also accused of using public money in 2009 to fly his massage therapist into Georgia.<sup>67</sup>

While it seems clear that Saakashvili started the war with an invasion into South Ossetia, it is also true that small-arms fire and occasional skirmishes occurred at the Georgia-South Ossetia border prior to August 8. For example, on July 3, 2008, a bombing in a South Ossetian village killed a police chief. Then, just days before the conflict in early August, heavy fighting

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<sup>62</sup> Time Whewell, “Georgia Accused of Targeting Civilians,” *BBC News*, Oct 28, 2008.

<sup>63</sup> Andrew Cockburn, “The Bloom Comes off the Georgian Rose,” *Harper’s Magazine*, Oct 31, 2013.

<sup>64</sup> Jan Cienski, “Tbilisi Admits Misjudging Russia,” *Financial Times*, Aug 21, 2008.

<sup>65</sup> *BBC News*, “OSCE ‘failed’ in Georgia Warnings,” Nov 8, 2008.

<sup>66</sup> Felix Light, “Georgian Ex-President Saakasvili gets Nine more Years in Jail on Fraud Charge,” *Reuters*, Mar 12, 2025.

<sup>67</sup> Amanda Taub, “What you need to know about Georgia president turned Brooklyn Hipster Mikheil Saakashvili,” *Vox*, Sep 21, 2014.

occurred with artillery weapons, claiming the lives of two dozen people.<sup>68</sup> Considering the Russian-coordinated response that swept through Georgia's sovereign territory, I believe it is logical to assume that the Russians intended for Saakashvili to eventually attack so that they could respond strategically. The intention of the Russian counterattack was to damage Georgian assets and send a message on the world stage that Russia would not roll over with Western influenced states. Robert Gates addressed the beginning of the war saying, "But my attitude then and now is that the Russians set a trap, and a headstrong, impetuous Saakashvili walked right into it and gave them the excuse they wanted."<sup>69</sup> It becomes more likely that Saakashvili jumped the gun, considering Matthew Bryza and George W. Bush's personal declarations against Saakashvili pursuing war. But as headstrong as Saakashvili may have been, there was talk that someone "mised" him into believing Russia would not counterattack or that Georgia would be supported if they attacked South Ossetia. The opposition party leader in Georgia stated that Saakashvili tends to trust the wrong people and act emotionally, but then who was he irrationally trusting?<sup>70</sup>

### **Further Examination and Motives**

It is not surprising that the United States voiced its support for Georgia against "Russian aggression" throughout this war, but the question of whether the United States was interested in war in 2008 is debatable. One piece of evidence that the United States was, at least, lying or participating in deception was the corroboration of the story as being a Russian invasion. "Russia has invaded a sovereign neighboring state and threatens a democratic government elected by its

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<sup>68</sup> Jim Nichol, "Russia-Georgia Conflict in South Ossetia: Context and Implications for U.S. Interests," *WikiLeaks*, Oct 24, 2008.

<sup>69</sup> University of Virginia Miller Center, "Robert Gates Oral History," July 8, 2013.

<sup>70</sup> Jim Nichol, "Russia-Georgia Conflict in South Ossetia: Context and Implications for U.S. Interests," *WikiLeaks*, Oct 24, 2008.

people,” was one of George W. Bush’s primary statements after the war took place.<sup>71</sup> In 2018, Condoleezza Rice, U.S. Secretary of State in 2008, wrote an opinion piece in the Washington Post echoing these sentiments and calling the conflict a “full-scale Russian invasion.” However, in this article she states that she warned Saakashvili not to fall for a Russian trap in the secessionist states.<sup>72</sup> These statements are supported by the New York Times when Rice met with Saakashvili in early July of 2008, but this is not indicative of a lack of interest in Georgia by Secretary Rice.<sup>73</sup> In a State Department interview, it was mentioned that the oil companies Chevron and Exxon were linked to the Caspian Sea and were shipping around 300,000 barrels of oil through the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline daily.<sup>74</sup> Condoleezza Rice, prior to her Secretary of State position under Bush, served on the board of directors for Chevron in 1991 and even had a Chevron oil tanker named after her.<sup>75</sup>

The revolving door in American politics makes it possible for private businesspeople, likely with continued financial interests in private companies, to leave their post in the private sector and transition into a policy making position, like Condoleezza Rice for example. In these positions of federal power, individuals can make policy decisions that further the interests of private corporations, and thereby themselves. George W. Bush’s Vice President Dick Cheney had substantial ties to the oil company Halliburton prior to his tenure at the White House. While serving as the CEO of the multinational energy company Halliburton, Cheney’s former company conducted business in many countries, including Iraq, prior to his vice presidency. Some of this

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<sup>71</sup> National Archives and Records, “President Bush Discusses Situation in Georgia,” Aug 11, 2008.

<sup>72</sup> Condoleezza Rice, “Russia invaded Georgia 10 years ago. Don’t say America didn’t respond,” *New York Times*, Aug 8, 2018.

<sup>73</sup> Helene Cooper and Thomas Shenker, “After Mixed U.S. Messages, a War Erupted in Europe,” *New York Times*, Aug 12, 2008.

<sup>74</sup> U.S. Dept of State, “The Pursuit of Black Gold: Pipeline Politics on the Caspian Sea,” Nov 13, 2007.

<sup>75</sup> National Archives and Records Administration, “Condoleezza Rice, Secretary of State.”

international business conducted by Halliburton was illegal and the company was subsequently fined for it.<sup>76</sup> Upon Cheney's appointment as Vice President, he did not sever ties with Halliburton and continued receiving bonuses and compensation during his time in the White House, according to Pentagon auditors. The independent Congressional Research Service found that according to federal ethics law, Cheney indeed had "lingering financial interest[s] in Halliburton." Halliburton's business with the military and the oil industry only improved under the Bush and Cheney administration, as well. For example, the multinational corporation received military contracts for U.S. troops in the Middle East and was accused, again by Pentagon auditors, of overcharging their services.<sup>77</sup> Or for instance, Halliburton was given a contract shortly after the beginning of the U.S.' invasion of Iraq that cemented their role in restoring the oil industry in the foreign nation. This contract was also kept secret at the time because of the "emergency conditions" brought about by the U.S.' war in Iraq.<sup>78</sup> During the Iraq invasion in 2003, many American citizens criticized the Bush administration for fabricating a story to invade Iraq for U.S. oil interests. In fact, certain parallels can be drawn between the Iraq War of 2003 and the Russo-Georgian War of 2008.

Without delving too deeply into the Iraq War's intricate historical and political background, it is important to understand that, like Georgia, Iraq is positioned strategically for the oil interests of the United States. The second-largest oil producer in OPEC, Iraq contains large oil fields in the southern Basra region of the country and near Kuwait and the Persian Gulf.

<sup>79</sup> In a similar way to the Russo-Georgian War, the Iraq War was framed in speeches by Bush and

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<sup>76</sup> Cornell University, "The Halliburton Affair: Conflict of Interest at its Worst."

<sup>77</sup> David E. Rosenbaum, "A Closer Look at Cheney and Halliburton," *New York Times*, Sep 28, 2004.

<sup>78</sup> Cornell University, "The Halliburton Affair: Conflict of Interest at its Worst."

<sup>79</sup> U.S. Energy Administration, "Iraq Analysis – Energy Sector Highlights."

Cheney as a defense against Saddam Hussein and his aggression in the Middle East. “We have no ambitions in Iraq, except to remove a threat and restore control of that country to its own people,” Bush declared in the week the Iraq War began.<sup>80</sup> John J. Mearsheimer, professor of political science at the University of Chicago, and Stephen M. Walt, academic dean and professor of international affairs at Harvard, analyzed the U.S.’ claims regarding Iraqi aggression. Looking at Hussein’s nearly three-decade long career in politics and following his behaviors during prior military conflicts in the Middle East, the professors concluded that Saddam was no more aggressive than any other Middle Eastern country at the time and was likely given a “green light” by U.S. officials during his invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

A heavily debated controversy, the two academics describe how the U.S. may have used misleading language and communication tactics to effectively cause Hussein to believe that the U.S. would pay no mind if he invaded Kuwait. This is sometimes referenced in connection with April Glaspie, the U.S. Ambassador to Iraq until 1990, and her visit to Iraq days before the Kuwait invasion, where a cable demonstrates language that may have convinced Hussein that Washington had no issue with his intent to invade.<sup>81</sup> It is also mentioned that Kuwait was driving up oil prices in the face of OPEC quotas prior to Hussein’s invasion, which may assist in understanding why the U.S. never explicitly warned Hussein about not invading Kuwait.<sup>82</sup> It is also important to consider how having an ally like the United States may influence the ambition of foreign leaders. Given the certified connection to the White House and Chevron’s use of the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline through Condoleezza Rice, it seems plausible that the United States

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<sup>80</sup> George W. Bush White House Archives, “President Bush Addresses the Nation,” Mar 19, 2003.

<sup>81</sup> Wikileaks, “Saddam’s Message of Friendship to President Bush,” July 25, 1990.

<sup>82</sup> John M. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, *An Unnecessary War* (Harvard Kennedy School of Government: Foreign Policy Issue 134, 2003), 51-9.

may have caused Saakashvili to believe that the conflict with Russia and South Ossetia was within his capabilities. In the same way that the United States government bolstered the military capabilities of Georgia leading up to the war, the United States also similarly supported Iraq in prior conflicts. In fact, the Secretary of Defense from 2001 to 2006 under George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, who was involved in the authoring of the Defense Planning Guidance document, met with Hussein before he was considered a foe in 1983.<sup>83</sup> Some of the facets to the US-Iraqi relationship at that time included supplying Iraq with military equipment and “large-scale” intelligence sharing to combat Iran. The amicable times that the United States shared with Hussein before he was named an aggressor were filled with the same Iraqi behaviors the United States would later condemn seven years later during the Kuwait invasion, like chemical warfare.<sup>84</sup> It seems clear that having the backing of the United States increases the chances of some foreign leaders to act ambitiously, believing that their powerful benefactor will be there to support them.

So, then what changed between the United States and Saddam Hussein or the United States and Eduard Shevardnadze or the United States’ relationship with Russia in the 1990’s? And more importantly who led Saakashvili to believe either the Russians would not respond or that Georgia could win a military confrontation with Russia? The first question can be answered using these distinct conflicts and state relationships; the foreign and strategic interests of the United States simply shifted. The United States supported Hussein in fighting Iran at the end of the Cold War strategically because of the threat to the Persian Gulf. “Our bipartisan policy in the Persian Gulf has been to stand firm against Iranian aggression...,” was Reagan’s declaration in

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<sup>83</sup> Donald Rumsfeld, “Executive Summary: Defense Planning Guidance,” Sep 7, 2001.

<sup>84</sup> Michael Dobbs, “U.S. Had key Role in Iraq Buildup,” *The Washington Post*, Dec 30, 2002.

1988.<sup>85</sup> But interests change, and regimes rise and fall. When it was Hussein's time to play the "aggressor", this is what the United States made him. When it was Shevardnadze's turn to step down, the United States showed him the door. As a foreign policy strategy, the United States tends to know which way the wind is blowing, so they can greet the new faces in power with a helping hand and establish their own interests.

Regarding the second question, William J. Burns, sitting U.S. Deputy Secretary of State in 2008 and respected foreign policy voice, points to the Vice President's office, "Rice visited Tbilisi in July and pushed Saakashvili hard not to take the bait. He heard other, more encouraging voices in Washington, including in the Vice President's office, and couldn't resist the temptation to move...."<sup>86</sup> We already understand that Dick Cheney was receiving compensation during his time in office and Halliburton, the energy company he was CEO of for five years, was indeed involved in the Caspian Sea region. In 2008 Halliburton was anticipating a five-year contract in the Caspian Sea region that would yield 200 million dollars a year.<sup>87</sup> Considering this, the financial motive for allowing war in Georgia, from a U.S. perspective, could provoke an international response that drives Georgia closer to NATO and Russia farther from Europe. If a global outcry against Russia occurred, which the U.S. participated in by blaming the conflict on the Russians, the interests of the Defense Planning Guidance would be furthered, and the security of Georgia's energy resources would be improved if Georgia was pushed to join NATO in light of this "Russian invasion." It is no secret that finance played a role in the U.S.' interest in Georgia as Matthew Bryza, U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State,

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<sup>85</sup> Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and Museum, "Radio Address to the Nation on Foreign Policy Achievements," Aug 27, 1998.

<sup>86</sup> William J. Burns, *The Back Channel* (New York: Random House, 2013), 241

<sup>87</sup> United States Security and Exchange Commission, "Halliburton Company," July 20, 2009.

bragged in a Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe hearing that Georgia is one of the easiest places in the world to conduct business.<sup>88</sup>

Cheney must have seen the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 as a win-win situation if Saakashvili attacked South Ossetia. Andrew Cockburn quoted a U.S. national-security official with an inside perspective on Georgia-U.S. relations when he stated that Cheney saw the war as a good opportunity, “At best Georgia would win, in which case Russia would fall apart and at the worst the spectacle of Russia crushing little Georgia would reinforce Russia’s reputation as the cruel Goliath. So, Cheney was telling Misha [Saakashvili], ‘We have your back.’”<sup>89</sup> Besides this statement by the unnamed U.S. official and a Herald-Tribune article stating Cheney also led Saakashvili on during his visit to Georgia in May 2008, there is no substantial proof of Cheney saying he supported Saakashvili’s offensive. But it is true that the United States did not stand to lose much from the conflict. Russia was already being called an aggressor by the United States and if Russia attacked Georgia, as they did, the United States could easily reaffirm their claims. It seems likely that the U.S. understood their intentions in Georgia would continue regardless of the outcome of the war, so using this conflict to villainize Russia at the expense of Georgian devastation may have been within U.S. interests.

The United States maintained 130 military advisors and other civilian advisors in Georgia, not to mention their influence on aspects of business and contractors in the nation.<sup>90</sup> The U.S. had also deployed intelligence equipment in Georgia, likely to monitor Georgia and its larger northern neighbor, and had clout in the Georgian military as many officers studied in

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<sup>88</sup> Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, “Russia, Georgia, and the Return of Power Politics,” Sep 10, 2008.

<sup>89</sup> Andrew Cockburn, “The Bloom Comes off the Georgian Rose,” *Harper’s Magazine*, Oct 31, 2013.

<sup>90</sup> Stratfor, “Geopolitical Weekly: The Russo-Georgian War and the Balance of Power,” *WikiLeaks*, Apr 3, 2013.

American military academies.<sup>91</sup> The United States obviously knew that Saakashvili was preparing for war, as Rice and Bush warned against it, and it is evident their interest in Georgia was unwavering regardless of how Russia responded, so why would they prevent the war? Yes, the United States lost military bases, equipment, and Georgia suffered tremendously, but nothing changed in the long term regarding the U.S.-Georgia relationship. The United States was there after the conflict with 30 million in humanitarian aid to rebuild their allied country and continue training Georgia's troops, it does not make sense to conclude U.S. officials would have batted an eye if Russia destroyed some of their assets in Georgia.<sup>92 93</sup>

Considering the quantity of advisors, NATO monitors, intelligence equipment, and the U.S.'s reach into the military actions of Georgia, the idea that the United States was unaware of the attack is illogical. But regardless, certain media sources continue to push this narrative that the U.S. was naïve to Georgian aggression with headlines like, "US Intelligence Couldn't Find the Russian Army During 2008 Georgia Invasion."<sup>94</sup> Robert Gates, sitting Secretary of Defense during the war in 2008, recounted a story where he used Russia's poor intelligence capabilities as a punchline in front of Putin, saying, "'Well you need to get yourself a new intelligence service.' Now, telling Putin that was really kind of sticking it to him. That was kind of fun, actually."<sup>95</sup> Declarations like this make it increasingly difficult to believe that the United States was fooled by Russia and caught off guard by Saakashvili's offensive. But since we can conclude that the

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<sup>91</sup> Stephen F. Jones, *Georgia: A Political History* (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, 2012), 241.

<sup>92</sup> George W. Bush White House Archives, "Statement by the President on Georgia," Sep 3, 2008.

<sup>93</sup> Stephen F. Jones, *Georgia: A Political History* (London: I. B. Tauris & Company, 2012), 244.

<sup>94</sup> Constantine Atlamazoglou, "The U.S. is watching Russia's every move in Ukraine. In 2008, U.S. Spies couldn't even tell where Russia's Army was," *Business Insider*, Mar 28, 2022.

<sup>95</sup> University of Virginia Miller Center, "Robert Gates Oral History," July 8, 2013.

United States was privy to Saakashvili's attack, why did they not help Georgia, as one of their closest allies, during the Russian response?

There is reason to believe that George W. Bush considered a military response during Russia's counterattack into Georgia but was clearly apprehensive. The result would have likely been a direct military confrontation between the United States and Russia, something that Washington was likely not prepared to do for their Georgian allies. "We came to the right decision, but it was an emotionally difficult decision," former National Security Council senior director Damon Wilson stated.<sup>96</sup> Though the United States chose not to act in defense of Georgia during the onslaught of the Russia's counterattack it did not stop U.S. officials, such as Matthew Bryza, from emphasizing how important Georgia was to the United States. Senator John McCain, close friend to Saakashvili, employed emotional language when he discussed the Russo-Georgian War: "...I know I speak for every American when I say to him [Saakashvili], today, we are all Georgians."<sup>97</sup> It did not matter that the United States, or their NATO arm, did not intervene in defense of Georgia, the strategic narrative needed to include themes of helplessness, miscommunication, sympathy for U.S. ally Georgia, and disdain for Russia's actions.

### **Counterarguments and Conclusions**

There exists a plethora of information available to the public regarding the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 that continues to explain the war as a Russian invasion or a consequence of Russian aggression. The part that the Russians played in this war should not be minimized, and as discussed, it is probable that the Russians prepared for the initial Georgian attack, so they

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<sup>96</sup> Ben Smith, "U.S. Pondered Military Use in Georgia," *Politico*, Feb 3, 2010.

<sup>97</sup> The American Presidency Project, "McCain Campaign Press Release," Aug 12, 2008.

could strategically seize the opportunity to strike Georgia. But pinning the blame on Russia for this war seems mistaken given the evidence concluding Georgia was the primary aggressor.

Among these viewpoints, one points to a plan created prior to the war by the Russian government called the “Plan of Aggression,” as proof that the Russian government was going to attack regardless of Georgian aggression. While this plan does generally describe how Russia attacked Georgia, complete with the use of the Black Sea fleet, it contains a contingency saying that the plan would be implemented only after the Georgian forces had already fired on South Ossetia, in reference to a “system of repelling aggression”.<sup>98</sup>

Russian opinion towards Georgia and their Western allies was souring and the ceaseless nature of their counterattack proved they could also take advantage during tense situations to further their own interests. Many articles that cover this war discuss Putin and Medvedev’s desire to regain their Soviet sphere of influence, but their attack does not necessarily demonstrate this. If Russia truly wanted to reoccupy their previous position of power in Georgia, the weakened state following the 2008 Russian counterattack would have been an opportune time. What seems more likely is that Russia wanted to reestablish its presence as a dominant military power and demonstrate this with a sweeping assault on Georgia. One of Russia’s most significant global interests in 2008 was protecting its own position as a dominant power in the face of NATO and the West’s increasing power in Europe. The scale of the Russian counterattack succeeded in demonstrating the abilities of the Russian military, at the expense of Russia appearing as the aggressor in its previously occupied territories. Cliff Kupchan, chairman of the Eurasia Group

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<sup>98</sup> Andrey Illarionov, “What did the Russian Generals Admit!,” *Georgia Online*, Sep 27, 2012.

and State Department officer, commented, “They sent a message that Georgia has been their backyard, was their backyard, and will be their backyard.”<sup>99</sup>

One counterargument by columnist and defense analyst Pavel Felgenhauer covers the existence of a documentary with inside information surrounding the Russian counterattack and their level of preparation before the outbreak of war, called “Lost Day”. The documentary describes the “Plan of Aggression” that the Russians made in anticipation for Georgian aggression, along with information about Medvedev and Putin’s dynamic. Using this documentary, which is admittedly of unknown origin and was found on YouTube, Felgenhauer weaves a narrative that paints the Russian invasion as the primary issue during the Russo-Georgian 2008 War.<sup>100</sup> Primarily, as mentioned, nowhere in the plan made by Russia does it detail any violence without first being attacked by Georgian forces. Felgenhauer points to the fact that Russian officials already had envelopes with information about the counterattack before Georgia even attacked as evidence of Russian intent to invade. What Felgenhauer failed to mention in his Jamestown Foundation article, which was also reposted on the United Nations website, was the heavy violence and mounting military presence on the South Ossetian-Georgian border much before the Russo-Georgian War of 2008. As mentioned, only days before August 8, there was a skirmish between South Ossetian and Georgian forces that killed two dozen people. This conflict was brewing for months, or even years if you consider the influence of NATO expansion, which suggests that Russian preparation was not necessarily indicative of intent to invade Georgia unprovoked. In the same way that Rice and Bush warned Saakashvili about

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<sup>99</sup> ABC News, “Russia’s Georgia Invasion May be About Oil,” Feb 19, 2009.

<sup>100</sup> Pavel Felgenhauer, “Putin Confirms the Invasion of Georgia was Preplanned,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Aug 9, 2012.

attacking South Ossetia, Russia understood that conflict was likely and prepared a plan with their own strategic interests in mind.

Secondly, Felgenhauer accuses the Russian military of conspiring with South Ossetian forces to attack Georgia, disregarding the history of Russia and South Ossetia's relationship. Russia organized and supported South Ossetia leading up to the conflict and enjoyed de facto control over the state. The Russian peacekeepers that were in South Ossetia were permitted to be there by international law according to a 1992 ceasefire that allowed Georgian, Russian, and Ossetian peacekeepers, considered neutral under the agreement, to remain in South Ossetia to maintain peace in the conflict zone.<sup>101</sup> The dynamic between Russia and South Ossetia goes much further as in 2002, Russia granted Russian citizenship to former Soviet citizens, which already included around 40% of the South Ossetia population. As a demonstration of South Ossetia's interest in Russia, six years later it is recorded that 90% of the South Ossetian population had a Russian passport. While Russia had begun giving these to South Ossetian citizens over the six years, South Ossetia overwhelmingly welcomed the Russian citizenship by a large majority.<sup>102</sup>

Felgenhauer points to Putin's admission about South Ossetian forces playing a role in the counterattack against Georgia as a fair reason to question the integrity of diplomats that accuse Georgia of starting the war. But in fact, it is not surprising that the South Ossetian forces would support their ally Russia, especially considering that the Georgians started the conflict by invading and killing civilians in Tskhinvali. It is logical to assume that Ossetian forces would support their biggest ally, as most of the state were Russian citizens by then, against Georgia's

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<sup>101</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Violence in South Ossetia," Aug 15, 2008.

<sup>102</sup> Warsaw Institute, "Russia Hands Out Passports to Its Diaspora," Feb 18, 2020.

attack on their capital. It is possible that Russia became heavily involved in South Ossetia to bolster support for Russia in the secessionist state, as a preparation for a conflict. But regardless, Felgenhauer's use of Putin's quote about the help that South Ossetian peacekeepers and militias provided against the initial Georgian assault to further the idea of Russian aggression is damaging to public perception about this war. Putin's quote, which Felgenhauer uses, does not appear to be indicative of anything other than the historical and logical places where lines in the sand would be drawn in a conflict between Russia, South Ossetia, Georgia, and the West.

What the United States valued during this landmark war in 2008 was their prolonged presence in Georgia, none of which would be significantly affected by a Georgian skirmish with Russia. The United States also prioritized the larger agenda laid out by the Defense Planning Guidance that included a depiction of "Soviet aggression" on the world stage. What Dick Cheney and the 2008 White House valued was keeping a pro-West, Washington-approved, business center in the previous Soviet republic as it served as leverage against Russia and contained a crucial oil pipeline. The emotional language and the depiction of the war as a "Russian invasion" by various U.S. officials and media sources may also hint at more manipulative public perception strategies by the United States.

Through the lens of NATO expansion and the special interests of the United States the Russo-Georgian War of 2008 can be explained as follows: With U.S.-Russia relations reaching a boiling point, coupled with the U.S.' clear expansion into the previous Soviet republic, conflict was brewing long before the war began. Broken promises and hypocrisy plagued U.S. foreign policy at this time in history and their overreaching influence into foreign nations for their own, in some instances, financial gain and strength overseas were of paramount importance. There is ample evidence of U.S. overreach, U.S. ties to private sector money, and NGO's operating to

topple governments in Georgia prior to the war, not to mention the integrity of the leaders in positions of power during the conflict.

There remains significant documentation to support the claim that the United States, as Georgia's most influential ally, played some role in the transpiring of the Russo-Georgian War of 2008. The influence the United States had on the Georgian economy and military at this time is difficult to ignore and functions as further evidence of the United States' control over the previous Soviet republic. Statements made by U.S. officials that remark on the surprise nature of the conflict, or that the United States played no role whatsoever in Saakashvili's assault, seem ill-informed and unlikely, at best. The official statements made by a U.S. official and several journalists that the "vice president's office" may have led Saakashvili toward conflict with Russia seem to have a clear and researched understanding of the Russo-Georgian War and how it factually occurred.

It seems likely that Cheney may have taken a note from April Glaspie during Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and given Saakashvili some sort of confirmation that a Georgian attack on South Ossetia could have succeeded or would not end negatively for Georgia. But conclusions about why this "green light" would have been given to Saakashvili are purely speculative. It is possible that using intelligence resources, the United States knew that Russia was preparing to launch an attack on Georgia, should they ever attack South Ossetia. Understanding this, Cheney, and other special interest parties, may have wished for this Russian attack to take place so that U.S. officials could continue reiterating that Russia is an aggressive invader. In the historical context between Georgia and Russia, the United States could continue making claims that Russia is actively trying to recapture its previous Soviet territories, should they attack Georgia.

It would not be illogical to assume that the “Plan of Aggression” made by Russia which details their attack, could have been seen by United States intelligence, as it was seen by an unnamed documentary producer on YouTube for the “Lost Day” documentary shortly after the conflict. Considering this idea, a Russian attack on Georgia would undoubtedly increase global support for NATO causes, NATO expansion into Georgia to “protect” the old Soviet Republic from Russia, and pro-democracy causes and NGOs that participated in the Rose Revolution. These are all noted benefits to the United States and their global ambitions should Georgia attack Russia in 2008 and provoke a violent response from their northern neighbor.

Additionally, any unity that Georgia and Russia may have shared as old Soviet allies was largely undone politically with this conflict and the West’s influence in Georgia, not that Georgia and Russia were necessarily amicable prior to this war. But at a global level, there is no mistaking that this conflict pushed Georgia closer to the West and Russia farther from Europe and the West. With Georgia ever broadening its relationship with the U.S., all U.S. investments and energy resources in Georgia could be considered more secure as a result of this conflict. The connections that the 2008 White House had to the private energy sector are glaring, and Pentagon auditors concluded that, at least, some members of the administration were lobbying for energy companies during their federal tenure. Given the reach the U.S. enjoyed in various aspects of Georgia, it becomes difficult not to conclude that the U.S. would not have considered these benefits, especially to their private financial interests, if Georgia attacked South Ossetia and Russia responded with a heavy counterattack.

There is reason to believe that private financial interests may have been thoroughly considered while the U.S. decided what to tell Saakashvili before the war, or whether NATO should intervene and defend its prominent future member against Russia. Making money using

the revolving door was a documented aspect in American politics at this time in history and several of the U.S.'s political maneuvers in Georgia with Saakashvili can be accurately compared to the U.S.'s bipolar relationship with Saddam Hussein in Iraq. The Russo-Georgian War of 2008 provides a glimpse into the fighting for international natural resources, shifting of political stances, and constant tussling that occurs between the two Cold War enemies in a post-Soviet Eastern European context.

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