

COMMENTARY

The Georgia War and the Century of “Real Power”

Anthony H. Cordesman

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It is easy to view the war in Georgia in Cold War or American ideological terms, just as it is easy to fall into the trap of seeing the world in terms of slogans like “soft power” or “smart power.” In practical terms, however, the fighting in Georgia is not a warning about some new drift into great power confrontation or a new Cold War. It is a reminder that the world is not shaped by democratic values, international law, good intentions, globalism, rational bargains, or the search for dialogue. All of these elements do play an important role, but classic power politics are just as real as ever. Nation states still have the guns and missiles. More powerful states will bend or break the rules when they feel it is in their interest to do so and when there is no opposing power bloc that can pose a convincing threat.

As we consider the foreign and defense policies that the next Administration should follow, it is important to note that pragmatism based on *realpolitik* is far more likely to serve our interests, those of our friends and allies, and the world, than sustaining a neoconservative American morality play—or replacing it with a neoliberal version. The conflict in Georgia should be as much a reminder of the dangers of overreaching American power and influence as a reminder that Russia, China and many other powers do not share our values and goals.

Russia and China may not be peer powers, but they are becoming increasingly strong regional powers and they will act on their perceptions of their interests. For the foreseeable future, they will do so on the basis of goals and values that differ from ours. They may or may not evolve towards US or “Western” goals and values, but this is more likely to be a matter of decades than years. In the interim, there is no reason for them to be enemies, and they may often be partners, but they will also be competitors and act with a degree of ruthlessness that we will sometimes be able to contain and other times have to accept.

This means we cannot afford to demonize any nation, particularly a major regional power. The sequence of events in Georgia is still unclear, and some reports indicate that the US did counsel restraint on Georgia and did make attempts to keep it from provoking Russia. There are, however, an equal number of indicators that we forgot that Russia has its own interests and they are not ours, and that an expanding US presence in its near abroad, along with the expansion of NATO and the EC, would be seen as a threat.

We pushed too far on the periphery of a re-emergent Russia, and we pushed at least a country, not just a bridge too far. In the process, we almost certainly played an inadvertent role in convincing a “rabbit” that it could provoke a “bear.” If anything, we are lucky that the “bear” did not eat the “rabbit.”

Accordingly, if there is any lesson that can be drawn from the fighting in Georgia, it is a lesson that should have been clear long ago. America’s so-called status as a superpower does not prevent us from living in a multipolar world in which America’s “real power” is sometimes challenged by Russia and China, and is at other times ignored because they see other strategic interests as more important.

We need to face the fact that the time window in which the Soviet Union was in collapse and China was still a weak and uncertain power is over. We need to face the fact that our global economic position is increasingly fragile, and geoeconomics are as important as military strength. The fact that the US has drifted towards becoming a debtor nation, and risks experimenting with defining a “post-post industrial” economy while consuming a vast share of the world’s disposable resources is just as important as who has the most missiles or the most advanced weapons.

At the same time, there are critical limits to our military power. We invaded Afghanistan at a time when our strategy and force plans claimed we were able to fight two major regional contingencies, and found we only really had the assets to

properly fight one. The practical limits to American power—even with considerable aid from our allies—have now become all too clear in both Afghanistan and Iraq. They would have become far more clear if we had had to deal with Taiwan or North Korea, and the consequences could have been drastic if we had faced any real confrontation with China.

We need to accept the key military and strategic lesson of the last eight years: We are scarcely in decline, but we do face critical challenges. We live in a world the US can only unilaterally engage in much of the globe at the cost of overstraining limited military resources and/or being ineffective and provocative. This is not an American century, or a Western century, or the end of history. It is a century where conflicting national values and ambitions remain just as critical as in the past, and that will be filled with local violence as well as global tensions and with additional threats created by a range of non-state actors.

This does not mean we should abandon US or Western values, but pursuing our values should not mean pursuing some illusion of a sudden convergence towards shared global values or abandoning pragmatism and realpolitik. We need to face the acute limits to both American hard and soft power. We need to understand just how critical it is to treat key allies as true partners and not as clients, and to accept the fact that many friends and allies outside the West may have common strategic interests, but at best will take decades to share our values.

This also is not a century where the US can afford cultural, moral, or political arrogance. Barring some new and catastrophic conflict with another major power, the competition the US faces over the next century will be for the support of nations caught in between major powers and power blocs. All too often, these nations will seek to serve their own interests, and do so without any evolution towards our (US or Western) goals and values that somehow bind them to us.

In short, “real power,” not “soft power” or “smart power,” is going to be the critical factor shaping the course of this century—just as it has shaped the course of every other century in human history. Acknowledging this fact does not mean ignoring the actions of powers when their actions challenge our goals and values. It means we must not move towards pointless confrontations or turn them into enemies. It means dealing with issues in terms of the real balance of power in carefully measured terms, and pursuing pragmatic compromises and options.

Anthony H. Cordesman holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategy at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.