



Washington's Wars and Occupations Month in Review #40

by Max Elbaum, War Times/Tiempo de Guerras

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GETTING REAL ABOUT THE NEW MULTIPOLAR WORLD

Responding to Russian military action in Georgia, John McCain told a reporter August 14: "In the 21st century, nations don't invade other nations."

Most of the world gagged or guffawed at this latest expression of utter Washington hypocrisy. Even some U.S. media figures (especially editorial cartoonists) couldn't resist mentioning Iraq when commenting on the pontifications of Mr. Bomb, Bomb, Bomb. More than a few wrung their hands over Washington's "loss of moral authority" to lecture others about war-making. Not to mention the little detail that Georgia's U.S.-armed-and-trained military had struck first, attacking civilians in the disputed territory of South Ossetia and provoking the Russian assault.

Rank hypocrisy may be the most glaring aspect of Washington's response to events in the Caucasus. But it isn't the most important. The crisis in that volatile region casts a sharp spotlight on the new realities of power and politics in today's post-Cold War, post-9/11, post-Iraq-debacle world. Add the latest reports underlining the political futility and human cost of Washington's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and you have a vivid picture of militarism's awful consequences in today's multipolar world. John McCain is a demagogue. But it is certainly true that if the 21st century continues to be characterized by "nations invading other nations" – indeed, by the "enemy is out there" mentality and "military force solves problems" framework that still holds such a grip on U.S. mainstream politics – then the immense potential in today's surge for change will be ruined.

HUMAN DISASTER, GEOPOLITICAL CHESS

Ruin starts with those in immediate war-affected areas. For South Ossetians and Georgians, the recent fighting brought only destruction and suffering. Casualty and refugee counts are disputed. But even the lowest estimates show hundreds of civilians killed and up to 30,000 Ossetians and 68,000 Georgians forced to flee their homes. Human Rights Watch criticized both the Georgian and Russian militaries for using indiscriminate force against civilians. Property destruction is widespread, and many refugees have not yet been able to return to their homes even when these remain intact.

That's the human cost of what the political classes are terming a new round of geopolitical chess. And more than two players are contributing to this disastrous, lose-lose game.

The U.S. tops the list when it comes to treating the region as a chessboard and its people as pawns. The Washington spin machine says "It's all about promoting democracy". (Just like the invasion of Iraq!). Analyst Stephen Zunes gets beneath the rhetoric:

Washington's embrace of [Georgian President Mikheil] Saakashvili appears to have been based in large part on oil. The U.S. has helped establish Georgia as a major energy transit corridor, building an oil pipeline from the Caspian region known as the BTC and a parallel natural gas pipeline, both designed to avoid the more logical geographical routes through Russia or Iran.

(see "U.S. Role in Georgia Crisis" at www.fpif.org/fpiftxt/5465)

As for Saakashvili's "democratic" credentials, they mainly consist of jumping ship from his support of previous Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze just when Shevardnadze was losing favor with Washington. Since coming to power in 2003, Saakashvili has implemented harsh neo-liberal economic measures and acted as Washington's military outpost in the Caucasus. Saakashvili reduced domestic spending while expanding Georgia's armed forces and getting arms and training from the U.S. (and Israel): about 800 U.S. and 1,000 Israeli trainers are currently working with the Georgian military. Georgia returned the "favor" by deploying 2,700 troops for the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq. When faced with popular protest, Saakashvili responded with the same kind of repressive measures that were denounced by Washington when used by his predecessor: shutting down independent media, arresting opposition leaders, and ordering police to attack nonviolent protestors. And his ultra-nationalist bluster about "asserting control" over the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, whose populations do not want to be part of Georgia, was essentially a promise to start a war.

FOR THE NEOCONS: THAT'S ALL GOOD!

A Neocon dream, Saakashvili quickly became the poster boy for penetration into the oil-rich Caucasus and the campaign to surround Russia with U.S.-armed states. The Bush administration has been pushing hard for Georgia's admission to NATO, breaking an explicit U.S. promise given 18 years ago to then-Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev that NATO would not expand into the former Soviet Republics in the Caucasus. Also relevant here: the U.S. crusade to put anti-missile systems in Poland and the Czech Republic to counter the alleged threat of a first-strike from – get this – Iran.

If you are watching all this from Moscow, it is far from paranoid to wonder: exactly what part of the Cold War is actually over as far as U.S. policy toward Russia is concerned?

No wonder a full-blown crisis in U.S.-Russia relations erupted after Georgia's attack on South Ossetia August 7. Debate is still underway about why Saakashvili ordered his reckless assault. Knowledgeable analysts offer several theories: Saakashvili is "rash and delusional." He believed Washington had both the will and the capacity to intervene militarily if Russia responded to his assault. McCain's main foreign policy adviser, Randy Scheunemann, long a paid lobbyist for the Georgian government, told Saakashvili to attack to provoke Russia and boost McCain's fear-mongering presidential campaign. Whatever the case, the decision backfired. The Georgian military went within hours from bombing civilians in the South Ossetian capital to fleeing with their weapons dropped on the battlefield in face of the Russian military.

Not that the Georgian government's Proud-Agent-of-Empire role turns the other combatants into "good guys." Russia sent its own message to the world (and smaller countries on its borders) via disproportionate force and a measure of civilian blood. Both the Russian and South Ossetian elites have long protected, and inter-penetrated with, organized crime networks which take advantage of the political instability and civilian suffering in the region.

The Caucasus – like so many regions of the world – is in need of peace and development, human rights and environmental protection. The use of destructive military force has only made life for most of the region's people worse.

THE EMPIRE CAN'T STRIKE BACK

As far as the chess game went, the losers were the Georgian regime and the U.S. Despite all the blather from Washington, the harsh fact – reported daily on the front page of *The New York Times* – was that the U.S. “had a weak hand to play” and “could do nothing” to stop its cat's-paw regime from stunning humiliation. Immanuel Wallerstein analyzed the U.S. dilemma:

In 1989 the game between the U.S. and Russia changed radically. The major problem since then is that the U.S. misunderstood the new rules.... It proclaimed itself the lone superpower. In terms of chess rules, this was interpreted to mean that the U.S. was free to move about the chessboard as it saw fit, and in particular to transfer former Soviet pawns to its sphere of influence. Under Clinton, and even more spectacularly under Bush, the U.S. proceeded to play the game this way. There was only one problem: The U.S. was not the lone superpower... it had been demoted to being one strong state in a truly multilateral distribution of real power. Many large countries were now able to play their own chess games.... What, after all, could Bush do? U.S. armed forces were tied down in two losing wars in the Middle East. And the U.S. needed Russia far more than Russia needed the U.S.... As for Western Europe, Russia essentially controls its gas supplies. It is no accident that it was President Sarkozy of France, not Condoleezza Rice, who negotiated the truce between Georgia and Russia...as an ironic footnote, Georgia, one of the last U.S. allies in the coalition in Iraq, withdrew all its troops from Iraq. These troops had been playing a crucial role in Shi'a areas, and would now have to be replaced by U.S. troops, which will have to be withdrawn from other areas....

(full article at: www.binghamton.edu/fbc/commentr.htm)

FUTILITY IN AFGHANISTAN

Nowhere is the utter futility of relying on military force to solve problems more evident than Afghanistan, Washington's so-called “good war.” The war began with near-universal support among Western governments (extending all the way to the German Green Party) as well as tacit backing from Russia and Iran. Inside Afghanistan, Tariq Ali writes:

...there was a sense of relief in Kabul when the Taliban's Wahhabite Emirate was overthrown. Though rape and heroin production had been curtailed under their rule, warlords kept at bay and order largely restored in a country that had been racked by foreign and civil wars since 1979, the end result had been a ruthless social dictatorship with a level of control over the everyday lives of ordinary people that made the clerical regime in Iran appear an island of enlightenment... What many Afghans now expected from a successor government was a similar level of order, minus the repression and social restrictions, and a freeing of the country's spirit.... (see “Afghanistan: Mirage of the Good War” at www.newleftreview.org/?view=2713)

But what did the Afghan people in fact receive? Foreign occupation, thousands of civilian deaths, unemployment at nearly 60%, and revived heroin production with the President's brother a major trafficker. This last month, the inevitable and intertwined companions to occupation stood out in sharp relief:

- “A U.N. human rights team has found convincing evidence that 90 civilians – among them 60 children – were killed in air strikes on a village in western Afghanistan on August 22....” (*The New York Times*, Aug. 27)

- “Taliban insurgents mounted their most serious attacks in six years of fighting in Afghanistan over the last two days, including a coordinated assault by at least 10 suicide bombers against one of the largest American military bases in the country, and another by about 100 insurgents who killed 10 elite French paratroopers...the attacks were part of a sharp escalation in fighting...this year is on pace to be the deadliest in the Afghan war so far, as the insurgent attacks show rising zeal and sophistication....” (*The New York Times*, Aug. 20)

The Western occupation has decisively lost the “hearts and minds” of the Afghan people. (And the people of neighboring nuclear-armed Pakistan, where the ouster of Bush’s chosen despot, Pervez Musharraf, symbolizes the Pakistani people’s rejection of the U.S. agenda for their country.) Even Afghans who detest the Taliban are withdrawing support from the government and demanding an end to the foreign presence in their country. The notion that sending *more* foreign troops and conducting *more aggressive* air strikes will somehow bring “victory” over these problems is, to be blunt, absolutely absurd.

IRAQ: “PISTOL SHOTS TO THE HEAD”

“In March or April 2007, three noncommissioned U.S. Army officers killed four Iraqi prisoners with pistol shots to the head as the men stood handcuffed and blindfolded beside a Baghdad canal, two of the soldiers said in sworn statements.”

For the U.S. media, that’s a one-day report (*The New York Times*, Aug. 27). For Iraqis, it’s the day-to-day reality of a racist foreign occupation. In excess of one million Iraqi civilians have died due to violence unleashed by the U.S. invasion. Four million Iraqis have been displaced from their homes. An average of over 100 Iraqis a week die in occupation-related violence.

This matters little in the the war-makers’ latest fairy-tale, because “the surge has worked” and “victory is in sight.” Even beyond the human cost, it a new definition of victory when the overwhelming majority of the Iraqi people want the U.S. out and even U.S.-backed Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki insists on a timetable for U.S. withdrawal and Iraqi veto-power over U.S. operations. The U.S. has occupied Iraq with over 130,000 troops (and a nearly equal number of mercenaries) for five-plus years, spent hundreds of billions of dollars, and cannot persuade, bribe or bully even their its client Prime Minister to agree to U.S. terms for “staying the course”? War’s effectiveness is about on a par with its humanitarianism in face of people who simply want to have their own country back.

TERRORISM CAN BE ENDED, BUT NOT VIA WAR

But what about fighting terrorism? Here too, war is at best a useless tool. A new report from the war-makers’ own top-level think-tank, the RAND Corporation, says the following:

All terrorist groups eventually end. But how do they end? Answers to this question have enormous implications for counterterrorism efforts. The evidence since 1968 indicates that most groups have ended because (1) they joined the political process or (2) local police and intelligence agencies arrested or killed key members. Military force has rarely been the primary reason for the end of terrorist groups, and few groups within this time frame achieved victory....

RAND’s version of “whatever works” counter-terrorism includes rendition, “extra-judicial killing” (that is, murder) and other mechanisms which people of conscience oppose on both moral and civil liberties grounds. But RAND’s basic point, that wars fuel rather than end terrorism, is right on point.

“ENEMY MENTALITY” LEADS TO GLOBAL RUIN

The bottom line is that military force can produce immense amounts of destruction, but doesn't work for solving political problems in a world where masses of people no longer accept the idea that they are destined to be ruled forever by others. Even if force had more utility than it does, the steady spreading out of economic power and technological savvy in the world (the rise of Asia, new initiative in Latin America, etc.) means the U.S. no longer can simply snap its fingers and expect everyone else to obey. It is a new multipolar world.

The main drama in world politics is whether the U.S. will respond to new realities by brandishing its still-stronger-than-everyone-else's military in more dead-end wars; or whether it can be pushed in the direction of diplomacy, negotiation and even cooperation with the rest of the planet.

Unfortunately, which direction Washington will take is not yet decided. One of the two contenders for the Presidency this year is basing his campaign on the idea that only militarism can “keep America safe” (and on the barely-coded racist message that his opponent is “not one of us”). That opponent, with a more realistic grasp of the current balance of world power, advocates a more cautious course in (most) international affairs. But Obama does not challenge the argument that the world is full of “enemies” and he accepts the challenge (thrown especially hard at him because he is Black) that he has to “prove” that he can be a “strong commander-in-chief” to become President.

It's certainly better for the world and the country to have a reality-based President rather than a fantasy-based one who still looking for a do-over “victory” in Vietnam and promising another such “victory” in Iraq. But until there is a substantial shift in the basic parameters of mainstream foreign policy debate – and the actual policies themselves – the U.S. posture remains a grave threat to everyone on the globe, this country's own people included.

The good news is that millions are ready for a significant change. Discontent with the Iraq war and belief that the country is currently “on the wrong track” are majority positions. Today's youth are more connected to peoples across the planet than any previous U.S. generation. They are in the forefront of a surge of concern for the future of the planet in the face of global warming, war and growing global inequality. A potential base brimming with social conscience and energy exists, way beyond the self-identified left. These millions can be galvanized to fight for a different relationship between this country and the world, between human beings and nature, between people of different backgrounds and experiences within the U.S. This base will – and does – make its progressive sentiments felt within the existing electoral system. But the spark to galvanize, focus and deepen those sentiments will not be found exclusively or even mainly there. Becoming that spark is the challenge before antiwar and other social movements.

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