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The multilateralist castle built on sand

By Marko Attila Hoare, 14th September 2008

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- 1. Despite left-liberal illusions that it is the US that threatens world order and the UN that defends it, in reality it is the US's opponents on the world stage that are most keen to tear up the UN Charter, as demonstrated by their support for Russia's aggression against Georgia.**
- 2. This bad faith on the part of the anti-Western bloc of states renders the UN ineffectual as the guarantor of international order.**
- 3. The most successful recent case of the reforming of a rogue state has been that of Serbia, which is on the road to European integration thanks to Western intervention carried out independently of the UN.**

4. The security of the Western alliance depends upon it acting independently to promote democracy and human rights abroad, through diplomatic, economic and where necessary military means.

According to a popular left-liberal viewpoint that has become widespread since the run-up to the Iraq War, US unilateralism threatens an otherwise stable global order that rests on international law underpinned by the UN. The latter, so the argument goes, is the institutional safeguard protecting the world from the unhindered exercise of power by the US; the guarantor of weak or independently minded nations that rightly fear American imperialism.

Some of us, however, suspected that this ‘multilateralist’ viewpoint was, more often than not, expressed insincerely by those who were much more interested in opposing the US than they were in upholding international law. We have only had our suspicions confirmed by the tepid international reaction to the Russian assault on Georgia. This unilateral invasion of a sovereign state, occurring without UN Security Council authorisation, has provoked rather less left-liberal outrage than the US invasion of Iraq, though it represented by any standards a much greater violation of the principle of state sovereignty - involving, as it did, territorial dismemberment and the unilateral redrawing of international borders - and though it was directed against a state that, unlike Iraq, represented no threat to its neighbours and was a democracy, albeit highly flawed. There has been no million-strong demonstration in London against the Russian invasion of Georgia. Still more pointed has been the support for the Russian aggression expressed most strongly by the very states, left liberals might have argued, that are most in need of the UN as a safeguard against the US.

The defection of the Libyan regime of Muammar al-Gaddafi from the ‘Axis of Evil’ has often been cited as one of the achievements of the Bush Administration and its tough policy on rogue states. Yet Libya has welcomed the Russian assault on Georgia. ‘What happened in Georgia is a good sign, which means America is no longer the sole world power setting the rules of

the game,’ [Seif al Islam al-Gaddafi](#), son of the Libyan leader and head of the Gaddafi Foundation, has been quoted as saying; ‘There is a balance in the world now. Russia is resurging, which is good for us, for the entire Middle East.’ Nicaraguan President [Daniel Ortega](#), who in the 1980s successfully sued the US at the International Court of Justice, is the first head of state apart from Russia formally to recognise the ‘independence’ of the break-away Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, denouncing as he did so ‘political hegemonies’ that were ‘trying to surround Russia’. President [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#) has blamed the US, Georgia and ‘Zionists’ for the war in the Caucasus: ‘In our opinion, if Georgian officials had acted properly and not allowed outside forces to interfere, the situation wouldn’t have taken on its current dimensions’. Venezuela’s [Hugo Chavez](#), too, supports Russia’s dismemberment of Georgia: ‘Russia has recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. We support Russia. Russia is right and is defending its interests.’ Chavez has [announced](#) that Venezuela will host Russian troops and warships and carry out joint military exercises with Russia. According to Cuba’s [Raul Castro](#), ‘It’s false that Georgia is defending its national sovereignty’; he went on to claim that the ‘Autonomous Republic of South Ossetia historically formed part of the Russian Federation’. Syria’s [Bashar al-Assad](#), in the course of offering to host Russian missiles on Syrian territory, stated ‘I think that after the crisis with Georgia, Russia has become only stronger’; furthermore, ‘It’s important that Russia takes the position of a superpower, and then all the attempts to isolate it will fail.’

Thus, far from seeing the UN and international law as desirable safeguards against ‘US imperialism’, those states - one or two of them headed by left-liberal icons - that are actually most in conflict with the latter are rushing to demolish these supposed safeguards. Russia is providing a banner behind which the West’s enemies can unite, even if this means tearing up the UN Charter and colluding in the invasion and dismemberment of a UN member-state.

Yet if the closing of ranks of the West’s enemies behind a nuclear-armed aggressor is a reason for consternation, we can draw comfort from a definite

success story: one former rogue state, at least, appears definitely to have reformed. In Serbia, pro-Western parties emerged successful from parliamentary elections this spring; the new government appears to be **cooperating** with the war-crimes tribunal in The Hague, and has arrested the fugitive former Bosnian Serb warlord Radovan Karadzic; the leading Serbian anti-Western political force, the neo-Nazi Radical party, has **imploded**. The Serbian case is particularly significant because it is over Serbia that the Western alliance has frequently been condemned for acting ‘unilaterally’; i.e., without UN authorisation. That is, NATO went to war with Serbia in 1999 without UN sanction, then the US and most NATO and EU countries recognised the independence of Kosovo this year, again without UN sanction.

It is NATO and the EU, rather than the UN, than have proved the motors of change in Serbia; the promise of a European future has been the bait that has lured Serbian voters away from the nationalist parties, and the Serbian government toward collaboration with The Hague, while it was the question of whether to support Serbia’s Stabilisation and Association Agreement with the EU that **occasioned the split** among the Radicals. Far from the recognition of Kosovo’s independence driving Serbia into the arms of the nationalists, it has hastened the nationalists’ political decline. True, Serbia is still seeking to have the International Court of Justice rule the recognition of Kosovo’s independence illegal. But while we may deplore this move, it nevertheless represents a civilised way of conducting a dispute; a tremendous step forward from the rioting and attacks on foreign embassies that took place in Belgrade in February in response to international recognition of Kosovo’s independence.

The Western approach to Serbia has therefore proved a successful one: stick and carrot; military firmness combined with economic incentives and democracy promotion - mostly conducted independently of the UN. An approach of this kind is often stereotyped by its critics, whether from conservative-isolationist or left-liberal schools of opinion, as amounting simply to military aggressiveness. Yet the military-deterrent aspect of the Western policy that has guided Serbia toward Europe has ultimately proved

less decisive than the economic carrot of EU integration. That this is so is highlighted by the failure of Western policy regarding a country that should, logically, be firmly in the Western camp but that may be slipping away: Turkey. Although Turkey is a loyal NATO member of long-standing; although it has long been committed to joining the EU; although it has responded relatively well to diplomatic and economic incentives to democratise; and although it historically fears Russian imperialism, yet Turkey is developing increasingly friendly relations with both Russia and Iran. Ahmadinejad visited Istanbul last month, and Ankara and Tehran **reached agreements** on a number of areas, though a full energy pact was not signed on account of US objections.

Heavily dependent on Russian trade and energy supplies, Ankara has meanwhile refused to support Georgia's membership of NATO, resisted talk of modifying the Montreux Convention limiting naval access to the Black Sea by the US and other outside powers, and **barred** two US warships from entering the Black Sea in support of Georgia. Ankara is meanwhile promoting a 'Caucasus Stability and Cooperation Pact' that would group together Turkey, Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan - its essential purpose is to enable Turkey to establish a working **regional collaboration** with Russia that **bypasses the US**. Ankara's drift toward friendship with two of the Western alliance's most dangerous enemies is an all-too-predictable consequence of the declining attraction of the EU option for Turkey, resulting from open French and German opposition to Turkey's EU membership. Given events in Georgia, the Franco-German alienating of Turkey appears increasingly short-sighted. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, that goes through Turkey, is the only pipeline transporting Caspian crude oil that does not go through Russia. Turkey's strategic importance is increasing exponentially just as Franco-German cold-shouldering is having its negative effect.

Events on the world stage this summer have shattered the multilateralist, soft-liberal dream of a post-Cold-War world presided over by the UN, in which UN members live harmoniously according to its rules. Instead, the UN is resuming its Cold War role as merely one, ineffectual forum in which the

conflict between the Western alliance and the anti-Western bloc is played out. In these circumstances, there is no point in believing in illusions about a UN-governed world that our enemies do not share. As the Serbian example shows, democratisation and integration into the democratic family of nations are the best way to remove the threat from a rogue state; even when not overtly hostile, dictatorships - from Pakistan to Libya - make unstable, unreliable allies. We should be foolish indeed if we were to abandon our support for democracy and human rights abroad, through diplomatic, economic and where necessary military means. The enemies of liberal democracy will always play by their own rules; we should play by ours.

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