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# JOURNAL OF PEACE AND WAR STUDIES

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# The Aftermath of the 2008 Russo-Georgian War: Appeasement of Russia and the War in Ukraine

Lasha Tchantouridzé

**Abstract:** The full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 is a direct result of appeasement policies pursued by the West toward Russia. The appeasement of Russia started soon after Russia invaded Georgia in August 2008 and captured parts of that country. Initiated by the United States in early 2009 and labeled “reset,” appeasement policies encouraged wrong perceptions of the world in the Kremlin. As part of the appeasement policies, the West refused to sell arms to Georgia, pressured Georgia to remove the valid objections to Russia joining the World Trade Organization (WTO), and quickly abandoned what few sanctions were imposed on Russia following the August 2008 war. The West somewhat toughened its response to Russian aggression after Moscow invaded Ukraine in 2014, annexed Crimea, and created renegade provinces in the Donbas region. Still, the West’s reaction was largely symbolic. This apparently convinced the Kremlin that the West was largely impotent, and the same response was to be expected after launching a full-scale war against Ukraine in February 2022. However, that has proved to be a colossal miscalculation.

**Keywords:** Russo-Georgian war; war in Ukraine; appeasement of Russia; Russian foreign policy.

## Introduction

On February 21, 2022, Russian television channels released a video account of the country’s National Security Council meeting chaired by President Vladimir Putin. One by one, the council members stood at a podium and delivered their version of justifications why the Russian Federation should recognize Ukraine’s Donbas’s breakaway provinces as independent states and launch a military invasion against Ukraine. One of the most extensive speeches was delivered by the council’s deputy chair, Dmitry Medvedev, who served as president of Russia from 2008 to 2012 and as prime minister from 2012 to 2020. In his speech, Medvedev addressed potential sanctions that the Russian government expected the West to impose on the country and their potential severity. He assured his audience that the sanctions would be insignificant as they were when he was the president of Russia. Back in August 2008, Russia attacked Georgia and declared Georgia’s breakaway provinces to be independent and sovereign states. “These 14 years [since the Russo-Georgia war] have been beneficial for us,” he said. “When they [the West] got tired, they came to us and offered to remove the sanctions ... they know that Russia is much more important than Georgia or Ukraine.”<sup>1</sup> Medvedev concluded that he expected the same reaction by the West after Russia’s anticipated quick victory over Ukraine.

The August 2008 Russo-Georgian war was a dress rehearsal for what started in Ukraine in 2014 and culminated in the 2022 Russo-Ukraine war. Moscow began to set the stage for an invasion of Georgia in the spring of 2008 by organizing large-scale military

maneuvers at the border with Georgia in July 2008 and commenced the invasion on August 7, 2008. The official reason: to stop the “genocide” in South Ossetia allegedly carried out by Georgian authorities. In preparation for war, South Ossetian authorities evacuated civilians to Russia, but they left armed fighters to face the Georgian army that had to move north to intercept the invading Russian mechanized infantry columns. A large group of Russian journalists were invited for the occasion as well. The war ended in five days: Georgia sued for peace as its armed forces were encircled by the Russian army that crossed the land border with Georgia from the north and northwest, and later conducted amphibious landing from the west. As the ceasefire agreement entered into force, Moscow recognized the independence of the two breakaway provinces of Georgia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and established “diplomatic relations” with both. Soon after that, Russia deployed sizable troop contingents to both Abkhazia and South Ossetia announcing new military alliances with these “sovereign states.”

On March 6, 2009, at their bilateral meeting in Geneva, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton presented a symbolic “reset” button to Sergei Lavrov, Russia’s minister of foreign affairs. Conceived to “reset” Russo-American relations to a more positive starting point for the new US presidential administration of Barack Obama, the symbolic plastic button had erroneously inscribed the Russian word for “overload” instead of “reset.” True to its symbolic promise, relations between the two major powers went into overload for the next 13 years, reaching their climax with Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Although the US made several unilateral concessions to the Russian Federation, Moscow never stopped its aggressive foreign policies toward its smaller neighbors. The argument put forward in this paper is that the initially minor concessions initiated by the Obama administration expanded into the appeasement of Russia. Russia’s February 2022 invasion of Ukraine is a direct result of that appeasement policy. The cost of this appeasement has been paid by states like Georgia and Ukraine, especially by the latter.

In contemporary discourse the policies of appeasement are not necessarily seen in a negative light in the US or elsewhere—there is no preordained reason why appeasement policies by a great power toward other powers cannot yield positive results for both. However, in the context of the US, circa 2008-2022, the policy of appeasing Russia has had a couple of important implications for the international balance of power. Before the war in Ukraine, the US had conceded Russia’s dominant position and status in most, if not all, former Soviet space. In addition, Russia had established itself as a major player in the Middle East following the Syrian civil war and started to assert its military superiority in the Mediterranean. Since early 2009, the US made several unilateral concessions to the Russian Federation, but the latter did not cease but expanded aggressive foreign policies toward its smaller neighbors. The inability or unwillingness of the US under both presidents Obama and Donald Trump to do anything about a resurgent Russia, and disagreements among members of the transatlantic alliance on a series of important issues dealing with Moscow’s foreign policy ambitions, did not pass unnoticed by the Kremlin. Further, decision-makers in Washington and European capitals did not distinguish between appeasement policies

toward more minor powers, e.g., North Korea or Iran, and great powers like Russia. To some extent, appeasement worked when dealing with Pyongyang or Tehran because both North Korea and Iran have had limited objectives centered on the survival of the ruling regimes. In comparison, Russia is a great power with unlimited objectives aimed at conquering or destroying neighboring states.

The distorted understanding of Russian foreign policy objectives in Western capitals stemmed from the erroneous conception of Russia as a minor power following the end of the Cold War. From the early 1990s on, the diminished status of the Russian Federation in international affairs played a decisive role in creating misleading perceptions in the West that gave rise to the deeply misguided and theoretically illogical unipolar world doctrine. The Russian Federation was seen as the political successor of the Soviet Union, but not its geopolitical equivalent. According to the doctrine of unipolarity, Russia was unwisely relegated to an insignificant place in world affairs such that it essentially challenged Moscow to do something drastic about the new world order. A series of policies by the US and its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies in Eastern Europe touched the areas that were very sensitive for Moscow. Serious disagreements between Moscow and the West started in the 1990s with NATO enlargement and reached a critical point in 1999 with the NATO-Yugoslavia war. During the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Russia voiced loud objections to the West's several long-reaching policy initiatives. These included further NATO enlargement, the US invasion of Iraq, Western involvement in Ukraine and Georgia, the recognition of Kosovo sovereignty, the decision to place missile defense system in Eastern Europe, Western policies in Syria and Libya, and endless but fruitless discussion about whether Georgia and Ukraine should join NATO or not.

Short but decisive, the 2008 Russo-Georgian war quickly erased an image of the world that saw Russia being relegated to the status of an insignificant player, and the Obama administration affirmed the new reality by making a number of key concessions to the Russians, symbolized by Clinton's plastic "reset"/"overload" button. America's concessions gradually turned into Moscow's reassertion of dominance in the former Soviet space of influence and this allowed Russia to introduce nineteenth century-style great power politics in dealing with its European neighbors. Moscow's attacks on Georgia in 2008 and Ukraine in 2014 did not initially appear to threaten the vital interests of the US or its European allies. With these small regional wars, Putin had achieved his main goal before starting an all-out invasion of Ukraine in February 2022: Moscow was no longer ignored as an irrelevant international player; instead, it could now throw its weight around, and Western states had to make concessions and pay attention to the Kremlin. Moscow fully expected the West to keep doing what it had been doing since 2008, no matter what would happen in Ukraine after February 24, 2022. However, the Kremlin has clearly miscalculated. Still, the West's appeasement policies following the Russo-Georgian war of 2008 had contributed significantly to the formation of Moscow's distorted perceptions of the world.

## Appeasement in International Relations

Historically, policymakers in the West have been more critical of appeasement in foreign policy than scholars, due to the negative association of this approach with Franco-British efforts to appease Adolf Hitler in the 1930s. At the same time, Western scholars have not spent much energy debating appeasement as a tool in foreign policy. Since the appeasement of Nazi Germany was understood as a bad policy, the question of the usefulness of appeasement in foreign policy was understood as settled once and for all. However, is all appeasement inherently bad? After all, the main alternative to appeasement is war. If appeasement helps avoid war clearly, there must be something positive about it. One study sympathetic to the phenomenon defines appeasement as “the policy of reducing tensions with one’s adversary by removing the causes of conflict and disagreement.” In other words, appeasement could be understood as “a policy of tension-reduction.”<sup>2</sup> Further, “as a short-term strategy for maintaining the international status quo, appeasement may be a policy of *crisis reduction*.”<sup>3</sup> As a long-term strategy, appeasement could be viewed as a policy of crisis prevention, also within the context of maintaining the *status quo*. In terms of the alteration of the *status quo*, appeasement serves as a short-term tool for “limited political trade,” and a long-term objective toward “friendship/alliance.”<sup>4</sup> Historically, great powers trade with each other, while the interests of smaller powers serve as the key currency for trade. There is nothing inherently harmful in such conceptual definitions, and they sound rather abstract and benign, unless one’s state or home is included in the proposed “limited political trade.” Such trades concern primarily more minor powers (*nichtgrossmachten*) in international politics that do not have a decisive voice in either alliance formation or maintaining the international status quo. On the other hand, trade between a great power and an aggressive minor power does not necessarily involve the interests of other states. Instead, the commitment to a non-nuclear status or state support of terrorism could be the objective of trade.

Ferguson notes that A.J.P. Taylor’s *The Origins of the Second World War* examination of the appeasement approach that preceded World War II “has stood up remarkably well to subsequent scholarship.”<sup>5</sup> The appeasement of Hitler had many parents, none of them pretty: “the pusillanimity of the French statesmen, who were defeated in their hearts before a shot had been fired; the hypocrisy of the Americans, with their highfaluting rhetoric and low commercial motives; above all, the muddle-headedness of the British.”<sup>6</sup> Hitler’s appeasement was not at all a problem if, for instance, the British wanted to align themselves with Nazi Germany—and in fact, on numerous occasions Hitler expressed his desire to have an alliance with London.<sup>7</sup> Evidence suggests that Hitler did not really want a war with Britain as he hoped that London would let Poland go with some rhetoric and no action the same way the rump Czechoslovakia was dumped. Reportedly, Hitler told Alfred Rosenberg that “he couldn’t grasp” what the English were after by honoring their defense commitment to Poland and declaring war on Germany. Hitler argued that “even if England secured a victory, the real victors would be the United States, Japan, and Russia.”<sup>8</sup> Hitler did miss on Japan, but his prediction was otherwise correct. However, the British evidently did not fancy the idea of playing the second violin to the Germans by

appeasing them indefinitely, and the war was on. Indefinite appeasement of a great power with unlimited foreign policy objectives makes no logical sense: indefinite appeasement engenders demands for indefinite concessions, and the concessions that great powers demand are primarily territorial or material.

Stephen Rock argues that appeasement as such is not inherently bad, and provides few examples to demonstrate its usefulness: “British appeasement of the United States, 1896-1903,” “Anglo-American appeasement of the Soviet Union, 1941-1945,” and “American appeasement of North Korea, 1988-1994.”<sup>9</sup> He argues that the case of the failed attempt by Great Britain and France to conciliate Nazi Germany carries with it many misperceptions and “a good deal of what is commonly supposed to be true of this case is in fact myth.”<sup>10</sup> Rock demonstrates that the British “pursued a conciliatory policy in part because he [Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain] saw it as the only chance—albeit a slim one—of avoiding war.”<sup>11</sup> The argument makes sense as Britain was not ready for war in 1938 or even 1939 when it actually started.<sup>12</sup> Regardless, the Munich approach failed and “even if appeasement did not actually encourage Hitler to commit further acts of aggression, it failed to satisfy him and thereby preserve peace and stability in Europe.”<sup>13</sup> Ferguson notes that some historians have even imagined “that the great mistake was not appeasement but its abandonment in 1939 ... it has even been suggested, peace could have been restored in 1940 or 1941, if only someone other than [Prime Minister Winston] Churchill had been in charge of British policy.”<sup>14</sup>

No matter how one interprets the usefulness of a particular appeasement policy or specific historical events, appeasement has at least one theoretical problem that cannot be overcome by alternative interpretations of events or by counterfactual history. This theoretical problem is rooted in empirical realities of international politics, and in general, an understanding of how power relations work among states. The idea that appeasement of an aggressive major state can succeed is based on the assumption that there exists in international politics something like a “stationary state,” to borrow J.S. Mill’s concept.<sup>15</sup> If it were possible to reach a stage in international politics in which power competition or self-affirmation, self-assertion by great powers no longer mattered, appeasement could be viewed as a valid tool for guiding aggressive powers toward that end. That is, if the desire for more international power and influence by a single state or an alliance of states had a logical end without destroying the existing international system, appeasement would make sense. However, since such a stage in international history appears to be utopian or located somewhere in a very distant future, making concessions to an aggressive major state results in a continuous process that increases the aggressor’s appetite by making its objective achievable at a very low cost. The drive for more power will not cease after each such concession—there is no absolute power, and even if there were such a thing, those driving for it will not recognize it as long as others possess some power. The only end of appeasement to an aggressive big power will be the end of the international system, that is, the establishment of a world state. Suppose a great power already occupies about 18 percent of the world’s land surface, as the USSR did during the Cold War, or has an outline to become a truly global empire, as Nazi Germany did. In that case, the idea of appeasement



to such entities should appear even more unacceptable. The Russian Federation circa 2008-2022 is somewhat smaller than the Soviet Union, and less ideologically odious than Nazi Germany. However, its leaders have voiced threats never before heard in world history: a promise to unleash a nuclear war if Russia did not achieve its great power goals. Just like in the case of Nazi Germany, the foreign policy goals of the Putin regime are territorial and material: they are aimed at the conquest or destruction of other states.

### **The 2008 War and Its Aftermath**

The August 2008 war began after the separatist forces in Georgia's breakaway South Ossetia started attacking Georgian villages and peacekeepers with artillery fire in July 2008, and this continued as Russia's 58th Army invaded on August 8. The Russian troops massed at the Georgian border in July: similar to what would happen before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, Moscow staged large-scale fake war games there called "Kavkaz-2008." In late July, Moscow announced that the war games had ended and Russian military units were heading back to their bases. This fake announcement signaling the ostensibly peaceful conclusion of military maneuvers would also be repeated before the invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. It was a ruse, and when those Russian military units invaded Georgia few days later, they arrived fully armed and ready to fight. The fact that the Russian forces were getting ready to invade Georgia from mid-July 2008 should have been apparent to anyone who had information about the logistics of the Russian military units in the North Caucasus. Military maneuvers or games do not involve mass supplies of combat munitions, bombs, and missiles: troops engage in mock battles during exercises and do not shoot each other with actual combat projectiles. However, when the Russian troops invaded Georgia soon after the conclusion of the military exercises, they were armed with far more lethal munitions than inert bombs and empty warheads customarily used for military maneuvers.

Georgia's breakaway South Ossetia is linked with Russia through a single mountainous highway, which snakes down from the high Caucasus mountains into the valleys of central Georgia. While the Russian troops were progressing through the mountains, a small Georgian army fought them successfully and slowed their advance. However, a couple of days later Russia's Black Sea Fleet joined the fight by sailing several surface ships from Sevastopol, Crimea. Georgia had no coastal defenses and Russian amphibious landings went without significant resistance in Abkhazia, Georgia's other breakaway region controlled by Moscow, and Georgia proper. The Georgian army units fighting the bulk of the invading Russian troops in mountainous areas risked becoming encircled and destroyed by the Russians. To avoid this, the Georgian government ordered its military to withdraw from South Ossetia and sued for peace. President Nicolas Sarkozy of France mediated between Tbilisi and Moscow, and a ceasefire agreement was signed in mid-August. Soon after, Moscow declared Georgia's two breakaway provinces "independent states" and set up a large-scale military presence in both of these statelets.

In August 2008, the Russian leadership was very cautious when invading Georgia with an army not fully ready for a large-scale war. It was believed that Georgia had been armed and equipped by the US, and fighting with a modern army, albeit small, carried not insignificant risks. After the war, Russian leaders held a closed-door meeting to analyze the lessons learned from the Georgia campaign. First, they had discovered that the Georgian army was armed and equipped with small American arms and rubber boats for coastal defense—the country was nowhere ready to fight a Russian invasion. The successes that the Georgian army had in battles were due to the old Soviet air defense system S-300 borrowed from Ukraine, and the initiative and courage of artillery detachments successfully resisting the Russian troops in mountainous areas. Second, the Russian leadership heard that the Black Sea Fleet was late to act, and that delay nearly cost them. Overall, in 2022 Moscow would repeat its Georgia invasion scenario in Ukraine, albeit on a larger scale, but with one key difference: in Georgia, the Russian troops agreed to a peace agreement quickly, because they were not ready, and the Russian army has never fought in the mountains to start with. However, the short war in Georgia was a key dress rehearsal for the Russian army. It was in Georgia that Moscow first used its new combat groups built around heavy mechanized enhanced infantry battalions. More than one hundred of these battalions would be used at a much larger scale 14 years later in Ukraine.

After the war, Moscow highlighted a critical shortcoming in the Georgia campaign: the lack of seafaring helicopter carriers for amphibious assault operations. Russia traditionally manufactures and procures all its military resources and material domestically. Still, they have never had large support vessels for amphibious assaults—as a continental power Russia seldom staged amphibious assaults and never with helicopters. Those seeking appeasement of Russia in the West noticed this problem and used it to get on Moscow's good side and make profits along the way. Paris offered Moscow to sell them the French-made Mistral-class amphibious assault ships. The French were so enthusiastic about supplying Russia with this weapon that President Francois Hollande would not stop his sales pitch even after the Russian-backed rebels in Ukraine's Donbas region shot down a Malaysian Airlines Flight 17 and killed scores of European citizens in July 2014.<sup>16</sup>

The European Union was likewise eager to put Russia's conquest of Georgian territory in the rear-view mirror and to resume business as usual with Moscow. After the ceasefire, the EU organized a study group to investigate the origins of the Russo-Georgian war and subsequently produced a report, published on September 21, 2009, in which its authors unequivocally blamed Georgia for attacking Russia. The report committee was headed by a Swiss diplomat, Heidi Tagliavini, the head of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) mission to Georgia during the war. Officially called the "Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia," but informally called the "Tagliavini Report," it "discovered" that Georgia started the war with Russia on August 7-8, 2008.<sup>17</sup> This "discovery" was made through a superficial study of the movements of the Georgian troops and their actions on the eve of the war. The EU group failed to account for or investigate parallel moves made by the Russian troops

across the Russo-Georgia border or in South Ossetia itself. The claim made by EU's "fact-finding mission" was a deliberate lie—there was no factual evidence provided in the report to support it.

Regardless, the report was immediately embraced by Western friends of Georgia, and thus a myth about Georgia starting the 2008 war with Russia was born. The myth survived the 2014 Russo-Ukrainian conflict and the annexation of Crimea, promulgated by, among others, Western friends of Georgia and even Georgia's high officials.<sup>18</sup> This despite the fact that the EU report that runs for more than 700 pages has no account on how more than the 70,000-strong invading Russian force appeared at the Russo-Georgian border within minutes of Georgian artillery opening fire on the rebel forces in South Ossetia. The OSCE report identifies the time of the Georgian artillery attack as "the night of 7 to 8 August 2008." This narrative is contradicted by the account of the Russian general who actually led the ground assault on Georgia. According to the commander of Russia's 58th Army, which commenced the military invasion of Georgia, he received a sealed order from his superior concerning Georgia on August 5. In an extensive interview with a Russian news agency, Lieutenant-General Anatoliy Khrulev stated that he received an alert exactly at midnight from August 7 to 8 from Major-General Marat Kulakhmetov, the commander of the Russian troops stationed in South Ossetia, suggesting that "Georgia started a war."<sup>19</sup> Three minutes after midnight on August 8, Khrulev was allegedly directed to open the sealed order received on August 5, and seven minutes after midnight, he received a confirmation from his superior authorizing the 58th Army to start the invasion. Fifteen minutes after midnight, according to Khrulev, all the officers were in their posts, and the invasion commenced. Khrulev's account did not mention that the Russian troops were preparing for the invasion for weeks by staging war games, and by shipping and storing combat, as opposed to training, ammunition closer to the Georgia border. Even then the advancing Russian troops still should have required at least a couple of hours to drive from North Ossetia's lowlands toward the pass in the Caucasus mountains.

It was impossible for the Russian troops to arrive at the Georgian border within 15 minutes from their bases located closer to urban areas of the North Caucasus. The Russo-Georgian border is drawn through the Caucasus mountains, the highest mountain range in Europe. Two narrow and difficult-to-navigate roads connect the two countries through high mountain passes. To achieve that incredible feat of military efficiency by invading Georgia through the Caucasus mountains within minutes after receiving an order, Khrulev's troops should have been stationed right at the border crossing long before August 8. As for the Tagliavini report, it was a one-sided narrative created to assign the blame to the victim, Georgia, and find justifications for the actions of the aggressor, Russia. This could not have been done for any other reason but to appease Russia and limit the Western reaction to Russian military aggression with largely symbolic sanctions.

The US and the EU imposed few weak economic sanctions on Russia after its invasion and occupation of Georgia. None of the sanctions damaged the Russian economy

even remotely, not to mention its military machine. As Russia's former President Medvedev noted just before the February 2022 invasion of Ukraine, the West removed those sanctions from Russia on its own; Moscow did not even have to ask. On the other hand, by spring of 2008, Georgia had openly declared that it wanted to join NATO and expected to get a so-called Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the NATO Bucharest summit in May 2008. Germany and France deliberately blocked MAPs for both Georgia and Ukraine. That was a signal for Russia that NATO was not really interested in Georgia or Ukraine, and the same Bucharest declaration essentially imposed a military embargo on Georgia, which badly needed modern military equipment to defend itself from Russia. After the Bucharest summit, the West's disinterest in helping Georgia was so severe that when Russia invaded in August of that same year, Georgia did not even have military-grade communications equipment. As a result, the Georgian military's commercial-grade communications were quickly compromised by the Russian army, and Georgian military leadership could not even issue orders to its troops through secure channels.

Most damaging to Georgia has been the unwillingness of the US and its Western allies to rearm and reequip Georgia to defend itself from another attack from Russia. Although Georgia had been praised for its democratic and economic reforms and its steadfast Western orientation, the country was literally undefended when Russia invaded, and remains poorly armed and underequipped to this date. The Georgia military had participated in the US-sponsored missions in Afghanistan and Iraq, expecting to be helped by the US, but no real help came from Washington or any other Western capital except small arms that Georgia was allowed to purchase. During and after the August war, the general message to Georgia voiced in Washington and other Western capitals simply stated: "There is nothing much we can do." The same message was repeated in February 2014, when Russia attacked Ukraine and annexed Crimea. However, the 2022 Russo-Ukraine war has demonstrated that, most definitely, there had been many decisive and effective things that the West could have done in 2008 or 2014. By pretending to be helpless in the face of Russian aggression, the West was trying to appease Moscow, hoping that the Kremlin would be satisfied with the conquered territory and would not try to continue its military conquest. As the events of February 2022 have demonstrated, the appeasement policies produced the most undesirable results. Now facing long and highly destructive war prospects in Europe, the West had no choice but to take decisive steps.

After the August war, Georgia tried to rearm since what little it had was spent or destroyed in the war with Russia. Once again, it found a cold shoulder from the West, presumably because Moscow objected to any country giving arms to Georgia. Moscow has fully exploited Georgia's defenseless state: it has adopted a policy of moving the demarcation line separating the breakaway South Ossetia and Georgia proper and capturing more land for the renegade regime. This process labeled "borderization" in Georgia has continued since the war stopped in August 2008, and every year since, the Russian troops have captured a few hundred yards of Georgian land. Clearly designed to provoke Georgia into a new armed conflict, the practice has been met with no official protests from the West except the occasional statements by Western ambassadors posted in Georgia.

## Washington's Reset Policy and Europe's Indifference

The argument made in this essay is that the Western appeasement of Russia following the 2008 Russo-Georgian war made the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian war possible. In this, we echo the sentiments expressed by the former foreign minister of the Russian Federation, Andrei Kozyrev. Soon after the start of the Russo-Ukraine war on February 24, 2022, Russia's former top diplomat was quoted saying that the West's appeasement of Putin made him "delusional," implying that the Western appeasement made Putin believe that he could do whatever he wanted.<sup>20</sup> The fact that the US and some of its Western European allies tried to appease Moscow from 2009 on has been noted by a few observers, but there has been a disagreement about whether this appeasement has been positive or negative. For instance, just before the start of the Russo-Ukraine war in February 2022, Cato Institute's Doug Bandow called the appeasement of Russia "a good cause."<sup>21</sup> On the other side, the Heritage Foundation's Daniel Kochis warned in July 2021 that the US "would regret this shameful appeasement of Russia."<sup>22</sup> Mitt Romney, the Republican Party's presidential candidate in 2012, warned about the threat posed by Russia, suggesting that the Obama administration was making too many concessions to Moscow. Romney was criticized for this in American mass media, and Obama made fun of his warning, but after Russia invaded Ukraine, even Romney's opponents acknowledged that he was right about Russia.<sup>23</sup> According to Benjamin Haddad and Alina Polyakova, Obama's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and intervention in Syria in 2015 "was cautious at best, and deeply misguided at worst." They noted that "the imposition of sanctions on Russia for its invasion of Ukraine was accompanied by so much propitiation and restraint elsewhere that it didn't deter Russia from subsequent aggression, including the risky 2016 [presidential election] influence operation in the United States."<sup>24</sup>

In the case of Georgia, the West's appeasement of Russia was the most damaging in the refusal to sell Western weapons to Georgia. Following the August 2008 war, Moscow made several public and diplomatic demands not to supply weapons to Georgia.<sup>25</sup> Washington obeyed the Russian demands even though, in January 2009, the US and Georgia established a strategic partnership charter, which among other things, called for cooperation in defense and security fields.<sup>26</sup> The Obama administration fully complied with Moscow's request to impose an arms embargo on Georgia, which lost most of its modern military equipment during the August 2008 war. The most significant loss for Georgia was the destruction of its nascent Black Sea navy—a maritime country was left without any kind of maritime force or coastal defense. The Western embargo on arms sales to Georgia was so comprehensive that a largely symbolic act by the Trump administration of selling a small batch of anti-armor Javelin missiles to Georgia was seen as a groundbreaking event.<sup>27</sup> In late November 2017, it was announced that the US would allow Georgia to purchase Javelin anti-tank missiles worth \$75 million.<sup>28</sup> The shipment included Georgia 46 Javelin FGM-148s launchers with 82 missiles. To put it in a military context, this shipment would allow a defending side to fight one Russian enhanced combat battalion for a couple of hours.

The collective Western effort to make the Russian Federation a member of the WTO was no less harmful to Georgia and beneficial to Russia. In 2011, the West started pressuring Georgia to make concessions to Russia on its application to the WTO. Russia had occupied two breakaway provinces in Georgia since the mid-1990s, and from August 2008 had a large number of military and civilian personnel deployed there. These provinces, formally part of Georgia, were fully integrated into the Russian economic space and they continue to be so to this date. Georgia initially vetoed Russia's WTO application for very valid reasons: Moscow had captured its territory, operated there under a false pretext that these were independent countries, and Georgia did not want to set up customs and border checks between Georgia proper and the Russian-occupied Georgian regions. Georgia resisted as much as it could but had to yield under heavy Western pressure, and in early 2012, Russia became a member of WTO. According to a senior Georgian official, in order to obtain concessions from Georgia favoring Russia, "they [the West] put a gun at our head."<sup>29</sup>

America's appeasement policy toward Russia was developed very early in its first term of the Obama administration. Guided by Clinton, the policy was labelled "reset," implying starting Russo-American relations from a clean sheet. Whether the Obama administration ever blamed its predecessor, the George W. Bush administration, for problems in bilateral relations with Russia was never openly stated. However, it became very clear very soon that the US blamed Georgia for the difficulties that it found itself vis-à-vis Russia. The US and Georgia became gradually distant under Obama, and by 2016, almost nothing was left of the former "strategic partnership" between the two countries. The Trump administration had an even lower opinion of Georgia and Ukraine. Trump's White House was only too happy to continue Obama's reset-like approach, even though now Russia was under a set of mild economic sanctions created after Moscow's annexation of Ukraine's Crimea in 2014.

It has been argued that the West bears significant responsibility for what has transpired between Russia and Ukraine.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, the first significant challenge thrown at the Russian Federation by the West took place in 1995, when the "Study on NATO Enlargement" was published in Brussels.<sup>31</sup> The Russian government objected strenuously, and Russia nationalist adopted this issue to rally their supporters. However, the Russian public remained largely indifferent to the prospect of NATO moving eastward.<sup>32</sup> The post-Cold War thaw was still on and most Russians distrusted their own government more than they did the West. The post-Cold War thaw was still on, and most Russians distrusted their own government more than the West. Public indifference in Russia to NATO enlargement did not last: the second humiliation to Moscow was delivered in a more physical and dramatic way by the NATO-Serbia war over Kosovo in 1999.<sup>33</sup> The Kosovo War changed many things in Russia: It helped to turn Russian public opinion dramatically anti-Western within a week;<sup>34</sup> it essentially killed the credibility of Russia's budding Western-style liberal democratic political forces; it allowed the nationalist-revanchist forces to acquire credibility and power base among the people; and it propelled Vladimir Putin and his associates to the very top of Russia's government structure.



Putin owed his ascent to the reignited anti-Western feelings in Russia, courtesy of the Kosovo War. He made explicit promises from the very beginning of his presidential activities to recover as much as possible of Soviet Union's lost glory. Putin's first administration encountered several challenges that were not much different from what Russia had faced in the 1990s: the expansion of NATO, Chechnya spinning out of control, and Russia's declining military and economic power. However, one new major issue that arose with the George W. Bush administration (2001-2009) was even more formidable than the old ones: Washington decided to walk away from the 1972 ABM Treaty. In 2001-2002, Russia was in no position to counter this development, and the Russians felt vulnerable. On the other hand, the rising oil prices and higher international demand for oil and gas helped the Putin government to fill the country's coffers, consolidate state power, and start a slow recovery of Russia's military might.

The first step of the post-Cold War NATO enlargement was taken in 1999, during the NATO-Serbia war, and the process continued in the early 2000s. In the eyes of Russia, NATO was pushing its armies toward Russia. In 2003, a group of radical reformers came to power in Georgia—the process that Moscow initially helped and supported, presumably expecting in return Western support in keeping pro-Russian forces in charge there.<sup>35</sup> However, the Orange Revolution of Ukraine in 2004 prompted Moscow to seek more forceful and radical measures. Now explicitly pro-Western and anti-Russian governments in Tbilisi and Kyiv developed a “join-NATO and the EU” axis that Moscow viewed as the final red line it could not allow NATO to cross.<sup>36</sup> In February 2007, Putin delivered a litany of warnings and admonitions to a group of high-level Western politicians, journalists, and pundits gathered for an annual security meeting in Munich.<sup>37</sup> Among other things, he warned against recognizing Kosovo's independence from Serbia. Exactly a year after the Munich conference, Kosovo declared its independence, and it was duly recognized by the US and all NATO members except Spain, Greece, Slovakia, and Romania.<sup>38</sup> This could not have been taken in Moscow any other way but as a direct insult—no matter what Moscow said and asked, the West was not going to take it seriously unless Russia was ready to act. Putin's determination to bring Russia back as a global power has been absolutely resolute, even if it took him a series of military crises and confrontations to achieve his goal. Unfortunately for the Georgians, and subsequently for the Ukrainians, this path of action commenced in August 2008 with the war in Georgia—a brief war that allowed the Russian leadership to gain immense confidence in their ability to enact changes through the use of force. The results of the war were dramatic but should not have come as unexpected: Putin had pretty much laid his intentions in his Munich performance in February 2007, with which he was pleased, and which he later fondly recalled as “memorable.”<sup>39</sup>

When it came to bilateral Russo-American relations, the Obama administration stepped into an environment of confusion and bewilderment—a product of the Russo-Georgian war of 2008. The relations between the outgoing Bush administration and Moscow were business-like, but the Russo-Georgian war poisoned many good prospects. To conciliate the Russians, the Obama administration essentially acknowledged that the

American approach to the issues that bothered Moscow had been rather thoughtless. The US suspended two important programs: the placement of anti-missile defense components in Eastern Europe, and its defense and anti-terrorism cooperation with Georgia. In response, the Russian Federation did not have to make compromises or give up on anything, and if they were asked to reciprocate in kind, nothing was publicly stated to that effect. The Russians made no effort to show reciprocity anyway. In fact, Russian attitudes hardened on some issues, namely Iran, and more decisively on Syria. Some of the rhetoric voiced in Moscow, specifically by Putin who was running for president again, was insulting and clearly designed to provoke Washington. Putin even claimed that political opposition protests in Russia during the parliamentary and presidential elections of late 2011 and early 2012 had been incited by the US, and he even accused Clinton personally.<sup>40</sup> The purported author of the “reset” policy, Michael McFaul, became the US ambassador to Russia, where he was greeted with insults and enjoyed the kind of “following” (organized by Russia’s state security service) frequently practiced in the USSR.<sup>41</sup> The insults on McFaul opened a long season of open harassment of American diplomats by Russians, about which Washington finally publicly complained in June 2016.<sup>42</sup> The Obama-Clinton “reset” policy led to more problems than it tried to amend, the chief disaster being Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and annexation of Crimea in February-March 2014. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was a direct continuation of the 2014 events. Shortly before the Crimea invasion, McFaul tried to defend the “reset” in Washington,<sup>43</sup> while populist leaders in Moscow openly denounced him.<sup>44</sup> The American ambassadors represent the US president personally, and it was remarkable that McFaul was directly attacked by Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, who called him arrogant, and admonished him to behave better.<sup>45</sup> The failure of the “reset” appeasement of Russia had nothing to do with McFaul’s personality, but it was all due to ever-increasing Russian demands in foreign policy: since the original pre-reset grievances had been resolved to its satisfaction, Moscow learned this lesson well and advanced new demands.

The best audio-visual representation of America’s appeasement of Russia was Obama’s plea to then-President Medvedev to intercede with then-Prime Minister Putin on the issue of the missile defense. Prior to the March 26, 2012, meeting in Seoul, Korea, Obama asked Medvedev to inform Putin, who was returning as president, to give him “some space,” presumably to be better positioned for the November 2012 presidential elections. Medvedev promised to talk about this with his mentor.<sup>46</sup> Unsurprisingly, this exchange produced some harsh criticism in the US, especially in Republican political circles, but in fact, the Obama was fully in line with the symbolic “reset” button pushing in early 2009, and even with some steps undertaken by the outgoing Bush administration. Bush’s Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, and Russian’s foreign minister Lavrov had made every effort to minimize the negative fallout after Russia’s war with Georgia. According to Rice, at their first post-war meeting at the United Nations,

We agreed to pass a Security Council resolution on Iran simply reaffirming past resolutions. The reason was to send a signal to Iran that the Georgian war had not



caused us to abandon our joint efforts toward Tehran. It was never quite the same, but we managed to work together for the rest of our term. Nonetheless, I'm sure Lavrov looked forward to the arrival of another team in Washington.<sup>47</sup>

America's perceived unique power status in an alleged unipolar world ended with the question posed by Steve Hadley, national security advisor in Bush's second administration: "Are we prepared to go to war with Russia over Georgia?"<sup>48</sup> One could easily imagine similar questions asked in London and in Paris in 1939 after Germany swallowed the whole of Czechoslovakia.

Trump, who succeeded Obama in 2018, announced his vision of transatlantic relations by openly questioning the validity and usefulness of NATO—music to the ears of those in the Kremlin. Trump substantively continued Obama's failed "reset" policy by giving Russia a free hand in Syria, and not pressing it over the issues in its immediate neighborhood, specifically Ukraine. Trump has openly admired Putin both during his presidency and after. In his unique vision of the world, Russia was in the Trump camp, while Ukraine was in that of President Joe Biden's. Trump's men tried hard to find dirt on the Biden family in Ukraine, emboldened by the fact that Biden's son been given a cushy job in a large oil corporation there. During his one-term presidency, Trump and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, were primarily preoccupied with several issues to aid and assist the State of Israel in both diplomatic and international security arrangements. Indeed, the Trump team managed to do much for Israel, and both American and Israeli officials held several productive meetings to find common grounds regarding problems crucial to Israel. Significant breakthroughs that Israel achieved during the Trump presidency suggest that Moscow was helpful and assisted the joint US-Israeli efforts. However, Russian leaders do not just help America or any other country out of the goodness of their hearts—they always want something in return. That something most likely was American non-interference in the military preparations that Moscow was holding in its neighborhood, specifically in Georgia and Ukraine.

## **Conclusion**

Once a darling of American foreign policy during the George W. Bush presidency, Georgia largely fell from the American foreign policy radar after 2008. Obama avoided the Georgia question entirely but did interfere in Ukrainian affairs during the domestic protest rallies in early 2014, which produced a firestorm of criticism in Moscow. The Kremlin partly used American interference in Ukrainian politics during the unrest in early 2014, which forced President Viktor Yanukovich out of the country, to justify its attack on Ukraine in February 2014 and its subsequent annexation of Crimea. Moscow identified then-Vice-President Biden as the chief boogiemer calling him America's "viceroy" in Ukraine. The 2014 annexation of Crimea was followed by eight years of anti-Ukrainian and anti-Western propaganda in Russian mainstream media. The Russian government slowly eliminated independent media sources and severely curtailed freedom of speech. The pro-government media in Russia dehumanized and ridiculed Ukrainians for eight years, helping the Russian

government prepare the public opinion for the full-scale military invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The Russian government propaganda denounced and ridiculed the US and the West in a similar light. In late 2021, the Kremlin propagandists started openly talking in Russian mass media about “conquering Western Europe” soon. However, the US and its European allies did not waver in their collective efforts to appease Russia until Moscow launched open military aggression against Ukraine with an unlimited objective of destroying Ukraine’s statehood. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 ended Western appeasement of Russia. However, even then, the US has struggled to find common ground with Europeans to stop and reverse Russian aggression.

With the war in Ukraine, an ugly spectrum of thermonuclear war is more likely to materialize than ever before in history. Kremlin officials and propagandists have touted the alleged invincibility and superiority of their country’s nuclear arsenal as they had praised their conventional forces. However, with the war in Ukraine it has become clear that the information these propagandists and their leaders relied on in preparation of their armed forces for war was largely false. There is a distinct and clear danger that the Russian leadership has similarly false information regarding their nuclear forces’ alleged superiority and invincibility. If they were to make the same mistake in the application of their strategic forces, the consequences will be truly tragic: they will successfully kill themselves and take millions of innocent people along.

**Lasha Tchantouridzé** is professor and director of the graduate programs in diplomacy and international relations, Norwich University. He is also a Davis Center associate, Harvard University, Boston, Massachusetts; research fellow, the Center for Defence and Security Studies, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Canada; and advisory board member of Peace & War Center at Norwich University. He earned his PhD in international relations from Queen’s University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

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