

CHINA'S RESPONSE TO RUSSIA-GEORGIA CONFLICT

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Russia's aggression of August 2008 against Georgia has posed a major dilemma for Chinese diplomacy. China believes in and advocates certain principles, based on internationally established norms for conducting state-to-state relations, which have been grossly violated by Russia, while committing aggression against a smaller and weaker sovereign neighbouring state. It is, therefore, hard for China to condone Russia's act, despite the fact that it has a strategic partnership with Russia and both share geopolitical interest in the region. The Russian act of aggression was essentially to punish Georgia for leaning towards the EU and US, and especially in joining NATO. In the past as well, Russia has been explicitly expressing displeasure over NATO's overtures to woo Georgia into its sphere of influence. China has been equally concerned over NATO's increasing ingress in the Eurasian region. China considers American and NATO moves to bring Georgia into the network of Western security pacts as a threat to a close Chinese partner. The Article 9 of the "Treaty of Good-Neighborliness and Friendly Cooperation Between the People's Republic of China and the Russian Federation" reads: "When a situation arises in which one of the contracting parties deems that peace is being threatened and undermined or its security interests are involved or when it is confronted with the threat of aggression, the contracting parties shall immediately hold contacts and consultations in order to eliminate such threats."¹ Ideally speaking, if Russia considered the Georgian situation threatening to its security interests, then under the treaty obligations China was expected to help Russia remove the threat. However, the situation in reality progressed differently.

Russian aggression against Georgia has resulted in the creation of two new states, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which have declared their independence. Russia has formally recognized the independence of both the states. Following the August 8 military offensive in South Ossetia, President Dmitry Medvedev argued that recognition was necessary to protect the republics from Georgian acts of aggression.

Such ad hoc creation of new states sets an inherently dangerous precedence for China and its territorial integration, especially in the case of Taiwan and to a lesser extent, Xinjiang and Tibet. Therefore, since the eruption of the crisis in Georgia, China has cautiously maintained a low profile on the issue. China's dilemma lay in the fact that it could not clearly condemn the invasion of Georgia without offending Russia, a strategic partner, nor could it condone the act as it would contradict its stated policy and undermine its own territorial interests. On the other hand, not doing anything and simply accepting the Russian position would create an image problem for China as it would be seen adopting double standards.

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Background of the conflict

The recent conflict in Georgia has a history of mayhem and tensions which could be traced back to the 1920s, when South Ossetia attempted to declare independence but failed and as a consequence ended up as an autonomous region within Soviet Georgia after the Red Army conquered Georgia. Once again in 1989, when the process of disintegration of Soviet Union began, South Ossetia made efforts aimed at either joining North Ossetia in Russia or gain independence. With the declaration of independence from the Soviet Union by Georgia, a conflict broke out between Georgia and South Ossetia in 1991, resulting in the estimated deaths of 2000-4000 people and displacement of a large population. Russia intervened to mediate and brokered a ceasefire in June 1992 between the warring factions. Under the agreement a peacekeeping force was created comprising 530 Russian and 300 each from South Ossetia and Georgia. The peacekeeping force was deployed in the security zone around Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia. Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) provided facilitation for confidence building and the security zone was patrolled by their monitors.

In the following period, Georgia increasingly came under EU and US influence, while Moscow consolidated its grip over South Ossetia. The ground reality in strategic terms in fact had pitched Russia directly against Georgia. Therefore, on August 7, when Georgia used heavy long-range artillery against South Ossetia, the very next day, Russia came out with a strong military response against Georgia without giving any chance to mediation or any other means of settling the dispute. With the French President Sarkozy's mediatory efforts Russia agreed to a six point formula which included Russian troop's withdrawal. On August 12, Russian President Medvedev declared "the aim of Russia's operation for coercing the Georgian side to peace had been achieved and it had been decided to conclude the operation... The aggressor has been punished."²

China-Georgia Relations

Georgia, located between Caucasus and the Black Sea, has had traditional links with China, since the time of 'Silk Roads'. However, in the recent times, this historic relationship was re-discovered when Georgia declared its independence from Moscow, and the governments of China and Georgia signed the 'Joint Communiqué on the Establishment of Diplomatic Relations' in Tbilisi on June 9, 1992 – officially establishing diplomatic ties at the ambassadorial level and beginning a new era of bilateral ties.

Since the establishment of diplomatic relations there has been a regular interaction and exchange of high-level visits between the two countries. In June 2007, the two countries celebrated the 15th anniversary of establishment of diplomatic relations. At this occasion, China's Minister of Foreign Affairs, Yang Jiechi, stated, "We are happy to see the smooth growth of bilateral ties since the establishment of diplomatic relations. Believing in equality of all countries regardless of their size, China and Georgia treat each other with respect and sincerity. We render each other understanding and support on major issues concerning national independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity."³

Since 2006, the Georgian government has been supporting China on all major issues of China's concern such as Taiwan, Tibet and Xinjiang. The Chinese Government, while appreciating Georgia's support on several issues of their national interest, has offered over the years economic support and in categorical terms support to Georgia's independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity. In April 2006, China persuaded Georgia to renounce official relations with Taiwan, in turn, agreeing in a "Joint Statement of the two presidents" that "Abkhazia and South Ossetia are internal affairs of Georgia and should be properly handled through peaceful negotiations based on respect of Georgia's state sovereignty and territorial integrity."⁴

Chinese Response

Russian aggression against Georgia generated mixed signals from China. China's response to Russian invasion of Georgia has been very cautious and ambiguous by design.

Initially, the Chinese response was virtually non-existent, as the opening ceremony of Olympic Games coincided with the Russian invasion of Georgia on August 8. Beijing showed no concern when on August 9 Chinese President Hu met with the Russian Prime Minister Putin. In their meeting, Hu praised China's relationship with its Russian "strategic cooperative partner" as "advancing across the board precisely in accordance with our commonly declared goals."⁵

China's ambiguity on the issue was deliberate. Open support to the Russian action would have a) amounted to legitimizing claims by Taiwanese, Tibetans and Uighurs for independence from China; b) it would have been contrary to the opinions expressed by the international community on this issue. On the other hand, for China, Russia is too important an ally and it simply can not afford to take any position that opposes Russia, either by condemning aggression or supporting Georgian and international community's position. However, at the same time it was important for China that it must exhibit its concern over this development. In order to do so, China chose to use the forum of Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit which was convened on August 28 in Dushanbe (twenty days after the August 8 events).

China's Foreign Ministry spokesman Qin Gang told a news conference ahead of the SCO summit that "leaders will expound their shared position on issues of interest within the framework of the agenda, and the South Ossetia issue will be no exception." Gang further said that Beijing hoped that Moscow and Tbilisi could find "a peaceful solution to the Georgian-South Ossetia conflict through dialogue."⁶ China was also concerned about the Georgia crisis because it was worried Russia might exert similar pressure on Central Asian states – all of which were former Soviet republics like Georgia and have no match to the Russian military might. A veiled criticism by China and Central Asian states on Russian action is reflected in Dushanbe Declaration which says in its Article 1;

"The interdependence of states tremendously increased and security and development are becoming inseparable in the 21st century. None of the present-day international problems can be resolved by force. The factor of force is decreasing objectively in global and geopolitical issues.

Any attempt for an exclusively forcible resolution will lead nowhere at all and only hinders local conflicts from being settled comprehensively. The comprehensive resolution of existing problems is possible only when all the parties' interests are considered in full and when they are involved in a negotiating process, but not by isolating them. Attempts to strengthen one's own security to the detriment of others' security will not promote the maintenance of global security and stability.

The heads of state reiterated the need to respect each country's and each nation's historical and cultural traditions and efforts aimed at preserving the unity of the state and its territorial integrity, as well as at encouraging good-neighborly relations between nations and their joint development in accordance with international law."

Russia interpreted the Dushanbe Summit as supporting its position on Georgia and claimed that the action was taken on humanitarian grounds. The Russian Foreign Ministry said on August 28, that China had expressed its understanding of Russia's decision to recognize Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. President Medvedev said recognition was necessary to protect the republics from Georgian acts of aggression, following the August 8 military offensive in South Ossetia. Medvedev urged the leaders at the summit in Dushanbe, to support Russia's role in Georgia, in order to "send a serious signal to those who are trying to justify the aggression that was committed."⁷

However, in reality, the Russian military action in support of secession of two ethnic groups from a sovereign state grossly contradicts and undermines the very foundation and spirit of SCO framework which is based on fighting three evils namely "separatism, extremism and terrorism." In the case of Georgia, Russia is seen standing on the side of the separatists.

Conclusion

Russia-Georgia conflict created a serious dilemma for Chinese diplomacy as the Chinese government had, since 2006, considered South Ossetia and Abkhazian issues as internal affairs of Georgia. China had accepted the sovereignty of Georgia over these territories. Chinese political expediency rendered it unable to take a principled position in favor of Georgia. Chinese analysts were unable to voice their concerns over this issue. Chinese media also maintained a low coverage policy on Russia-Georgia conflict. While China seemed to be uncomfortable with the situation, in order to safeguard its long-term strategic interests with Russia, it decided to keep a low diplomatic profile on this issue at all forums, including UNSC. For China, the events in Georgia had set a negative precedence with serious implications for the regions/territories where similar conditions exist. The case of Taiwan in particular has continued to inform Chinese strategic thinking. China is also of the view that in Russia's fight with the EU+US, it should refrain from taking a definitive position. The only strategic advantage for China in the aftermath of the Russian invasion is that the Russian-Georgia is likely to restrain and delay NATO's eastward expansion and consequently provide China with an opportunity to consolidate its strategic interests in the Eurasian region.

References

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- ⁶ <http://en.rian.ru/world/20080827/116312664.html>
- ⁷ RIA, Novosti, August 28, 2008