

Rational Russia

Decision-Making in a Declining Superpower

Russia's 2008 invasion of Georgia demonstrates that Putin's state still behaves rationally | J. Haley Tucker

In August of 2008, Russia invaded Georgia in a military move that shocked the globe. The "Five Day War," as it has been named, proved to be a short, but bloody war. Although provoked by fighting in South Ossetia, the Russian invasion appeared to be somewhat random and much more extensive than the world expected. This article utilizes Graham Allison's rational model of decision making to wade through the propaganda and ascertain the thinking behind this move by Russia, as well as the aftermath of the decision. Through the lens of the rational model, it is clear that the decision by Russia to invade in a limited war provided the most benefits with the least amount of risk.

The Kremlin's hand was forced to a decision during the night of August 7, 2008. The events of the previous six months had culminated in a historic moment. In February, Kosovo had declared independence, and the world watched as genocide and conflict ensued. Two months later, Ukraine and Georgia were denied a Membership Action Plan (MAP) with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) following intense debate. Although denied, Georgia was promised a MAP "at some point" in the future if they still desired. Skirmishes, bombings, and other military conflicts were ongoing in the regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in Georgia. The two regions under dispute hosted Russian peacekeepers, as well as Russian military bases, who worked alongside separatist forces in each area. The Russian military con-

ducted patrols along the border of Georgia beginning on July 15. These exercises were intended to prepare the Russian 58th army for an "operation of peace enforcement" in either South Ossetia or Abkhazia. Although these operations ended on August 2, these troops continued to be stationed at the border until the war started on the 8th.

All of these events came to a head when Mikheil Saakashvili, the President of Georgia, ordered troops to restore constitutional order in South Ossetia late on August 7th. Saakashvili had been given intelligence by Georgian soldiers that Russian troops were moving through the Roki Tunnel in force, presumably intending to invade. There is much debate over whether the Russians invaded first or the Georgians attacked South Ossetia. The Georgians assert that Russia invaded and forced Saakashvili to return fire. The Russians argue Saakashvili attacked South Ossetia randomly in the night to regain control of the provinces. Regardless of which occurred first, Russia was forced to make a decision in response to Saakashvili's military action in South Ossetia.

In order to fully understand this decision, the in-depth factors that precipitated the decision and provided the rationale for the Kremlin's position must be assessed. The first is the Kosovo precedent. When Kosovo declared its independence in February of 2008, intervention by NATO and the United States angered Russia



fueled fears of losing influence in the Caucasus. At the time, intervention was cited as necessary for humanitarian reasons: to stop the mass genocide and ethnic cleansing that was occurring. Russia utilized this precedent of Western intervention when legitimizing the decision to invade Georgia.

In reference to humanitarian concerns, Putin also compared the overnight bombing of Tskhinvali to the Srebrenica genocide in 1995. The Kremlin accused Georgia of attempting genocide against South Ossetians, claiming that over two thousand civilian citizens had died and insinuating that by taking action, Russia would just be following suit with the West.

In addition, the ability of Russia to claim that South Ossetians and Abkhazians are Russian citizens came from a policy of "passportization," which began in 2002. This streamlined process allowed citizens of surrounding countries to easily gain Russian citizenship. Though controversial, passportization allowed Russia to attempt to legitimize impinging upon a neighboring country's sovereignty. Despite this attempt, the international community has not recognized these citizenships unless the citizens have renounced Georgian citizenship officially. Therefore, Russia uses passportization as legitimacy, but it is ineffective. However, the Kosovo precedent provided Russia with necessary legitimation for the decision the Kremlin was about to make.

The rational model of decision making, outlined by Graham Allison, contains several basic tenets. One of these is the precept that the principal actor is a national government or state. In this case, the principal actor is Russia. Russia acts unitarily in this decision, despite reports of disagreement and discord between Dmitry Medvedev and Vladimir Putin (president and prime minister, respectively, at the time of the war).

There is little consensus over who was actually making the decisions among the Russian elite. Many are now saying that Putin was in control, although he should not have been involved in foreign policy as the Prime Minister. A new documentary entitled "The Lost Day" was released on YouTube accusing Medvedev of slowly responding to the war praised Putin for his assertiveness and leadership skills. Speculation indicates that perhaps this film is purely political to support Putin in the upcoming election. Putin made several comments while he was still president regarding his policies of supporting South Ossetia and Abkhazia through "not declarative, but material support."

This indicates that it was well within Putin's intentions to fully support separatist interests. Putin was also quoted as saying, "There was a plan in place, and I think it is no secret that Russia's forces acted in accordance with this plan [...] The General Staff drew up this plan somewhere in late 2006 or early 2007. I approved it." Not only does this indicate that the invasion into Georgia may have been pre-planned, but also that it was predominantly Putin's plan. Despite whose plan it actually was, the decision to invade was made by the state of Russia and executed unitarily, as per the rational model of decision making.

Another key concept in the rational model is the idea that the action chosen is the value-maximizing option, given the state's goals. Russia's goals regarding Georgia cannot be separated from the Kremlin's general foreign policy strategies. Russia is highly concerned about NATO enlargement and understanding this helps to clarify both the intentions and the timing of the conflict. Georgia's attempts to enter NATO in April sparked renewed fervor and fueled Russia's intentions. According to the 2008 Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, "Russia maintains its negative attitude towards the expansion of NATO, notably to the plans of admitting Ukraine and Geor-

gia to the membership in the alliance, as well as to bringing the NATO military infrastructure closer to the Russian borders on the whole..." Thus, Russia was highly committed to keeping Georgia from gaining membership in NATO.

This goal ties in closely with the continued objective of Russia to maintain influence and control over the regions along the border. Maintaining Russian influence over the Caucasus, as well as deterring a Western advancement towards the border, has been a major goal of Russia since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Russia sees itself as a global power, and desires to maintain this position, especially regionally. These interests provide clarity when thinking about Russia's perspective on the importance of Georgia and its influence in the region.

Another of Russia's goals concerning Georgia was to continue supporting the separatist forces in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, in hopes of absorbing the regions into Russia or at least maintain regional influence. More than gaining these regions, Russia desired to prevent Georgia from regaining full control, thus increasing Western influence in the region. Russian regional hegemony has lost much of its potency since the collapse of the Soviet Union. The loss of territory and power that occurred has left Russia deeply concerned about increased Western influence and control over the region. There is quite a bit of evidence, in fact, that Russia had intended to intervene in Georgia much earlier than August. In late May, Russian troops had entered Abkhazia in order to repair railroad tracks that were not functional. The railroad directly linked Georgia and Russia, allowing troops and equipment to move much faster during the invasion. This, along with repeated skirmishes and provocations of the Georgian government, indicates that perhaps Russia was pre-planning an invasion in order to regain predominance in the region.

With these goals in mind, utilizing the rational model, one must consider the options available to Russia at the time of the decision. Hans Mouritzen and Anders Wivel have described four possible options that Russia could have taken. First, Russia could have remained passive and simply supported the separatist forces, as they had been doing by providing arms and peacekeepers, and avoid further engagement. Second, Russia could have initiated a large-scale, short-term intervention, in which troops fully engage militarily to defend the separatists, but return back to Russian territory after. Third, Russia could engage in limited war to fully control South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The last option was to invade completely and occupy either security zones or the whole of Georgia.

If Russia had chosen to remain passive, it would have been inconsistent with the Russian Foreign Policy Concept, as well as with history. This option also would have undermined Russia's support of the separatists because it would be clear that they did not have the full backing of the Russian government. The second option of short-term intervention accomplishes many of the goals of limited war at similar cost, but does not provide the maximum benefits. Full invasion and occupation of Georgia provides maximum benefits to Russia, but with increased cost. Occupying Georgia would require much more military involvement and an exponentially higher cost, due to the cost of installing a puppet government and maintaining order long-term. There would also have been major repercussions to Russia's international reputation. Even in the limited war that Russia waged in Georgia, the West detected echoes of a resurgent Cold War Russia. A complete invasion and occupation of Georgia would have rekindled anti-Russian sentiment akin to that of the Cold War era. These costs were too substantial to be chosen rationally.

Within the rational model, the principal actor makes the decision that is value-maximizing. Russia chose the option of limited war because it accomplished the most goals at the least cost. Limited war meant that Russia would invade, defeat Georgian forces, increase and maintain control of the separatist


provinces, and then cease. Russia accomplished this task within five days, although some sources state that forces did not leave until much later. After international calls for a ceasefire and much diplomatic negotiation, a ceasefire agreement was signed which ended the war. During the five days of conflict, French President Nicolas Sarkozy and other European Union leaders met with President Medvedev and President Saakashvili. Sarkozy drafted a peace plan, which was eventually agreed upon after much diplomatic wrangling. After the ceasefire was signed by both parties, debates continued concerning whether Russia would follow through with plans to evacuate troops and abide by the ceasefire. Much pressure from the international community led to an eventual retreat and subsequent ending of war.

Russia had successfully met the majority of its goals in the conflict, with the exception of completely ending Georgia's control over the separatists. In a statement highlighting Russia's success in goals regarding NATO, Medvedev illuminated, "For some of our partners, including NATO, it was a signal that they must think about geopolitical stability before making a decision to expand the alliance." In other words, the war in Georgia warned NATO of the potential consequences of expansion towards Russia.

The costs of the war were minimal for Russia, with Georgia suffering the majority of the casualties. The Independent Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict of Georgia found that Russia lost 67 servicemen, while Georgia lost 170 servicemen, 14 policemen, and 228 civilians, with many more injured. In addition to human cost discrepancies, the Russian government did not suffer many political casualties. Public opinion in Russia greatly supported the war due in part to governmental control and censorship of media in Russia. Western response to the war also demonstrated that Russia would face very little consequence for their actions. The West refused to choose sides between Russia and Georgia during the war, instead calling for a ceasefire. Since 2008, President Obama has pursued a policy to "reset" relations with Russia. This policy has not included any form of indict-

ment of the war in Georgia. As a result, Russia has succeeded in achieving many of its regional goals with very few real consequences.

The aftermath of the Five Day War remains to be fully revealed. Not only did Georgia lose the war, but as noted earlier, it also sustained a much higher degree of casualties. The impact on Georgians, both in the heart of the country and in the separatist regions, was profound. As of this writing, NATO has yet to offer Georgia a MAP. Although initially seen as the victims of the war, the Georgian government has begun losing support as the media has focused on discovering the initiators of the conflict, rather than its full context. The Saakashvili government also sustained damage, as Western countries are now less convinced of Georgia's ability to maintain law and order. The aftermath of the war for Russia, aside from meeting the goals previously discussed, has been comparatively less damaging. Russia announced its recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. Despite this announcement by Medvedev, very few other states have followed suit, indicating that perhaps Russia overstepped its bounds.

Russian foreign policy towards Georgia continues to be ambiguous yet frosty. While there has yet to be another full-fledged war between the two states, much of the tension remains. When one regards this conflict through the lens of the rational model, however, one can ascertain the thinking of Russian policymakers and leaders. Clear links exist between Russia's decisions and the statements and policies available on public record. Without question, Russia operates as a rational actor in the foreign policy world. Decisions are made based upon pragmatism and the selection of the value-maximizing option. All of these factors lead to the conclusion that the decision to go to war with Georgia in the summer of 2008 was a rational and calculated decision based upon an assessment of the potential options. It will certainly be interesting to see how Russia implements future foreign policy objectives regarding the state of Georgia. 



Global Issues. Local Perspective.

Your passport to unique insights in foreign affairs - brought to you by the students of the Patterson School of Diplomacy & International Commerce.



And don't forget to take *Ex-Patt* with you!
Connect with us on your favorite social media sites.