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Don't Resort to Putinesque Payback

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WASHINGTON — Russia's brutal and calculated invasion of Georgia raises the curtain on a dangerously volatile period in world politics. Further miscalculation and posturing by Russian, American and European leaders could damage the prospects of global peace for decades to come.

Unilateral U.S. sanctions and more rhetoric are unlikely to succeed in reversing the immediate consequences of Vladimir Putin's lunge for revenge and advantage in the Caucasus. The overriding policy goal for Washington should be the forging of a new U.S.-European understanding on Russia that will be as durable and agile as containment was in the Cold War.

Times change, as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice pointed out when asserting that "this is not 1968 and the invasion of Czechoslovakia," even if there are eerie parallels to that presidential election year for Americans. But trans-Atlantic cooperation is still essential to managing relations with a Kremlin that seems resurgent but may in fact be overreaching.

Called "Putin's War" by some in Moscow, this conflict exposes the failure of Russia's post-communist leadership to develop a political culture that does not depend on force and intimidation along with a tactical cleverness that frequently backfires.

For Putin, the attack on Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's forces was not just business. It was intensely personal. Putin set out to bring about the downfall of the brash, impulsive Georgian who has overplayed the support he received from Washington.

"Putin's feelings about Saakashvili resemble those George W. Bush had about Saddam Hussein," a Russian

friend observed as his nation's troops moved out of South Ossetia and into the Georgian heartland. "This could turn out to be our Iraq."

The invasion has also stripped away the pretense that Putin is sharing power with President Dmitry Medvedev, whose real job is to act as Putin's lawyer. Medvedev negotiated enough loopholes in the cease-fire deal brokered by fellow lawyer and French President Nicolas Sarkozy to drive a tank force through — which Putin promptly did.

The Russian prime minister's thirst for revenge extends far beyond Georgia. He is a transactional leader, expecting clear quids whenever he offers quos. In Putin's view, President Bush did not reciprocate for the help and support Putin provided in the immediate wake of Sept. 11, 2001. Instead, the Americans continued to push for NATO expansion into Ukraine and Georgia, decided to place U.S. missile defenses near the Russian border and egged the Europeans on in granting Kosovo an independence from Serbia that Russians refuse to recognize.

None of these actions, it turns out, were cost-free, as both the Clinton and Bush 43 administrations seemed to assume or at least to pretend when challenged on them. Putin is someone who believes that a thumb in the eye deserves two if not three in return.

The invasion of Georgia was carefully if unpersuasively choreographed to echo NATO's 1999 humanitarian intervention in Kosovo, with Russia claiming it acted to stop ethnic cleansing and genocide. By making the severing of any Georgian control over the enclaves of South Ossetia and Abkhazia a fait accompli, Moscow would turn this conflict into the kind of bleeding wound for the West that Kosovo is for Russia.

None of this excuses or attenuates the rape of Georgia. But the next American president should avoid the arrogance demonstrated by both the Clinton and Bush administrations, which acted as if Russia would have no choice but to swallow NATO expansion or Kosovo independence in any form Washington chose to dictate.

Putin now acts in similar fashion, apparently heedless that the Georgia action was certain to make former Soviet satellites and states more determined to seek U.S. protection. A few days after the invasion began, Poland put aside its reservations and signed a long-delayed accord to host U.S. missile interceptors.

Initial efforts by Bush and Rice to respond by getting NATO foreign ministers to suspend Russian participation in alliance maneuvers and to rush reconstruction aid to Georgia have been uncontroversial and are moving forward. This may in turn clear the way for stricter steps such as bans on Western investment in Russia's oil and gas industry and a threat to boycott the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi.

European and U.S. cooperation should emphasize strategic steps that do not descend to Putinesque payback. Bush, and his successor, should not march to the same vindictive drummer the Russian leader follows. They should avoid any temptation — which will be reinforced by this being an American election year — to turn from too often ignoring Russia to punishing Russia out of spite or pique.

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