

## Jet Fighters, Toy Soldiers and Juvenile Delinquency

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As American Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice anticipated receiving Bulgaria's *Stara Planina Medal* just before heading to Tbilisi, four Russian fighter jets buzzed Georgian territory. Radar tracks indicate that they penetrated Georgian airspace on July 8 at 2011, cavorting above the separatist territory of South Ossetia for about forty minutes. What is the point of this latest bout of international juvenile delinquency?

Of course, Russian violations of Georgian airspace are nothing new.

On the night of March 11, 2007, Russian Mi-24 *Hind* helicopters snaked through the Caucasus Mountain passes that lead from Russia to Georgia to attack Upper Abkhazia, the only part of Abkhazia controlled by Georgia.

On August 6, 2007, a Russian Su-24 *Fencer* fighter aircraft penetrated Georgian airspace three times above the town of Stepansminda. On the third foray, it traveled southwest to Tsitelubani where it fired a Kh-58U anti-radar missile, apparently aimed at a nearby radar. The missile fell, undetonated into a vegetable field meters away from houses in the village.

Russia denied involvement in either attack, suggesting the Georgians had attacked themselves with weapons they do not possess. Incongruously, after both attacks Russian Special Envoy for CIS Countries Valery Kenyaikin made clear that Georgia deserved the punishments.

On July 8, the Russian fighters did not fire their weapons. Instead, Moscow escalated the political rhetoric: "In order to clarify the situation, aircraft of the Russian Air Force carried out a brief flight over the territory of South Ossetia. As subsequent events showed, this step helped to cool hot heads in Tbilisi and to prevent a military scenario from unfolding, the likelihood of which was more than real."

Moscow's aerial antics and pugnacious talk fit into the escalation of Russian and Russian-backed aggression and violence over the last three months.

Most recently, as Rice, as well as OSCE and United Nations teams traveled to Tbilisi, bombs, automatic weapons and rocket propelled grenades rocked Abkhazia, and separatist leaders slammed shut the administrative border with the rest of Georgia. Meanwhile, in South Ossetia, machine gun fire and mortar attacks riddled the already tense situation.

Then came the fighters and—more tellingly—Moscow's statement, released just as Rice and Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili began their Tbilisi press conference. It is unlikely the timing was coincidental.

Rice's statement was diplomatic and constructive. "The United States remains committed to the territorial integrity of Georgia, to its democratic development." The territorial conflicts must be "resolved peacefully" and "some of the activities that Russia has engaged in have been activities that

have not promoted peaceful resolution.” Finally, Rice said, “I am committed to you to try with our colleagues to reinvigorate, indeed, intensify our efforts to resolve these frozen conflicts.”

In contrast, the Russia statement was the diplomatic equivalent of an obscene gesture made toward Rice’s fading airplane. That is Moscow’s response to her call for reinvigorated diplomacy.

Why the trash talk and muscle flexing? Because Russia cannot articulate what it wants.

We only know what it does not want—preaching about democracy and human rights, scrutiny of its elections, busybodies poking around Iran, Sudan or Zimbabwe, world economic institutions, NATO, the European Union, American missile defenses, the American Navy, or new lines drawn on the map of Europe.

The last one is the key.

From 1945 to 1989 there was a stark line across Europe—Winston Churchill dubbed it the “Iron Curtain” that ran “from Stettin on the Baltic to Trieste on the Adriatic.” Then, a group of East German holidaymakers crashed the fence between Hungary and Austria, turning the Iron Curtain into scrap metal. It had been based only on rusted lies and intimidation.

Democracy spread eastward with remarkable celerity. Unsurprisingly, the countries that chose freedom joined—or want to join—freedom’s flagship institutions, the European Union and NATO. This is the institutionalization of freedom, not a sinister plot to redraw lines on the map.

Indeed, Europe is an EU and NATO patchwork. Many countries belong to both. Austria, Cyprus, Finland, Ireland, Malta and Sweden belong to the EU but not to NATO. Iceland, Norway and Turkey belong to NATO but not the EU. Switzerland belongs to neither but is without doubt a European country.

It is really Russia that wants to draw lines around what little is left. Georgia and Ukraine loom so large in Moscow’s psyche because, once they fulfill their aspirations, Russia will have to face the only line left in Europe that matters—from Narva to Taganrog and along the Caucasus Mountains, Russia’s European border.

Then, international juvenile delinquency with jet fighters and toy soldiers will no longer insulate Russia from contemplation of its own essence and future.

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