Russia and Georgia are at war. Reports are that on 7 August Georgian forces under the orders of Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili moved into the region of South Ossetia, a region juridically part of the Georgian state but one that, like Abkhazia, refused to recognize Georgian sovereignty following the break-up of the Soviet Union and fought a war with Tbilisi. The objective of the Georgian forces was to capture the capital of South Ossetia, Tshkinvali, and reassert Tbilisi’s control over the region. The Russian Federation had peacekeepers deployed in South Ossetia, and Georgian forces engaged them in combat. In response to the Georgian incursion, responded by mounting what appears to be a sizeable invasion, sending in armored columns into Ossetia and conducting air raids on targets inside the Georgian Republic.

Even if Ossetian reports of 1,500 lost to Georgian artillery and air strikes and Georgian claims of having shot down ten Russian aircraft are revealed to be exaggerated, it is clear that this fighting is far more than a mere flare-up in another remote impoverished are of Eurasia. Instead, it testifies to a significant and dangerous shift in the balance of power in Eurasia and perhaps around the globe more generally. At a minimum, it demonstrates the return of a substantially more capable and assertive Russia. It may well reveal a worrying overextension of US involvement and the limits of democratization and liberalization as a simultaneous solvent for regional problems and vehicle for the expansion of Western influence.

The current situation is not wholly without precedent, but instead calls to mind the landscape of the Caucasus after WWI. In the wake of the Russian Revolutions and the disintegration of the Russian Empire in 1917, Wilhelmine Germany encouraged Georgian Mensheviks in May 1918 to proclaim Georgia a sovereign and independent state. Even as it was still engaged in a titanic struggle against France, Britain and the United States, Germany had its eyes on the future exploitation of the Caucasus and had identified Georgia as the key to control of the export of Caucasian and Caspian resources, and of oil in particular. In a similar way, the US and the EU have regarded the independence of Georgia as critical for the diversification of export routes for Eurasian energy resources beyond Russian (and Iranian) control.

Mikheil Saakashvili came to prominence as a Western media darling as a result of the much ballyhooed “Rose Revolution” of 2003, when at age 36 he led anti-government protesters bearing roses who peacefully seized the parliament and compelled the ruling president and one-time Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze to flee and later resign. Under Shevardnadze, Georgia had stagnated, both economically as well as politically. Corruption was endemic throughout government and society, and the population of the resource-rich country remained desperately poor. Not only did Abkhazia and South Ossetia continue (with Russian support) to defy Tbilisi’s rule, but the Muslim region of Adjaria, too, functioned as an independent fiefdom.
The Rose revolution was hailed as a template for the future of Eurasia, (and of the Middle East, as well, as commentators attempted to portray Ukraine’s “Orange Revolution,” Lebanon’s “Cedar Revolution,” and Egypt’s “Kifayeh” movement as part of a global dynamic). Saakashvili personified this belief that the future belonged to a pro-democracy, pro-free market, young and dynamic generation that was unabashedly pro-Western. He has enjoyed some successes. He managed to breathe hope into Georgians, reduced corruption, and brought Adjaria under Tbilisi’s control. Saakashvili proved an eager partner with the US, not least in the military and security fields. Georgia became a candidate for membership in NATO, and Georgia has a contingent of forces deployed in Iraq supporting the US effort.

Saakashvili has been noticeably less successful in resolving the questions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Tbilisi’s problems with these regions are not new. These regions are inhabited by non-Georgian peoples, and both fought inconclusive wars against Tbilisi following the break-up of the Soviet Union. A similar process had unfolded when the Menshevik Georgian Republic declared independence. Tbilisi found itself embroiled in a civil war with the Abkhaz and the Ossetians. The Abkhaz aspired to belong to the nascent Union of Allied Mountaineers of the North Caucasus, among whom were the Circassian peoples of the North Caucasus, to whom the Abkhaz are related linguistically and culturally. The South Ossetians speak not a Caucasian but an Indo-European language distantly related to Persian. Unlike the Georgians, (who represent one of the world’s oldest Christian traditions) but like most of the Abkhaz and the mountain peoples of the North Caucasus, the South Ossetians are Muslim (the exception among the North Caucasian mountaineers are the North Ossetians, who happen to be nominally Orthodox Christians). One consequence of Menshevik Georgia’s wars with the Abkhaz and Ossetians was to weaken it before the Bolshevik invasion of 1921, which completed the reconsolidation of Russian (now Soviet) control over the Caucasus.

No such grand reconquista is in the offing today, but no one should not underestimate Russia’s determination to humiliate Saakashvili and deliver a blow to expanding US influence in the region. Whereas the Western media portrayed Saakashvili positively as a dynamic liberal reformer, it has devoted far less attention to Saakashvili’s habit of putting his foot in the mouth while antagonizing Russia, a habit that the Russian media has for the past several years exploited to full in order to depict Saakashvili as a witless stooge of America.

This is not to suggest Saakashvili is personally responsible for the deterioration of relations with Russia. Russia has been cultivating a particularly strong resentment of Georgian independence since the time of Shevardnadze, who initiated a decisive shift toward cooperation with the West. (Indeed, many Russians came to suspect that Shevardnadze’s ascent to power in Georgia in 1992 was a reward by the West for his role in dismantling the Soviet empire under Gorbachev). The Russians found Georgia’s embrace of the US and Europe as especially offensive. In the popular Russian perception, the Georgians benefited disproportionately from Soviet rule. Living standards were higher in Georgia than in Russia, and Georgians were seen as being exceptionally adept at working the system to their benefit. Georgia was also something of a prize of the Soviet empire, and thus to see the Georgians repudiate their ties with Russia and jump into the Western camp so joyfully was a particularly painful rebuke.
These emotions accompany an intense struggle over more tangible matters such as control of energy routes from Eurasia to the outside and the expansion of NATO and American military might. Moscow owes the revival of its power not only to its possession of hydrocarbon resources but also to its ability to control the export routes of its energy-rich neighbors. Georgia’s cooperation in the construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, which sends oil from the Caspian through Georgia to the Mediterranean, is a direct challenge to Russia’s main source of power. Similarly, Georgia’s bid to enter NATO has stirred unease among the Russian leadership and public alike. To say that Moscow has been unhelpful in resolving the Abkhazian and Ossetian conflicts or in establishing proper relations with Tbilisi would be an understatement. Among others things, Russian jets in recent months had violated Georgian airspace repeatedly, downing Georgian remotely-piloted aircraft and even dropping bombs on Georgian territory. Moscow then brazenly denied any such acts, thereby signaling its impudence to Tbilisi and elsewhere. Saakashvili called Moscow’s bluff and lost.

Now that Moscow finds itself in a war with Georgia, I expect that it will not be content to see a mere return of the status-quo ante. Moscow has been thirsting both to knock Saakashvili down a peg and to rebuff the US in the Caucasus and elsewhere. For the past several years, the Russian media has been relentlessly negative in its portrayals of the US and American prospects, gloating over such things as American difficulties in Iraq and the slowing American economy. Russian Prime Minister Medvedev’s denunciation in June of American “egotism” and predictions that America can’t solve its crisis suggests that the belief that America is overextended and weak is shared by Russia’s leadership as well as its public. A war with Georgia provides Russia an excellent opportunity. Georgia, after all, is much closer geographically to Russia and has had, for better or for worse, close relations with Russia for far, far longer than with America.

South Ossetians, like the Abkhaz, carry Russian passports. Russia’s actions against Georgia and Medvedev’s promise that Russia will defend its citizens “wherever they are” will echo in Central Asia, including natural gas rich Turkmenistan which has treated its Russian minority poorly. To justify its intervention and bombardment of Georgia, Moscow has cited NATO’s bombing of Serbia on behalf of Kosovo in 1999. This illustrates not only a certain creativity among Russia’s diplomats, but also a desire to avenge the West’s dismissal of Russia’s interests in that conflict and to overthrow the post-Cold War Western-dominated international system more generally.

Washington thus may well find itself facing a much bigger and messier crisis than it had ever bargained for in backing the youthful but perhaps too dynamic Saakashvili. It is difficult to argue that Georgia itself is a vital US interest (ensuring a diversity of energy supplies is a real and growing concern for the EU, but the EU has little leverage with which to use against Russia). Moreover, as Moscow as only too aware, Washington has enough problems to contend with, ranging from Iraq, a worsening situation in Afghanistan, the probability of a nuclear armed Iran, and a domestic economy headed into recession. Yet with Georgian forces in Iraq and Georgia’s status as a candidate for NATO membership, Washington will find it difficult to wash its hands of Georgia without suffering a major loss of face and credibility. Moscow would find few outcomes more gratifying than that.