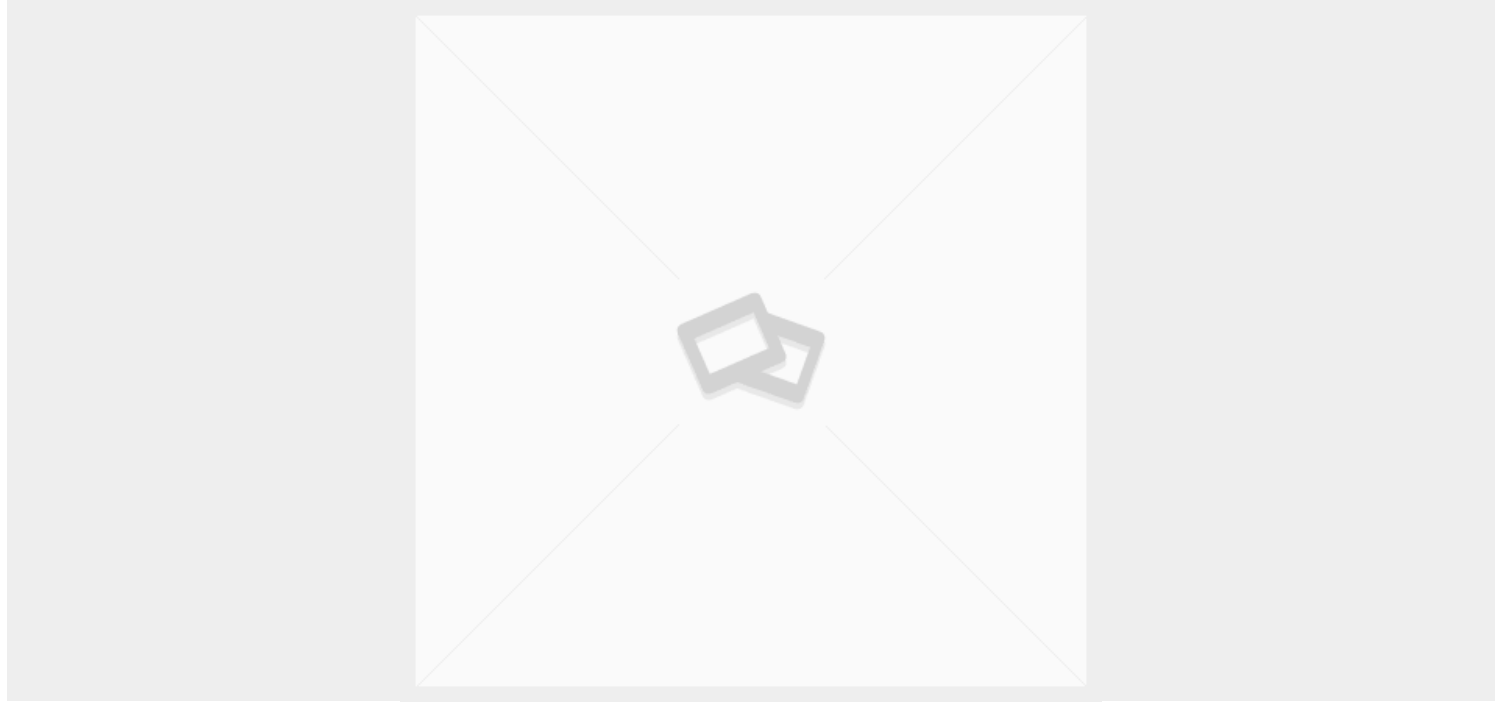
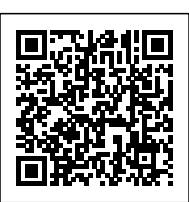


THE DRIVE TO SECEDE: GEORGIAN PROVINCES LIKELY TO JOIN RUSSIA

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By Eric Margolis, Toronto Sun.com, August 17, 2008

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On Aug. 8 Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin swiftly and deftly checkmated the United States on the Georgian strategic chessboard.

Georgia's President, Mikheil Saakashvili, fell right into Moscow's trap.

Georgia and Russia have been feuding since 1992 over two Georgian ethnic enclaves, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, whose people wanted to decamp Georgia and join Russia.

The young, U.S.-educated Saakashvili became Georgia's president in 2003 after an uprising, believed organized by the CIA and financed by U.S. money, overthrew the able former leader, Eduard Shevardnadze. I interviewed Shevardnadze in Moscow when he was Mikhail Gorbachev's principal ally and architect of Soviet reform.

Saakashvili quickly became the golden boy of U.S. right wing neocons, who saw him as a model of how to turn former Russian-dominated states into "democratic" U.S. allies. Critics claim Saakashvili kept power by bribery and vote rigging.

U.S. money, military trainers, advisers, and spooks poured into the former Soviet Republic of Georgia. Israeli arms dealers, businessmen and intelligence agents quickly followed.

The Bush administration brazenly flouted agreements with Moscow made by presidents H.W. Bush and Bill Clinton not to expand NATO into the former U.S.S.R.

Russia's tough Deputy Prime Minister Sergei Ivanov sneeringly termed Georgia a "U.S. satellite." This former KGB elite foreign directorate agent certainly knows a satellite when he sees one.

Georgia provided the U.S. with oil and gas pipeline routes from Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan that bypassed Russian territory. Russia was furious its Caspian Basin energy export monopoly had been broken and vowed revenge.

On Aug. 7 Saakashvili, his head swelled by Washington's promises of additional aid, arms and eventual membership in NATO, rashly sent his little army to invade the breakaway region of South Ossetia. Washington likely backed this attack or at least knew of it.

Putin seized upon Saakashvili's disastrous blunder and unleashed two Russian divisions against the Georgians, who were quickly routed. Impudent Georgia and its American sponsors were humiliated.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia likely will move into Russia's orbit. The West backed independence of Kosovo from Serbia. The peoples of South Ossetia and Abkhazia have as much right to secede from Georgia.

In one swift blow, Putin thwarted Bush's clumsy attempt to further advance U.S. influence into the Caucasus. He delivered a stark warning to Ukraine and the Central Asian states: Don't get too close to Washington. Putin put the U.S. on the strategic defensive and showed that NATO's new eastern reaches - the Baltic, Bulgaria, Romania, and the Caucasus - are largely indefensible.

It's a good thing Georgia was not admitted to NATO. Is the West really ready to be dragged into a potential nuclear war for the sake of South Ossetia?

Georgia is a bridge too far for NATO.

President George W. Bush, VP Dick Cheney and Sen. John McCain all resorted to table pounding and Cold War rhetoric against Russia. McCain, whose senior foreign policy adviser is a rabid neocon and registered lobbyist for Georgia thundered, "the U.S. has important interests in Georgia." Interests that are barely a few years old, senator. Russia's go back two centuries.

The Caucasus is Russia's backyard. Imagine Washington's response if Russian troops were deployed to Quebec.

Hypocrisy was thicker than shellfire. Bush, who ordered the invasion of Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia, denounced Russia for invading "a sovereign nation." Putin, who crushed the life out of Chechnya, piously claimed his army was saving Ossetians from ethnic cleansing.

Paper tigers Bush and McCain demand Russia be punished and isolated. The humiliated Bush is sending some U.S. troops to deliver "humanitarian" aid. Their response is dangerous, provocative and childish.

The West must accept that Russia has vital national interests in the Caucasus and former U.S.S.R. Russia is a great power and must be afforded respect. The days of treating Russia like a banana republic are over.

The most important foreign policy concern for the U.S. is keeping correct relations with Russia, which has thousands of nuclear warheads pointed at North America. Georgia is a sideshow.

