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WHAT DOES RUSSIA'S ACTION MEAN FOR US?

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Those who defend Russia's invasion of Georgia say that it was a necessary act by Russia to secure its sphere of influence, with the remote cause lying in NATO's eastward expansion, or that the international community is equally to blame because of ambiguous priorities between the right to national self-determination and the principle of noninterference in internal affairs. However, I cannot agree with them as either of the two arguments fail to pin down "the essential meaning of Russia's action."

It was not NATO but Central and East European countries that wanted to expand NATO. Having suffered Russia's aggression and repression in the past, these countries were eager to join the Western alliance to ensure their security in a post-Cold War environment. Ioan Mircea Paşcu, former Defense Minister of Romania who worked hard to achieve Romania's entry into NATO, confided me about his relief by telling, "Romania has obtained its true security for the first time in its history." To decide with whom to ally is a matter of sovereignty for any country and should never be a matter of direction by Russia.

It is certainly true that the conflict between the right to national self-determination and the principle of noninterference in internal affairs is one of the major issues left unsettled in international law. It remains a cause of instability in international politics. This, however, does not justify Russia's military action against Georgia because "the essential meaning of Russia's action" does not lie there.

What then is "the essential meaning of Russia's action"? As a matter of fact, I anticipated the latest move of Russia. Considering the essence of Russia's political culture prevailing in the Czarist and Soviet regimes to be the "rule of force," I had long sensed a dangerous trend of Russia under Vladimir Putin to return to this essence.

In August 2000, just after the inauguration of the Putin administration, I was in Russia and predicted, "President Putin will make a name for himself in Russian history alongside Peter the Great and Stalin by taking the lead in building the reborn Russia over the next decade or two." The reason I made this prediction, which had come true, was the way Putin was building his power base. His reliance on force (or violence) was seen fit in the tradition of Russia's political culture, the "rule of force." Putin's friends from former KGB circles later known as *siloviki* were gathering around him. It was those *siloviki* that arrested the prominent Russian businessman Mikhail Khodorkovsky and dissolved his petroleum company Yukos in 2003. The "rule of force" by a political secret police, which exercises unlimited power, is the very embodiment of the political culture of Russia since Peter the Great and Stalin.

When projected abroad, this becomes the basis on which Russian foreign policy is planned and implemented.

Russia's incursion was carried out on a well-prepared operational plan. After provoking Georgia into military action, Russia has behaved as a savior of the victims. This reminds us of the 1931 Manchurian Incident, which provided a pretext for Japan's invasion of Manchuria. The Imperial Army of Japan then dynamited the South Manchuria Railway and put the blame on Chinese dissidents.

At what, then, is Russia aiming its grand strategy? We cannot answer this question without taking into consideration the "rule of force," the persistent nature of Russia's political culture. Russia is no doubt aiming at controlling the world energy market, but the problem is that the country has a tendency to play the game disregarding its rules, often to the extent of mobilizing such extra-market forces as military and/or political.

Russia's "recognition of the independence" of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was "annexation" in substance, comparable in nature to the 1990 invasion of Kuwait by Iraq and the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia by the Soviet Union. Herein lies "the essential meaning of Russia's action."

The problem that the international community has come to face anew this time is how it should counter the threat posed by "rogue states," a major security challenge of the post-Cold War era, when it comes from such a big country as Russia. This requires the utmost care. Fortunately, however, we have the successful experience of having won a Cold War. Has Russia learned nothing from its defeat in the Cold War? Moscow has said, "Russia is not afraid of the prospect of a new Cold War." Under such circumstances, if the international community is afraid of such a prospect, the situation will not improve and could even be exacerbated. The international community must stand firm on the principle of never permitting a change of status quo by force, and be prepared to consider a drastic review of its fundamental relations with Russia, should the country continue pursing such a path. However, confrontation with Russia, if there must be any at all, should be kept at the

level of a “cold war.” We must be careful not to let it develop into a “hot war.” History shows that a cold war alone is enough to win the big game.

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