Alea iacta est

David J. Smith*

Do not expect much from the heads of European governments meeting in Brussels today to decide how to respond to Russian aggression against Georgia. “We are now in dialog with Moscow, not in a phase of sanctions,” said an aide to French President Nicolas Sarkozy. “France’s position as President of the European Council is to get a common position from the whole of the European Union,” clarified French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner. Without a clear conceptual framework, that common position will not amount to much.

Meanwhile, the United States is coordinating its equally aimless response with the EU, according to State Department Spokesman James Wood. Washington—a single government, stronger than Europe and not dependent on Russian energy—is “re-evaluating its relationship with Russia,” said White House Spokeswoman Dana Perino.

Western exhortations—already repeated 1000 times—will not dissuade Russian Czar Vladimir Putin. Equally silly would be for the west to accumulate successive lists of ineffectual sanctions on Russia, each the least common denominator of the positions of 27 European states plus the US.

Sanctions, boldly applied as Russian tanks rolled through the Roki Tunnel might have induced Moscow to rethink the scale and scope of its aggression. Now Western leaders must face the reality of the present, including the results of their dithering.

Alea iacta est—the die is cast—declared Julius Caesar as he crossed the River Rubicon in 49 BC—from certain actions there is no return. In 2008, Putin cast his die when his army crossed the Caucasus Mountains. He will not turn back because we ask it. Moreover—make no mistake—Putin’s war is against the west, its first battle fought on Georgian soil. This conflict will shift the tectonic plates of world affairs—Brussels and Washington had better act accordingly.

First, they must send unmistakable signals that they recognize Putin for the barbarian that he is. The best moves would be to nix the 2014 Sochi Olympics and to boot Russia from the G-8.

Next, forget about punishing Russia; simply thwart its war objectives: 1) to topple Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili; 2) to decimate Georgia’s economy and military; 3) to derail Georgia’s approach to NATO; and 4) to frighten the west from the East-West corridor.

People in and out of Georgia may have their opinions of Saakashvili, but he is the democratically elected President of Georgia and he is the only western leader who has consistently understood the geopolitical situation in Eurasia. Sarkozy and US President George W. Bush—and any other head of government—must visit Tbilisi now, stand with Saakashvili in Freedom Square, pray together in Sameba Cathedral and stand before a Russian checkpoint to say, “Mr. Putin, tear down this checkpoint!”
The two leaders of the western world could then survey the damage to Gori. There they could announce an EU-US Georgian Recovery Plan to rebuild the Georgian infrastructure destroyed by the Russian invaders.

For the Georgian military, The US should announce extension and expansion of the Stability and Sustainment Operations Program that trains the Georgian Armed Forces. France should pledge to rebuild the Mountain Training Center at Sachkere and to continue the training that its elite Alpine troops offer. Western leaders must now make clear that Georgia will receive modern anti-tank and ant-aircraft weapons.

That would befit a country that German Chancellor Angela Merkel said on her August 17 visit to Tbilisi is “on a clear road toward NATO membership.” On August 20, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband added, "I think the formal process kicked off yesterday with the establishment of a NATO-Georgia commission.”

The next step is to offer Georgia a NATO Membership Action Plan, which is simply another rigorous reform program with no guarantee of membership. Indeed, this is so simple that it can be done at any Tuesday meeting of the North Atlantic Council. "It is an important signal but there is also important substance to it,” said Miliband of the new NATO-Georgia Commission.

One more signal is necessary. The bombs Russia hurled just meters from the oil and gas pipelines that traverse Georgia were a clear warning that the west should shrink from developing the East-West corridor that would open the Eurasian heartland. We should do nothing of the kind.

However, the Russian onslaught made potential investors reasonably nervous. To counter this, in our own interest, western governments should encourage continued investment in Georgia, particularly in east-west projects. To this end, the US and EU should combine to form a Georgian Private Investment Corporation that would guarantee investors against any losses due to renewed hostilities.

Strictly speaking, nothing suggested here is a sanction on Russia—these are positive steps to help Georgia and to undercut Putin’s war aims. If we find the courage to demonstrate with concrete actions that war does not work, then western exhortations might just induce the Russian army to abandon its stranglehold on Georgia.

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Alea acta erit—the die will be cast.