

Russia invaded Georgia 10 years ago. Don't say America didn't respond.

by Condoleezza Rice August 8 at 7:12 PM



Condoleezza Rice was secretary of state from 2005 to 2009.

Ten years ago [this week](#), during the final year of George W. Bush's presidency, Russia launched a full-scale invasion of Georgia. Post columnist Robert Kagan [marked the anniversary](#) Wednesday by connecting the dots from Vladimir Putin's aggression against Russia's democratic neighbor — and the response to it by the United States and the rest of the West — to the many challenges facing the liberal world order.

It is important to note several points for the historical record.

We in the Bush administration did recognize the looming danger of Russian military action in Georgia. Beginning in the spring of 2008, the United States and Germany tried to negotiate a de-escalation of the growing tensions in the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The effort would have physically separated Russian peacekeepers from the Georgians and established much-needed “rules of the road” in how they operated. (There should never have been Russian peacekeepers in these breakaway regions to begin with — but that is another story.)

It was in that context that I told Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili — *privately* — that the Russians would try to provoke him and that, given the circumstances on the ground, he could not count on a military response from NATO. I did not “blame” him for the crisis — and I still do not. This was simply a statement of fact in an attempt to temper the actions of the Georgians, whose passions were understandably inflamed.

When the Russians launched their invasion, the United States focused first and foremost on protecting the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, and the duly elected Georgian government. In that regard, U.S. military transport returned Georgian armed forces from Iraq so that they could defend their homeland. Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told his Russian counterpart that we were doing so and not to interfere. And, as Saakashvili recounted in [his own op-ed Wednesday in the Wall Street Journal](#), we launched a “humanitarian convoy,” escorted by U.S. warships. This *was* a signal to the Russians.

Was there a threat to Tbilisi? Indeed there was: In a phone conversation days into the crisis, Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, told me there were three conditions for ending the war. First, the Georgians should sign a

“no-use-of-force pledge” in the breakaway regions. Second, the Georgian forces had to return to their barracks. These were acceptable to the Georgian government and its allies. However, the third condition, which he said was “just between us,” shocked me. “Misha Saakashvili has to go.”

I told Lavrov that the American secretary of state and the Russian foreign minister couldn't have a secret conversation about the overthrow of a democratically elected president. “I'm going to call everyone I can and tell them that Russia is demanding the overthrow of the Georgian president,” I told him. He was furious. But we did just that. And the Russians' true motives were revealed to the world. Saakashvili remained in power, and Georgian democracy survived.

By the way, as Kagan noted, the United States did ask the French — who held the presidency of the Council of the European Union at the time — to try to negotiate an end to hostilities. Ultimately, they could not — and I personally negotiated the final agreement that ended the war. Sitting in Saakashvili's office — working from the French draft — we made important changes, including altering the geographical limits of where Russian troops would be allowed so that they could not threaten the Georgian capital.

The United States is sometimes constrained in what it can do in circumstances such as the Georgian conflict. We focused our energies on stopping Moscow from overthrowing a new democracy that then-Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin hated with a virulence that is hard to overstate. America and its allies raised \$1 billion in aid for the Georgians. Sanctions levied on the separatist regions remain largely in place, so Moscow foots the bill for its adventurism in territory that is difficult to develop economically.

And we reminded our European friends that, only months before, they had denied Georgia and Ukraine a closer association with NATO through the Membership Action Plan — against American and Eastern European wishes. That was indeed a bad signal to Putin.

We could not deter Moscow in this case. But we did act, and Georgia survived. It is still a sad story — and perhaps Putin did take the wrong lessons from it. In order to deter him in the future, however, we need to first get the facts right about the past.