

The War in Georgia

For the past two weeks I've been trying to collect as much information as possible about the situation in Georgia. I talked to more than a dozen Russian and US military experts, got in touch with my contacts in Tbilisi and North Ossetia, and exchanged information with dozens of journalists in Moscow and here in the States. The goal of spending all this free time - normally reserved for fishing - was to piece together the most complete picture of the events in the Caucasus. My main worry was that someone will beat me to the punch (like the Asia Times or Jane's), rendering all my efforts redundant. Luckily, no one did.

Don't get me wrong: volumes have been written on the subject of Georgia's attack on South Ossetia and the subsequent military action by Russia against Saakashvili's regime. Most of these reports and analyses were rubbish, but some were good – in a very limited way. All the people writing on the situation in Georgia and relations with Russia can be separated into four categories: idiots, the good old boys, gearheads, and strategists. The idiots talk primarily about how the West should punish Russia (or, in case with Russian idiots, how Russia should punish the West). The good old boys are trying to revive the language and ideas of the Cold War era. The gearheads are counting the tanks, comparing missile ranges, and analyzing tactical maneuvers. And, finally, the strategists are overreaching themselves in trying to predict the future.

I probably belong in all four categories. I think Russia should take more definitive steps to reassert itself on the international arena. For years I've been criticizing Putin for his timid foreign policy. I am convinced the Cold War never really ended. I have no doubt that, despite all the dangers, the Cold War was one of the most productive periods in the development of human civilization – our culture, science and technology. I've been known to spend weeks reading nothing but technical specifications of tanks, fighter jets, and missiles. And, as a noted armchair admiral, I would rarely pass up an opportunity to make a strategic prediction, far too often ending up looking like a complete jackass just a few months later.

Background

The first step in understanding what happened in Georgia is, as Russians say, to separate the flies from the meatballs: to make sure you keep all the relevant facts in your brain on a separate shelf from CNN and BBC news reports. So what do we know? We know that Abkhazians and Ossetians are ethnically different from Georgians. We know that relations between these two ethnic minorities and the Georgian majority have been strained for centuries. There have been bloody feuds, ethnic cleansing, and centuries-old discrimination. At the same time, Abkhazians and Ossetians have been living together with Georgians in relative peace for a very long time.

During the Soviet years, Abkhazia had the status of an autonomous republic and South Ossetia had the status of an autonomous province. For administrative and financial purposes, both regions were

considered part of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. However, Abkhazia and South Ossetia both had their local governments. In 1990 Georgia revoked South Ossetia's autonomy and in 1991 Georgian government revoked Abkhazia's autonomy. A brief war broke out between Georgia and its breakaway regions in 1992. Later same year Georgia accepted a ceasefire to avoid a confrontation with Russia. Russia deployed peacekeepers in the region and the OSCE set up a monitoring mission. Sounds familiar?

Here's a brief overview of the status of South Ossetia by Jane's:

“South Ossetia is a former autonomous region of Georgia that has functioned as a de facto independent state since a June 1992 ceasefire accord ended a 32-month low-intensity conflict. Ossetians were left in control of the capital, Tskhinvali, and mountainous areas while Georgian authorities remained in charge of most lowland areas and several Georgian-populated enclaves beyond Tskhinvali. The frozen conflict has become sporadically violent since the election of Mikheil Saakashvili as President of Georgia and his initial success in re-installing authority in Adjara led Tbilisi to intensify its efforts to seek a solution to the South Ossetian separatist problem. Several dozen died in clashes between July and October 2004 and there were sporadic clashes in summer 2005. The ceasefire has largely held since October 2005 but confidence built up in 1992-2003 has not been restored. The primary issue to be negotiated for a lasting settlement is the status of South Ossetia, which unilaterally declared independence from Georgia in 1991 and now seeks admission to the Russian Federation. There are related disagreements over the distribution of customs revenues from cross-border trade with Russia and funding for the rehabilitation of the conflict zone. Relations with North Ossetia (a constituent and loyal republic of the Russian Federation) and the details of how to ensure the safe return of refugees are further complicating factors. Both sides agreed during 2005 on a three-step conflict resolution process: first, demilitarisation, security guarantees and confidence building; second, socioeconomic rehabilitation of the conflict zone; third, political settlement of South Ossetia's status. However, implementation has been almost paralysed by Georgia's refusal to sign a binding agreement on non-resumption of hostilities and Tskhinvali's restatement of its sovereignty in a November 2006 referendum. In the meantime regular tit-for-tat exchanges between Georgian and South Ossetian security forces have continued, and even escalated into mid-2007. Although the risk of direct conflict breaking out is still tempered by the presence of Russian peacekeepers and Tbilisi's desire to gain favour with the West, as tensions continue to rise and violence escalates, such a scenario cannot be discounted in mid to late 2007.”¹

And here's a quick look at the situation in Abkhazia, also by Jane's:

“The Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia is an ethnically diverse region that resisted Georgia's secession from the USSR and, with assistance from Russia and North Caucasian volunteers, fought and won a hugely destructive war of liberation in 1992-93. Its de facto independence has never been recognised by any other state and remains the subject of internationally mediated talks on some form of reunion with the rest of Georgia. With almost all of the Georgian population having fled or been expelled since 1993, there is no constituency within most of Abkhazia favouring a reunion with Georgia and the choice of status is seen internally as between full independence and association with the Russian Federation. An effective political revolution within Abkhazia at the end of 2004 asserted Abkhazian independence from Russia but also from Georgia. In line with its own tensions with Moscow, President Mikheil Saakashvili's government in Tbilisi has increasingly abandoned its initial confidence-building approach in favour of more militant demands and a campaign to mobilise international pressure against Russian policy in Abkhazia... Among the displaced population of around 200,000 Georgians there is conflict weariness but also some enthusiasm for a military campaign to retake the territory. Sporadic fighting, including major flare-ups in 1998 and 2001, and entrenched smuggling activities in the demilitarised zone around the ceasefire line have destabilised negotiations, imperilled the return of displaced Georgians, and undermined attempts at confidence-building. While Tbilisi has moderated its position somewhat since 2003, its rhetoric remains inconsistent and occasionally bellicose. Meanwhile, the Abkhaz position has become increasingly hard-line and the growing instability and authoritarianism of the Saakashvili regime since September 2007 has seen the president increasingly fall back on nationalist rhetoric to rally domestic support. Georgian militarisation since 2004, which

1 “South Ossetia, Georgia”, *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - Russia And The CIS*, July 31, 2007.

has seen defence expenditure grow from USD13 million in 2002 to USD560 million in 2008, has increased the potential for a campaign of reconquest but has been countered by rearmament on the Abkhaz side with covert Russian assistance. Although the resumption of direct conflict remains slim, tempered as it is by the presence of Russian troops and Tbilisi's desire to maintain good relations with Western institutions, sporadic violence is set to continue during 2008, accompanied by occasional spikes in tension.”²

When Saakashvili came to power by overthrowing Shevarnadze in 2003, Georgia embarked on an ambitious rearmament program and begun to actively challenge both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Reasserting Tbilisi's control over the two separatist provinces became an integral part of Saakashvili's political platform. Some will argue that defeating the separatists *was* Saakashvili's political platform. Georgia increased its defense budget more than forty-fold in just a few years, while its economy grew just three times, with nearly 14% unemployment rate in 2006³, 17%-30% inflation in 2007⁴, and more than 50% of its population living below the absolute poverty level according to the 2005 World bank and World Health Organization reports⁵.

As part of its rigorous rearmament program, Georgia purchased 30 towed (122-mm D-30) and 12 self-propelled (152-mm “Dana”) howitzers from the Czech Republic in 2006; 6 Mi-24B/P and 2 Mi-8MT assault helicopters from Ukraine in 2005; 31 T-72 main battle tanks from Ukraine and the Czech Republic in 2005; 25 120-mm mortars from the Czech Republic and Bosnia also in 2005; 20 BTR-80 armored personnel carriers from Ukraine in 2005; 12 self-propelled 152-mm 2S3M howitzers from Ukraine in 2004; one Mi-35 assault helicopter from Uzbekistan in 2004; 40 BMP-2 APCs from Ukraine in 2004; 14 120-mm mortars from Bulgaria in 2004; 6 122 mm RM-70 MLRS systems from the Czech Republic in 2003; and other heavy weapons, including fast attack craft, more mortars, howitzers and helicopters.⁶ Additionally, in 2007 Georgia purchased one division of Buk-M1 self-propelled SAM systems with 48 missiles from Ukraine. Also in 2007 Georgia purchased 30 Grom man-portable SAM launchers and 100 missiles. Georgia acquired several 9M33M3 Osa mobile SAMs and 9M114 Shturm ATGMs from Ukraine in 2006.⁷

Every year Georgia was spending more than 10% of its entire GDP on buying new and upgraded weapons primarily from Ukraine, the Czech Republic, and Israel. The vast majority of weapons acquired by Georgia since 2004 was offensive in nature, with priority being given to long-range conventional and rocket-propelled artillery.⁸ Furthermore, Georgia received hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid from NATO nations. Here's what Jane's writes on the subject: “... annual foreign military assistance probably exceeded domestic defence spending, with the US and Turkey financing almost all training and infrastructural development. Germany, France, the UK, Greece, Romania, Czech Republic and Bulgaria also provided military assistance or surplus equipment.”⁹

2 “Abkhazia, Georgia”, *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment - Russia And The CIS*, March 11, 2008.

3 “Уровень безработицы в Грузии в первом полугодии 2006 года составил 13,8%”, *ИА REGNUM*, May 9, 2006; <http://www.rhr.ru/index/news,18181,0.html>

4 “Департамент статистики Грузии намеренно и сильно приукрасил показатели экономического развития страны: эксперты”, *ИА REGNUM*, January 17, 2008; <http://www.regnum.ru/news/944017.html>

5 “Обзорные сводки о состоянии здоровья и здравоохранения по странам, Грузия 2005 г.”, World Health Organization, 2005; http://www.euro.who.int/eprise/main/who/progs/chhgeo/demographic/20050131_1?language=russian

6 “Weapons Acquisitions, Georgia”, *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment – Russia and the CIS*, August 18, 2008

7 United Nations Register of Conventional Arms, 2006-2007

8 “Defense Budget, Georgia”, *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment – Russia and the CIS*, August 18, 2008

9 “Defense Budget, Georgia”, *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment – Russia and the CIS*, August 18, 2008

Georgia operated dozens of Israeli-made UAVs over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, in violation of the ceasefire agreement it signed in 1992. Georgia, in turn, was accusing Russian aircraft of violating its airspace. A Russian MiG-29 shot down a Georgian UAV – an Israeli-made Elbit Systems “Hermes 450”. Saakashvili decided to take the issue to the UN, just to get a slap on the wrist for launching UAV flights over South Ossetia. Russia never officially acknowledged its involvement, and, embarrassingly for Saakashvili, Georgia was forced to promise not to launch any more UAV flights over the breakaway regions. Only once, shortly before the war broke out in August 2008, Russia acknowledged that its military aircraft violated Georgia's border in response to what Moscow said was a provocation by Georgian military forces.

In our information age, propaganda is a vital tool in foreign politics. It is certainly a tool favored by the Georgian president. The problem with overplaying your propaganda card is that eventually you start believing your own lies. This is exactly what happened to Saakashvili. For years he has been telling his people that Georgia was ready to deal with the separatists using military force and finally he convinced himself of this. He also convinced his army commanders. We know that Georgia spent billions to buy modern weapons. Georgian soldiers were being trained by military instructors from the US, France, Germany and other NATO nations, as well as by Israel. Were the Georgians ready to fight? Here's an interesting opinion – spelling errors and all - posted on one of the military discussion boards by a former US Army Ranger, who got a chance to work face-to-face with Georgian soldiers from the 3rd Infantry Brigade at a training camp in Kuwait:

“While they may dress in uniforms similar to the US, and some of them have US weapons, they aren't even close to US troops. Of the Georgian units I've seen, only the Commandos had any discipline. The regular units had SERIOUS discipline problems. They stole any and everything they could get a hold of, including the radio and antenna mount off of the HMMWV the NCOIC of their MiTT was driving. When confronted, their commander claimed innocence until the NCOIC told them they would get nothing else from the US military until his equipment was returned. So it "magically" appeared that night.

In Kuwait, they were routinely caught stealing from other units, they broke into shipping containers to steal MREs, and uniforms, many of them got caught stealing from the PX, they set several structures on fire because they were smoking in no smoking areas, etc., etc. Until they can get their sh*t together, there's no way in hell they should be allowed into NATO...

As I said, the Commando battalion was very disciplined and well led, but they were still equipped with older soviet era weapons (And they did have quite few female hotties). As for the other units, I wouldn't trust them to run the fry station at McDonalds. Their officers were garbage, and hey had no NCOs to speak of. They seemed more interested in what they could beg, borrow or steal from the US. The only reason many of them were here was because they get a supplement to their pay from the US. Most of the officers seemed to out to fatten their own wallets on the backs of their troops.

They need to make clean sweep of the officer corps, actually form a NCO corps, and enforce discipline in the units (that doesn't mean you beat your soldiers, but lead by example). It's a little hard when your officers treat their troops like peasants. They'll never show them any respect, you can't lead by fear alone.

At a minimum, it'll take them five years to weed out the old guard, and start replacing them with a better trained officer corps. If they start now, it'll take five to ten years before they have a seasoned NCO corps within their enlisted ranks, and these guys will be the backbone of any force they field. Until they do, they need to stay as far away from NATO as possible. From what I've seen, if I were the Russians, I wouldn't be worrying about them starting a war, but I would be checking my pockets to see if I still had my wallet, or if the tires were still on my car

in the morning.”¹⁰

It's worth noting that this opinion was posted back in April 2008 - long before the war broke out – and is very much in line with other first-hand assessments of the morale and discipline of Georgian troops that I've come across in the past. US military instructors working in Georgia agreed that the country's army was not ready for war:

“The Georgians were "beginning to walk, but by no means were they running," said Army Capt. Jeff Barta, who helped train a Georgian brigade for peacekeeping service in Iraq. "If that was a U.S. brigade it would not have gone into combat." ... They inherited bad habits from the Red Army, whose soldiers wouldn't move without a direct order from a superior, and need to be taught to think on their own, Barta said. To make things more difficult, many soldiers "come from the hills of Georgia, and some of them sign for their paycheck with an X," he said.”¹¹

Georgia Attacks South Ossetia

There have been several reports of artillery and mortar fire between Georgia and South Ossetia in the months leading up to the war. During the summer of 2008 Russian peacekeepers on the ground in South Ossetia confirmed several incidents of mortar attacks launched from the Georgian side of the border. Georgia claimed that its military was responding to mortar attacks by South Ossetia. Finally, on August 7 Georgia launched Operation Clear Field - a full-scale ground invasion of South Ossetia with the opening massed artillery barrage against its capital Tskhinvali, killing 15 Russian peacekeepers¹² and 1,692 civilians¹³. Georgian ground troops begun to move into the city the following day. Russia immediately countered by deploying an elite paratroop battalion, a Spetsnaz unit, and armored units of the 58th Army from its bases in Mozdok and Vladikavkaz in North Ossetia, including 150 tanks and self-propelled artillery, as well as 10,000-15,000 troops.¹⁴

“Fighting in Georgia between 7 and 12 August was the most intense since a series of conflicts between 1991 and 1993 witnessed the creation of the Russian-protected separatist territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. In just five days, Russian forces were able to expel Georgian forces from South Ossetia, retake the last Georgian-controlled territory in Abkhazia, push unresisted 50 km into western Georgia and destroy or badly damage most of Georgia's main army, air and naval bases. Reports of casualties vary but appear to be overwhelmingly civilian, especially those caught up in the Georgian bombardment of Tskhinvali from 7 to 9 August.

Whatever the legal validity of his definition of South Ossetia as a domestic Georgian concern, President Mikheil Saakashvili's authorisation of an all-out offensive to retake the separatist region ranks among the worst foreign policy miscalculations of modern times. Throughout 2008, Moscow had made clear its willingness to respond with overwhelming force in a peace enforcement operation should Georgia attempt to retake territory under the protection of Russian peacekeepers or use violence against its civilian nationals, which includes most South Ossetians and Abkhaz.

10 “U.S., Georgia to conduct joint drills near Tbilisi in July”, by Dominique, MilitaryPhotos.net, April 16, 2008; <http://www.militaryphotos.net/forums/showthread.php?t=132442&page=2>

11 “US trainers say Georgian troops weren't ready”, by Mattie Friedman, *Associated Press*, August 18, 2008; <http://www.foxnews.com/wires/2008Aug18/0,4670,GeorgiaMilitaryTested,00.html>

12 “Число погибших в Южной Осетии миротворцев РФ возросло до 15 человек”, *RIAN*, August 9, 2008; http://www.rian.ru/defense_safety/20080809/150220305.html

13 “Осетинский мартиролог”, *INTERFAX*, August 28, 2008; <http://www.interfax.ru/politics/txt.asp?id=29586>

14 “Georgian planning flaws led to failure”, by Richard Giragosian, *Asia Times*, August 20, 2008; http://atimes.com/atimes/Central_Asia/JH20Ag01.html

Defeated in a six-day war, Georgia is humiliated, substantially disarmed and facing major infrastructural and economic losses. This suggests another Russo-Georgian conflict is unlikely in the near term, given Tbilisi's need to reconstruct its forces. ¹⁵

Additional 1,000 Russian airborne assault troops from three assault companies were airlifted to Abkhazia on August 11, when it became known that Georgia planned to attack Abkhazia as well, after attack maps for the Operation Cliff have been found on the high-ranking Georgian staff officer captured by a unit of the Russian 4th VDV regiment.¹⁶ About 50 Russian fixed-wing aircraft (mainly Su-25 ground attack jets) and assault helicopters participated in the operation. Less than 48 hours later Georgian army suffered hundreds of casualties and was retreating in disarray across all of Georgia, leaving their armor, trucks, firearms, and uniforms behind.¹⁷ Russia acknowledged the loss of seven aircraft, including three Su-25 jet and the Tu-22M3R supersonic reconnaissance aircraft. Russia's losses in the conflict amounted to 74 killed, 323 wounded, and 19 MIA, according to the August 20 report by the General Staff.¹⁸ According to the same report, a Georgian air defense unit based in Gori was operating Buk-M1 mobile SAM launchers, secretly purchased from Ukraine in 2007. The Senaki airfield near the border with Abkhazia served as the primary launchpad for Georgian Su-25 jets. Russian troops quickly captured both Gori and Senaki. A brief confrontation between Georgian missile boats and the Russian Black Sea Navy ships resulted in one of the Georgian attack vessels being sunk.

The remaining week of the war was uneventful. Abkhazian separatists, supported by Russian aircraft, launched a brief operation to expel Georgian troops from the Kodori region of Abkhazia. Reported casualties in this confrontation were one Abkhazian and two Georgian soldiers killed. Georgian army retreated to the suburbs of Tbilisi, leaving behind most of its weapons. Russian forward units took over key Georgian military bases and airfields to the west of the capital, and were soon in control of Georgia's transport infrastructure, including the naval base and the commercial port in the town of Poti. Russian, Abkhazian and South Ossetian forces captured dozens of Georgian tanks, mobile SAMs, MLRS systems, self-propelled howitzers, APCs, trucks, jeeps, thousands of firearms and many tons of ammunition, according to an official report by Col. Igor Konashenkov, assistant to the Commander of Land Forces.¹⁹ In the following few days Russian forces collected as much abandoned Georgian military hardware and ammunition as they could find. The Russians also blew up the "Dioskuria" missile boat, Georgia's most advanced naval vessel, at the Poti naval base, where it was abandoned by its crew. Several bombing raids have been carried out by the Russians against the Tbilisi Aerospace Manufacturing (former Soviet "Tbilaviastroi") military aircraft factory producing Georgian and Sukhoi Su-25 attack jets.²⁰

15 "Baiting the bear - Georgia plays Russian roulette", *Jane's Intelligence Review*, August 14, 2008

16 "Российские войска обнаружили грузинский военный план", *Lenta.ru*, August 12, 2008; <http://www.lenta.ru/news/2008/08/12/plan1/>

17 "Georgia reeling from war with Russia", by Andrew North, BBC, August 18, 2008; "Georgian army flees in disarray as Russians advance", by Tony Halpin, *The Times*, August 12, 2008;

18 "Генштаб уточнил потери РФ в зоне грузино-осетинского конфликта: погибло на 10 человек меньше", *Newsru.com*, August 20, 2008; <http://newsru.com/russia/20aug2008/lost.html>

19 In his August 17 statement, Col. Konashenkov provided a list of weapons captured from the Georgian army, including 6 9A33 "Osa" mobile SAMs, 65 main battle tanks, 15 BMD-2 APCs, D-30 towed howitzers, Czech-made "Dana" self-propelled howitzers, US-made armored vehicles, tons of ammunition, unguided rockets, man-portable ATGMs, 1,728 firearms, including 764 M16 US-made automatic rifles, 28 US-made M-40 machine guns, 754 Kalashnikov automatic rifles of various models, handguns and other weapons.

20 "МВД Грузии: Российская авиация бомбит авиазавод в Тбилиси", *Regnum*, August 10, 2008; <http://www.regnum.ru/news/1038947.html>

The Georgian army's command structure collapsed during the first few hours of the war. This was primarily due to Russia's air superiority. Approximately 10,000-15,000 Russian troops were fighting the 28,000-strong Georgian army. The Georgian retreat begun while most of the Russian forces were still in transit from their bases in North Ossetia. The Georgians retreated so fast, the vast majority of the 15,000 Russian troops deployed to Georgia never got a chance to fire a single shot. Much has been said about Russia's "overwhelming air superiority" over Georgia. In reality, most of the operations over Georgia were carried out by just five squadrons of old Su-25s belonging to the 58th Army. It should be mentioned that Georgia's Su-25 "Scorpion" attack jets – locally produced and upgraded by Israel – were technically superior to the older Su-25s used by Russia. Furthermore, Georgian T-72 tanks, upgraded by Ukraine and Israel, were a good match for the Russian T-72s deployed by the 58th Army. Georgian artillery and MLRS was also comparable and in some cases even superior to the similar systems fielded by the 58th Army.

Georgia timed its attack on South Ossetia to coincide with the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games. Perhaps the logic behind this move was to weaken Russia's military response. Saakashvili and his war planners must have hoped that at the very least Russia will have to delay its military response until the end of the ceremony and perhaps even until Putin leaves Beijing. The expectation could have been that Russia would not want to upset its ally China by taking the spotlight off the Games. With most heads of state in Beijing, it was surprising to see Putin there and not Medvedev. If Russia expected Georgia to attack, Putin was definitely the best choice to deal with Bush and others in person. Putin first announced – through his spokesman Dmitry Peskov - of the plan to attend the opening ceremony on July 21. This was a warning sign Saakashvili should not have ignored.

Saakashvili's Plan

Some analysts suggest that Georgia could not have hoped to defeat Russia in a military confrontation, ergo, Georgia's attack on South Ossetia was a desperate response to Russian provocation. This theory does not hold water: for the past several years Georgia has been spending billions to increase its army's offensive potential. It's move against South Ossetia – carefully planned and timed – was a widely anticipated culmination of its extensive military rearmament program. Georgia was not preparing for war with Russia, but it was definitely getting ready to "restore constitutional order", to quote Saakashvili, in its breakaway provinces.

Surprising as it may sound, Georgia's attack plan against South Ossetia and Abkhazia had a good chance of success and there was at least one recent precedent. Operation Storm was a large-scale military operation carried out in 1995 by Croatian armed forces in Krajina, a small region of former Yugoslavia populated predominantly by ethnic Serbs and controlled by Serbian separatist forces. Croatian troops were armed and trained by the US-based Military Professional Resources Incorporated with the approval of the US government.²¹ Just as with Georgia's attack on South Ossetia, Operation Storm was launched overnight in early August. The opening attack by Croatian forces targeted densely-populated areas with massed artillery barrages, driving well over 200,000 civilians – mostly

²¹ "Operation Storm", *Wikipedia*; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_Storm

ethnic Serbs – out of the region.²² The assault lasted for only 36 hours and was the largest land offensive in Europe since WWII. By the time the operation was over, ethnic Serbs no longer comprised majority in Krajina.

Unlike Krajina, South Ossetia is surrounded by mountains and the only route of escape for the refugees is a narrow, two-lane (without shoulder), poor-quality road, framed by cliffs and ravines. The Rokskiy tunnel, linking Russia's North Ossetia region with South Ossetia is also a narrow, two-lane passage more than three-and-a-half kilometers long. In other words, this road could have been easily overwhelmed by tens thousands of South Ossetian refugees trying to escape Georgian attack, thus preventing Russian armor from reaching the zone of combat in a timely manner. This would have given Georgian forces ample opportunity to reach the southern end of the tunnel and to easily block it.

There can be no question about it: civilians in Tskhinvali were the primary target of the Georgian artillery assault. South Ossetia had a small military force with about two dozen outdated T-55 tanks.²³ The only armored vehicles available to the 530 Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia before August 7 were light armored personnel carriers, trucks, and two helicopters.²⁴ There were no heavy fortifications, no extensive minefields, and no concentrations of armor that would have warranted Georgia's use of massed artillery, including dozens of high-caliber howitzers and multiple-launch rocket systems. Most of the fire was concentrated on the city itself, leaving Tskhinvali in ruins with at least 438 residential buildings destroyed or seriously damaged, according to a UNOSAT report.²⁵ The Investigative Committee established by Russia to investigate the deaths of civilians in South Ossetia concluded that the Georgian forces committed genocide against the Ossetians. Alexander Bastrykin, the chief investigator, said that so far the Committee's 211 investigators have compiled more than one hundred volumes of evidence of Georgian atrocities and questioned 3915 witnesses.²⁶

Why not just destroy the tunnel to ensure that the Russians cannot send reinforcements? Destroying the tunnel would have prevented Ossetians from leaving what Georgia calls the “Tskhinvali province”, thus defeating the entire purpose of the operation. The entrance to the tunnel is heavily guarded by Russian troops, leaving an airstrike the only viable attack option. In order to take the tunnel out of service for a useful amount of time, one or more heavy aviation bombs had to be placed directly on the southern entrance to the tunnel. At the beginning of the conflict, Georgia was known to operate at least a dozen of Su-25 “Scorpion” attack planes – an Israeli-upgraded version of the Soviet-designed Sukhoi Su-25, produced by Georgia's Tbilisi Aerospace Manufacturing (TAM) and first shown to the West at the 2001 Le Bourget airshow in France²⁷.

The “Scorpion” features modern avionics system, including a glass cockpit and day/night weapons delivery and navigation system compatible with NATO standards. The aircraft is also equipped with a new weapons pylons allowing it to carry Western air-to-ground munitions, including precision-guided

22 “Croatia: Operation “Storm” - still no justice ten years on”, Amnesty International, August 4, 2005

23 “South Ossetia, Georgia”, *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment*, July 31, 2007

24 “South Ossetia, Georgia”, *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment*, July 31, 2007

25 “Разрушения Цхинвали: оценка из космоса”, *Cnews R&D*, August 25, 2008;
http://rnd.cnews.ru/tech/news/top/index_science.shtml?2008/08/25/314322

26 “Russia claims proof of genocide”, *Herald and Weekly Times*, August 26, 2008; <http://www.news.com.au/heraldsun/story/0,21985,24245956-23109,00.html>

27 “Su-25 Scorpion to debut at Le Bourget”, *Jane's International Defence Review*, June 1, 2001.

bombs. In 2001, Georgia had 30 Su-25s of various types available for export, with 20 more airframes under construction and earmarked for the “Scorpion” upgrade.²⁸ However, Georgia's limited inventory of precision-guided bombs and the Georgian Air Force's lack of experience using such weapons would have made any attempt to take out the Rokskiy tunnel a likely failure, prompting an immediate response from Russia. In the initial airstrike, the Russian Air Force destroyed several Georgian airbases, including the airfield near Senaki, where Georgian Su-25s were based.

Once Georgia attacked South Ossetia and it became clear that the Russians were prepared to respond, Georgia was unable to destroy the tunnel. Georgia's only attempt to blow up Rokskiy tunnel came on August 16, when two civilian SUVs packed with explosives tried to approach the southern entrance to the tunnel. The first vehicle was disabled by Russian snipers long before it could reach its target and the hapless demolition crew was forced to make a getaway in their remaining vehicle.²⁹

The second part of Georgia's plan, according to the captured military maps, called for a follow-up assault against Abkhazia to begin just two days after launching the operation in South Ossetia. Attacking South Ossetia would have made no sense without also attacking Abkhazia. Airfields and ports in Abkhazia would have enabled the Russians to send reinforcements. And the Russians did send reinforcements to Abkhazia as soon as they learned about Georgia's plan to attack the province: about a thousand Russian paratroopers and light armor were airlifted to Abkhazia on August 11 to provide support for a counter-attack by Abkhazian self-defense force against Georgian troops in the Kodori gorge.

Georgia's plan for attacking Abkhazia – Operation Cliff - called for the entire operation to be completed in just 24 hours. Just like in South Ossetia, the attack was to begin with a massed artillery strike continuing for two hours. This initial attack was to be followed by the advance of ground forces against the town of Gali. Georgian troops planned to reach the town of Ochamchiri in nine hours and to be in the regional capital of Sukhumi in fourteen hours. Within twenty four hours Georgian ground forces were planning to reach the town of Novy Afon.³⁰ The initial invasion of Abkhazia was to be carried out by two 800-strong amphibious landing forces deployed by high-speed naval vessels in Ochamchiri and later in Sukhumi. The attack toward Gali was to be undertaken by 6,000 Georgian army troops massed in Zugdidi.³¹ Georgian ground forces were to advance along two separate routes: Abkhazia's coastline and the Kodori gorge. Additional forces were to be diverted from South Ossetia, once Tskhinvali and the Rokskiy tunnel were under Georgian control.

Once again, at least in theory this was a workable tactical plan. Controlling ports and airfields in Abkhazia was an absolute requirement if the attack in South Ossetia was to succeed in the short term. Georgia's mountainous terrain and limited transportation infrastructure meant that one could bring only so many tanks and guns to bear on one's enemy at any given time and place. The fact that the Kremlin had thousands of tanks and hundreds of thousands of troops throughout Russia's territory gave no particular tactical advantage in Georgia. Russia could only send 150 tanks and self-propelled artillery against Georgia's 230 tanks and at least 50 self-propelled artillery and MLRS. In Georgia,

28 “Scorpion upgrade of Su-25 flies in Tbilisi, by Michael J Gething, *Jane's International Defence Review*, April 16, 2001.

29 “Российские войска предотвратили теракт в Рокском тоннеле” *INTERFAX*, August 16, 2008

30 “Ноговицын: грузинское вторжение в Абхазию планировалось завершить в течение суток”, *INTERFAX*, August 26, 2008

31 “Абхазский Генштаб: Грузия планировала после захвата Южной Осетии завоевать Абхазию”, *INTERFAX*, August 22, 2008

15,000 Russian troops were facing 28,000-strong Georgian army. On the Abkhazian border just 1,000 Russian paratroopers with light armor and supported by local militia were facing a high concentration of Georgian artillery and armor and at least 6,000 Georgian troops prepared to invade the province.

Two factors doomed Saakashvili's attack plans: Russia expected the attack and early in the war it was able to establish complete air superiority. While Georgian military planners and their American advisers anticipated at least a possibility of a Russian counterattack, Georgian troops on the ground seemed shocked by Russia's forceful response. This initial shock led to a complete disintegration of Georgian command and control structure. Entire battalions dropped their equipment, changed out of military uniforms, and retreated in disarray.³² Georgia's quick defeat in this war is particularly stunning, considering that the Georgian army spent months planning and forward-deploying troops and armor. The units of Russia's 58th Army, on the other hand, were still at their home bases in Russia at the time of the Georgian attack.

Peacemaking

I find Sarkozy's close personal involvement in ceasefire negotiations between Russia and Georgia to be of particular interest. As we have already established, both the United States and the European Union were aware of the planned attack by Georgia. It stands to reason, Bush and Sarkozy came to Beijing prepared for a possible confrontation with Putin. Most likely, the expectation was for a quick Georgian victory over the separatists and the subsequent need to contain Russia's reaction. France was one of several NATO members actively providing training and surplus equipment to the Georgian army. Last year Sarkozy also gave a go-ahead for the sale of two French navy frigates to Georgia.³³ Of course, Russia's military response to the attack by Georgia has been swift and overwhelming. Instead of containing Putin in Beijing, Bush and Sarkozy were now dealing - in person and in full public view - with one of the biggest flops in the US and French foreign policies.

The initial meeting between Putin and Sarkozy in Beijing on August 8 did not go well for the President of France. The meeting was described by a senior Western official as "very, very tough". Putin told Sarkozy: "We are going to make them [Georgians] pay. We are going to make justice."³⁴ Similarly, at a later meeting in the Kremlin on August 13, Sarkozy got mixed signals from Medvedev and Putin:

"When Nicolas Sarkozy, the French president, rushed to Moscow earlier this month to mediate the crisis over Georgia, he found the new Russian president, Dmitri Medvedev, to be calm, even sanguine about prospects for a solution. But the tone was wildly different when Sarkozy heard from Vladimir Putin, the president-turned-prime minister. According to a private report that Sarkozy later delivered to President George W. Bush, Putin was virulent in denouncing Georgian actions as atrocities, and he expressed such deep antipathy toward Georgian leaders that it made the war seem personal."³⁵

Despite confusion and setbacks, Sarkozy persisted, shuttling between Tbilisi and Moscow in the

32 "Georgia reeling from war with Russia", by Andrew North, BBC, August 18, 2008

33 Jane's Country Risk Daily Report, June 19, 2007

34 "In Georgia Clash, a Lesson on U.S. Need for Russia", by Helene Cooper, *The New York Times*, August 9, 2008; <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/10/world/europe/10diplo.html?ref=world>

35 "Russia's power couple: Good cop, bad cop?", by Steven Lee Myers and Thom Shanker, *The International Herald Tribune*, August 22, 2008, page 4.

middle of the night. He delivered the ceasefire proposal to reluctant Saakashvili and persuaded him to agree to Russia's demands. Initially, the US Department of State announced that the terms of the agreement could not be accepted by Georgia without changes. However, after a brief meeting with Sarkozy in Paris, Condoleezza Rice traveled to Tbilisi and pressured Saakashvili to sign the French-brokered peace plan, which heavily favored the Russian side by not specifying the timetable for withdrawal of Russian troops and by allowing Russia to carry out unspecified "additional security measures" in Georgia. Whatever Sarkozy told Saakashvili and Rice must have been exceptionally convincing.

Another interesting question is: why did the US take the back seat in this peacemaking process, letting France and the European Union lead the negotiating process? The most likely reason is that the US was too deeply involved in the planning and preparation of Georgia's attack on South Ossetia. Involvement of American private contractors – a la Operation Storm – in Saakashvili's war against the separatists seems a likely possibility. If this was the case, the Russians had to have known about it and, therefore, would not have accepted the US as a peace broker in this conflict.

Ceasefire Deal

The full text of the ceasefire agreement between Russia and Georgia has not been published. The six basic principles included in the agreement are:

1. Non-use of force.
2. Stop all military action.
3. Free access to humanitarian aid.
4. Georgian troops return to their previous positions before the conflict.
5. Russian troops return to the lines they held before the start of the military operation. Before an international solution is worked out Russian peacekeepers are taking up an additional security role.
6. The start of an international discussion over the future status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.³⁶

Some additional information about the agreement was provided to the media by Sarkozy himself:

"In a letter clarifying that point, French President Nicolas Sarkozy -- who helped broker the deal -- wrote that such measures "may only be implemented in the immediate proximity of South Ossetia to the exclusion of any other part of Georgian territory." He added that the measures must be 'inside a zone of a depth of a few kilometers from the administrative limit between South Ossetia and the rest of Georgia in a manner such that no significant urban zone would be included."³⁷

Associated Press published more details about the agreement, based on information from Western diplomats involved in negotiations:

"The French-mediated proposal calls for the immediate withdrawal of Russian combat troops from Georgia, but allows Russian peacekeepers who were in the flashpoint separatist area of South Ossetia before last week's explosion of violence to remain and take a greater role there. The draft document also does not commit Russia to respecting Georgia's "territorial integrity" but rather refers to Georgian "independence" and "sovereignty,"

³⁶ "Ceasefire reached", *Russia Today*, August 13, 2008; <http://www.russiatoday.com/news/news/28896>

³⁷ "Huge fire as Georgian train hits landmine", CNN, August 24, 2008; <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/08/24/russia.georgia/>

meaning Moscow does not necessarily accept that South Ossetia and another disputed region, Abkhazia, are Georgian. The proposed cease-fire appears to back down on previous demands from the United States and its European allies that Russia halt all military activity in Georgia and that Georgia's "territorial integrity" must be respected... If agreed, the cease-fire would allow the Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia to stay and henceforth be permitted to patrol in a strip up to 10 kilometers (6.2 miles) outside the area, the U.S. officials said... The cease-fire also would allow Russian peacekeepers to remain in Abkhazia, the second, and larger, disputed province."³⁸

Agreeing to these terms must have been extremely humiliating for Saakashvili. Nevertheless, Rice seemed to have had no problems convincing Saakashvili to sign the ceasefire during her brief visit to Tbilisi on August 15. Witnessing such a level of control by Washington over Georgia's president, the claims by the US Department of State of its inability to convince Saakashvili not to attack South Ossetia ring hollow. What Saakashvili signed, in essence, was a death warrant for his political career. That is if Saakashvili actually signed the ceasefire agreement. According to Russia's Foreign Minister, what Saakashvili signed was a letter from Sarkozy and not the actual peace agreement signed by Sarkozy and Medvedev.³⁹

Is Russia violating the ceasefire deal, as the White House claims? Under this ceasefire agreement Russia received such wide-ranging powers, it is unlikely that the Kremlin could violate its terms even if it tried. By attempting to earn his place in history as a peacemaker, Sarkozy unwittingly handed Russia a signed piece of paper that might as well have said: "C'est par mon ordre et pour le bien de l'Etat que le porteur du présent a fait ce qu'il a fait." This is a common problem with ceasefire agreements drawn up at 2 o'clock in the morning in the face of advancing superior enemy forces and, thus, we shall not judge Sarkozy harshly.

US Involvement

In my earlier reports⁴⁰, I suggested that, with most of Georgia's army involved in the operation against South Ossetia and with well over a hundred US military instructors deployed in Georgia, it is inconceivable that the US was unaware of the plans to attack South Ossetia. Since then, the US Department of State and military officials (namely, John Beyrly, the US Ambassador to Russia, and Kurt Volkner, the US Ambassador to NATO), have confirmed that the US government knew about the planned attack.⁴¹ Russian Foreign Ministry and Ministry of Defense officials stated that Russia received no warning from the US or the European Union of the planned attack by Georgia against South Ossetia – an attack that cost lives to 15 Russian peacekeepers and 1,692 civilians. In particular, Col-Gen Anatoliy Nogovitsin, Russia's Deputy Chief of General Staff, said that OSCE knew about the exact date

38 "Rice offering Georgia imperfect peace plan", by Matthew Lee, *Associated Press*; August 15, 2008; http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20080815/ap_on_re_eu/us_russia_georgia_109

39 "Саакашвили вместо мирного договора подписал письмо Саркози", Lenta.ru, August 27, 2008

40 "Georgia's Attack on South Ossetia: Washington's Role", Venik, *Let me Tell You...*, August 15, 2008; <http://venik4.livejournal.com/15094.html>

41 Interview with the US Ambassador to Russia, Kommersant, August 22, 2008; <http://kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1014311>; Also, "Syria seeks weapons deal with Russia amid 'Cold War' ripples", by Anne Penketh, *The Independent*, August 22, 2008; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/syria-seeks-weapons-deal-with-russia-amid-cold-war-ripples-905449.html>; "We warned Georgia not to go in – US", by Joel Taylor, *Metro*, August 21, 2008; http://www.metro.co.uk/news/world/article.html?in_article_id=276589&in_page_id=64&in_a_source=

of the planned attack, but did nothing to warn Russian peacekeepers in South Ossetia.⁴²

This fact by itself is sufficient justification for Russia's deep mistrust of Washington's intentions in the Caucasus. It is difficult to imagine what America's response would have been if, for example, Russia knew about the planned attack against the World Trade Center but chose not to warn the US. In the case with Georgia's deadly attack against South Ossetia, the US not only knew about the planned invasion and chose not to warn the Russians, the Americans were training and arming Georgian forces, thus directly contributing to the horrific loss of life in Tskhinvali. Russia's continued cooperation with the US despite unprovoked hostile steps by the White House is a good indication of Russia's geopolitical maturity.

If we were to suppose that somehow Russia missed or chose to ignore weeks of Georgia's preparations for the war, and that on the eve of August 6 the Russian army was completely unprepared to launch a quick counteroffensive, Saakashvili's military action against the breakaway provinces would have succeeded. However, if the first step was to attack South Ossetia and the second step was to invade Abkhazia, there had to be a step number three to prevent or contain Russia's delayed but inevitable response. Saakashvili could have survived under Russian bombs for two-three weeks, giving Americans and Europeans enough time to organize their thoughts and present Russia with a unified political front. And they did, after three weeks. What really soured Saakashvili's plans were Russian tanks thirty miles from Tbilisi on the fourth day of the war.

In his interview to CNN, Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin openly accused the US of orchestrating the war in Georgia with the purpose of raising the profile of the Republican presidential candidate. "U.S. citizens were indeed in the area in conflict,' Putin said. 'They were acting in implementing those orders doing as they were ordered, and the only one who can give such orders is their leader.'"⁴³ The active role of the US in the conflict – with hundreds of military personnel and private security contractor stationed in Georgia - is not in question. However, Putin's direct accusation definitely raises the bar in the diplomatic standoff between Russia and the US. This is clearly a move by Russia designed to introduce additional tensions in America's relations with the EU. Russia also announced economic sanctions against nineteen poultry meat companies exporting their products to the Russian market.

Questions about the role of US military personnel and private contractors in this war are starting to pile up. Whether or not the White House encouraged Saakashvili to attack South Ossetia with the purpose of boosting McCain's ratings, as Putin claims, is impossible to prove. On the other hand, the conflict in Georgia was the major factor in McCain's rapid popularity growth. Russia's Col. Gen. Nogovitsin told journalists about a US passport found at one of the destroyed Georgian special ops bases in the village of Zemo-Nikozi located to the south-west of Tskhinvali and used by the Georgians as one of the staging areas for the invasion. "We tried but were unable to find the owner of this passport. Right now we only know that he lives in the state of Texas," said Nogovitsin after showing the passport to the journalists.⁴⁴ The passport is likely to belong to a contractor from one of the US

42 "ОБСЕ знала о дате нападения Грузии на Южную Осетию", *PrimaMedia*, August 22, 2008; <http://primamedia.ru/news/show/?id=78884>

43 "Putin accuses U.S. of orchestrating Georgian war", CNN, August 28, 2008; <http://www.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/europe/08/28/russia.georgia.cold.war/index.html>

44 "На позициях разбитого грузинского спецназа найден паспорт гражданина США", *INTERFAX*, August 28, 2008

private security firms.

Russia's Plans

A blind would have noticed Georgia's war preparations. Photos of Georgian armor being transported to the border with South Ossetia have even been published by Jane's more than a month before the Georgians launched the attack. The armor was transported uncovered, during daytime, using public roads that go through dozens of towns and villages. The Russians knew where Georgian commanders placed their troops, how many, what weapons they had and, I am sure, what they had for breakfast every morning. And yet, in no way did Russia reveal its own preparations. The Russians chose not to forward-deploy any armor, so not to alarm Saakashvili's generals. Ever since Saakashvili came to power in 2003 - running on his platform of forceful reunification of Georgia – this war was inevitable.

It is evident that Russia had a clear plan of action not just for the military phase of this conflict, but also for dealing with the political and economic aftershocks. Russia gladly allowed France to negotiate the ceasefire deal and Russia even agreed to expanded OSCE presence in the region despite the organization's role in concealing Georgian attack plans. The Kremlin was very specific about the wording of this agreement. Independence? Yes. Sovereignty? No problem. Territorial integrity? A big fat “nyet”. Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told reporters “One can forget about any talk about Georgia's territorial integrity.”⁴⁵ From the very beginning of the conflict, Russia ruled out dealing directly with Saakashvili and called for him to resign.⁴⁶ Even the usually calm and soft-spoken Medvedev accused Saakashvili of harboring “idiotic ideas”⁴⁷ and referred to the Georgian leadership as “otmorozki” (“punks”).⁴⁸ As early as August 15 – more than a week before the Russian Parliament voted on the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia – Russia made its intentions abundantly clear. Western leaders and diplomats were too busy criticizing Russia's interpretation of the ceasefire agreement to fully realize where the Kremlin was heading.

Even when both chambers of the Russian Parliament unanimously voted to recognize the two breakaway provinces, the vast majority of Western political analysts did not believe Medvedev would be in any rush to follow the lawmakers' lead. Instead, the analysts thought, the Kremlin would use the Parliament's backing to strengthen its hand in the ongoing squabble with the West.

“The situation can hardly get worse,” said Georgian National Security Council spokesman Zura Kachkachishvili. “Nothing will really change.”

But he did say a delay “might be used by Russia as leverage in talks with Western parties.”

German Chancellor Angela Merkel said the recognition of independence for the two separatist regions would create a “very difficult, critical situation” in regards to Georgia's territorial integrity and violate international agreements, Reuters reported.

45 “Russia: Forget Georgian territorial integrity”, *Associated Press*, August 14, 2008

46 “Russia's Medvedev halts military action in Georgia”, Vladimir Isachenkov, *Associated Press*, August 12, 2008

47 “Georgia signs truce; it's Russia's move”, by Andrew Kramer and Clifford Levy, *The New York Times*, August 15, 2008

48 The Russian slang term “otmorozok”, in its original meaning, refers to a marginalized youth exhibiting asocial behavior or a small-time hoodlum and is analogous to the American “punk”.

There was real doubt Monday that a recognition announcement from the Kremlin would appear any time soon.

"Recognition shouldn't be rapid but discussed over a few years, so that it is recognized by the international community," said Vadim Mukhanov, a senior researcher at the Caucasus Research Center at the Moscow State Institute for International Relations.

Vasily Likhachev, deputy chairman of the Federation Council's Foreign Relations Committee, said Medvedev would likely take time weighing his options.

Likhachev said he expected Medvedev and Prime Minister Vladimir Putin to "conduct a few one-on-one consultations with strategic partners like the United Nations, for example."⁴⁹

Diplomats and analysts should have paid more attention to the words of State Duma Speaker Boris Gryzlov, who said that a response from Medvedev was expected shortly. Medvedev had no intention of using the Parliament's vote as leverage against the West, nor was he interested in protracted negotiations to gain support of the "international community". The Kremlin had a clearly defined plan and was prepared to stand alone. By attacking South Ossetia Saakashvili set this plan in motion and it appears Russia was ready for everything the West could throw at it. And Medvedev made it perfectly clear that Russia will match any hostile move by the West, regardless of how far the situation escalates. Where this plan leads is another matter.

49 "Lawmakers Recognize Rebel Regions", by Natalya Krainova, *The Moscow Times*, August 26, 2008