

# THE “FIVE-DAY WAR” AND PROSPECTS FOR PEACE IN THE CAUCASUS

## IT DOES NOT TAKE A PROPHET: WAR AND PEACE IN THE CAUCASUS

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Was the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, which resulted into a dismemberment of Georgia, predictable and avoidable? Supporters and ideological allies of the current Georgian government have insisted that those who criticize the alertness and behavior of the Saakashvili administration are looking at this issue with the full benefits of hindsight. To be fair, political scientists are much better at predicting the past than the future, and if we follow this logic, the future conflicts between the two neighbors in the Caucasus should be as “unpredictable” and “unexpected” as this one.

The international system behaves very much like a stochastic system, but it does exhibit certain regularities and carries certain conti-

nunity when it comes to behavior of its actors. Despite weaknesses and problems unleashed by the era of globalization, nation-states remain the main actors of the international system. Survival continues to be the main value for these actors, and the system guides the nation-states or those who act on their behalf to do their utmost to preserve this value for themselves, and stay as actors in the system. States compete, jostle, combine, and sometimes even collide in order to accumulate enough power and capabilities to provide for their survival. States collide and fight not because they have different values in the international system, but as carriers of the same set of values they come to different understandings and perspectives of how to defend these values

based on their individual geopolitical circumstances. Therefore, states may develop different, and often competing interests around the same issue, which occasionally throws them into violent conflicts.

Just prior to the extraordinary presidential election in Georgia on 5 January, 2008, a Georgian language daily *Resonansi* (*The Resonance*) printed my op-ed piece titled “The Issue of Division of Abkhazia, and Theories of the Ruling Party,” in which, among other things I warned that “If Saakashvili manages to stay in power, and the ruling party will do everything to keep its leader in the presidential seat, the most logical solution for the Abkhaz issue would be its division with Russia. It would be more beneficial for Georgia to keep the status of the autonomous republic undecided than to settle it by dividing [the province with Russia], as with a gradual weakening of Russia, Georgia should be able to recover the lost territories. However, in the event of its legal division with Russia, it would be almost impossible to recover the lost territory.”

Further I anticipated the province of Abkhazia to be divided by force between Russia and Georgia, and this to happen sometime before the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics: “...The Russians will try their best to act before Georgia does, and introduce troops to Abkhazia citing a prevention of aggression by Georgia. A provocation of sorts would be enough [for them] to argue that Geor-

gia is planning aggression, and intends to thwart the [Sochi] Olympic Games. After the deployment of the [Russian] troops [to Abkhazia], it would take decades to dislodge them from that territory.”

Saakashvili did win the elections in January 2008, supported in large by a shameful behavior of the OSCE delegation in the country.<sup>1</sup> In June 2008, he did propose secretly to Moscow to divide Abkhazia;<sup>2</sup> however, as the August events demonstrated, the Russians decided not to divide, but to keep the whole pie for themselves. The August escalation around Tskhinvali served as the pretext, but Abkhazia and its geopolitical setting is the biggest prize for the Russians, with which they will not easily part.

<sup>1</sup> OSCE German diplomat Dieter Boden proclaimed the presidential election process to be fair and democratic based long before the official results were released, and the opposition parties had their chance to complain about irregularities. With less than 3% of votes counted, Saakashvili was declared winner by the organizers of “independent” exit-polls, who subsequently received senior government positions (for more on this, see: L. Tchantouridze, “On the Results of the Special Presidential Elections in Georgia,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 1 (49), 2008).

<sup>2</sup> On 27 June, 2008, the Russian daily *Kommersant* reported on the Georgian proposal to Russia regarding the division of Abkhazia. At that time, both Russian and Georgian sides strongly denied that such a proposal was made. However, in his televised address on 24 August, 2008, President Saakashvili acknowledged that he had written a letter to the Russian leadership proposing exactly that.

## Some Important Distinctions

Analysis of international politics is best done at three levels: systemic, the state, and individual.<sup>3</sup> The individual level deals with the make-up and character of top decision-makers, the state level has to do with the composition and nature of the state, and the systemic level looks at the structure of international relations, which basically boils down to the distribution of power among the states.<sup>4</sup> Systemic level of analysis is the most important and decisive; however, the two other levels should not be ignored, especially when it comes to a complicated region like the Caucasus.

In terms of the Georgia-Russia war of August 2008, some clarifications should be made, as understandably such events often provoke emotional tensions, and blame games. A fundamental distinction should be made between the states and their interests, and the interests of the regimes that

<sup>3</sup> First proposed by Kenneth Waltz in *Man, the State, and War*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1954.

<sup>4</sup> See: K. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, McGraw-Hill, New York, 1979.

govern them. The ruling group often has parochial interests that do not correspond with the interests of the states they represent. In fact, the international system is shaped by the interactions among the ruling groups, most of them representing the nation-states and few others acting on behalf of important non-state actors, such as terror organizations, and state-like entities. Such interactions influence strategies of individual states as they seek survival, and accumulation of power.<sup>5</sup>

The standings of a country, and the position of its ruling class could be affected differently by an outcome of a military conflict. The aftermath of the August war seems to suggest that gains and losses have not been symmetric for Georgia and Russia, on the one hand, and their respective ruling groups, on the other. As no war could be fought in isolation from the greater international system, the outside powers involved in the Caucasus will undoubtedly take notes and adjust their strategies toward both Tbilisi and Moscow. The latter seems to be more immune to significant outside pressures in the region, at least in the short term.

Russia has not lost its great power status with the end of the Cold War. All that rhetoric about the United States remaining the world's only superpower, and even becoming an hyperpower of sorts, has been nothing but rhetoric. For all practical purposes, the Russian Federation and the United States have maintained a parity in nuclear armaments, and the Russian conventional armed forces, although somewhat outdated and rusty, cannot be dismissed as irrelevant for the status of great power either. The United States does have a technological edge when it comes to certain conventional equipment and capabilities; however, it is not clear at all how such an edge would translate into a whole new power status for the country. If a missile does its job, it does not make a huge difference whether it is smart or dumb. A technological edge is always a matter of a perspective, and one never knows its relevance unless tested in an actual battle.

Further, Russia remains a conglomerate of many nations—in essence, it is still an empire, despite its nicer name and an image of the republic. It houses many nations under rather authoritarian legal and political system, and borders many other nations with similar authoritarian past and present. As a great power, Russia emerged not very long ago in history—only after its autocrats opened the “windows’ into the Baltic, and especially Black Seas in the 18th century, Russia became an European power to be reckoned with. Subsequently, its great power status has been closely tied, among other things, with its ability to freely access these two seas.

Another important feature, which makes Russia unique among the world's great powers, is its self-sufficiency in the matters of national defense. No other great power, including the United States, manufactures and produces everything needed for national defense domestically. Russia's ability to operate the sole autarkic defense infrastructure in the world is closely coupled with its vast crude oil reserves. However, the oil reserves may well be vast, but even with world's current diminished appetite for oil, the Russian reserves are not expected to last beyond mid 21st century.

Therefore, both the access to the Black Sea, and as much supply of crude as possible serve Russia's national interests, and seem to be in line with its long-term objectives as a great power. Moscow tackled both issues with the war in Georgia: it has increased its Black Sea coastline by annexing Abkhazia, and acquired a former submarine base in Ochamchira. The Putin administration also intended, but could not accomplish, closing down the Georgian route for oil (and future natural gas) exports from the Caspian basin; however, they remain militarily well-positioned to re-occupy Georgia within days, and if needed, they could meet this goal within days.

Legitimate or not, the Russian interests in the Caucasus could have been defended and furthered by other means than war, and dismemberment of Russia's smaller neighbor could have been avoided. The Russian government has chosen violent means to further its interests in the Caucasus because of

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<sup>5</sup> States seek military and economic power, as well as intellectual know-how, legitimacy, prestige, etc. in order to better position themselves in the international system, and ultimately, create better chances for their own survival.

permissive causes internationally, and the parochial interests of the Kremlin. Among the permissive causes of the August war should be mentioned the weakened and leaderless West, and European dependency on Russian oil and gas. The Russian leadership, on the other hand, needs benefits gained from a small victorious war, as they have successfully resorted to such means in the past in Chechnia and Daghestan. In order to stay in power indefinitely they will wage similar military campaigns in the future in the Caucasus and elsewhere.

## Georgia and Saakashvili after the August War

Georgia is a small country, and in terms of military strength, it is much inferior to Russia. However, it has been a minor military power for most of the last two thousand years, during which it faced a variety of empires and invaders: the Roman, the pagan Persian, the Muslim Arab, the Mongol, the Turk Seljuk, the Byzantine, the Muslim Persian, the Ottoman Turk, pre and post-revolutionary Russia, and now the Russian Federation. Georgia has persisted, fought, and eventually evicted the invading great powers from its part of the Caucasus—it could not have survived as a nation otherwise. The Russians are relative newcomers to the Caucasus, they have been there for about two hundred years. In comparison, the Arabs ruled Tbilisi for 300 years between the 8th and the 11th centuries, but after exhausting all its military options, they left in the end.

In order to beat more powerful enemies, Georgia historically had to make alliances with the enemies of its enemies, and such alliances almost always transcended religious boundaries. The circumstances are no different today, as Georgia is trying to enter NATO and get military assistance from the United States, as it is not able to counter alone its much more powerful rival, Russia. With the Russians being unwilling to make any concessions to Georgia in order to gain what it needs peacefully, Tbilisi has not other choice but to try and attract as much Western support as possible.

In the end, Georgians may indeed recover the provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia through military means, but they were neither ready nor equipped for the August war. It was not in the country's interest to wage a war against Russia at that juncture; however, Georgia's ruling class probably did expect certain gains. It is very likely that in June 2008 they did find an understanding with Russia on the division of Abkhazia, and in August Tbilisi miscalculated Moscow's true intentions, and lost the war and its two secessionist provinces as a result.

The Saakashvili administration would have benefited from a short war with Russia, had they managed to recover at least parts of the territory under separatist control. Even after the lost campaign their position seems to be solid by gaining moral and monetary support from the West. By controlling more than US 4.5 billion aid package collected by the donors,<sup>6</sup> the ruling group under Saakashvili remains the most influential body in the country.

Georgia itself has been weakened dramatically by the August war, and it is more vulnerable to Russian attacks than ever before since gaining independence in 1991. Its defense forces have been heavily damaged, and their morale shattered. The navy, the biggest concern for the Russians has been wiped out due to neglect and ignorance of the Georgian leadership. To make things even worse, after the war the Georgian navy has been put under the control of the Ministry of Interior.

In the long run, the strategic significance of the Caucasus, and specifically Georgia, as well as the issues with which this significance has been associated, are not likely to disappear. Oil and gas

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<sup>6</sup> Data is available at "Georgia Donors' Conference—22 October 2008," European Commission: External Relations, available at [[http://ec.europa.eu/external\\_relations/georgia/conference/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/external_relations/georgia/conference/index_en.htm)].

will remain a crucial strategic resource for Russia, as well as other great powers, and Moscow will keep looking at the Black Sea as its own. At the same time, Georgia will try to recover the lost provinces, especially after Saakashvili, as the Abkhaz and South Ossetian issues are not going to vanish from Georgian politics, and strategic planning.

### *C o n c l u s i o n :* **Russia's Success and Its Future Options**

Russia's successes after the August war with Georgia are undeniable. Moscow's influence in the Caucasus has not been this strong since the collapse of the Soviet Union. It has increased its Black Sea possessions, and has positioned itself to fully control the access to the oil and gas rich Caspian Basin. Russia drew a red line for NATO's enlargement in the East. Weaknesses of the Western allies have been espoused, including double divisions among the Europeans, as well as between the "old Europe" and the United States. Washington was made to look frightened and confused, despite unambiguous accusations by Moscow of being a direct participant of war and an ally of Georgia.<sup>7</sup> The OSCE, once again, failed to anticipate anything, and it looked rather foolish and inadequate. The reputation of this organization was tarnished by the bizarre behavior of its senior military officer in Georgia.<sup>8</sup> Turkey has been silenced as Ankara seems to be more concerned with keeping non-littoral navies out of the Black Sea than with Russian expansionism. After West's pitiful display in August, Russia's options remain wide open in the Caucasus, as well as in Ukraine, which has been actively subverted by the Putin people for years. Other post-Soviet states have been sent a strong message, both those inside and outside NATO.

On the other hand, Russia has some serious structural weaknesses. Moscow's international behavior represents a classic example of its ruling class's desire for an insular empire. Historically, all empires have been unstable, precisely because no empire could exist without large doses of insularity and autarkic policies. In the age of globalization, keeping imperial desires alive will cost Moscow a lot more than ever before. Russia has no need to enter military alliances in order to provide for its defenses, yet, but this advantage will fade as its crude oil reserves start to diminish. Russia's imperial ambitions also will be checked from within, as desires for sovereignty, independence or various kinds of grievances are more likely to intensify with the increase of Moscow's authoritarian grip over the country. Anti-Moscow movements and processes within Russia will be boosted if the subsidies to its poor and potentially secessionist republics diminish, as they will have to if the imperial projects outside the Russian borders are to be funded.

However, Russia's structural weaknesses and its eventual demise as an imperial entity are still years off; meanwhile it has some options open in the Caucasus and around the Black Sea. In the short term, the Putin troupe may try to get rid of Saakashvili altogether, especially if they decide

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<sup>7</sup> During and after the August war, Prime Minister Putin, President Medvedev, and General Nogovitsyn accused the U.S. of instigating the war, supplying the Georgian armed forces with instructors, of having American mercenaries fighting against the Russian troops, re-arming the Georgian forces, and being a direct participant of conflict by airlifting the Georgian troops from Iraq back to Georgia.

<sup>8</sup> Ryan Grist, a former British captain, who was in charge on the ground when the fighting erupted between Russia and Georgia, initially squarely blamed Georgia, and his version of events was subsequently picked up by many Western government officials and representatives of the mass media. Eventually it was discovered that during the invasion, Grist disobeyed orders, argued with his boss, went AWOL to meet Russian and South Ossetian officials, after which he was fired by the OSCE (see: M. Champion, "British Monitor Complicates Georgian Blame Game," *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 December, 2008).

that nothing else could be gained from his erratic ways. To his successor Moscow will likely propose an anti-Western pact: sign a conditional deal to form a confederation with the “independent” Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and legally forfeit these territories if Tbilisi ever turns to the West. To keep the Black Sea firmly in its grip, Moscow will continue to try to detach Crimea from Ukraine, and as this peninsula cannot be sustained without supply lines from the mainland Ukraine, Russia’s secret services will concentrate on spending much money in Kiev, and eastern Ukraine may well become the next target of Russia’s military planners. Most importantly, Russia has drawn a “do not cross” line for the United States and whatever is left from its European allies—now it is Washington’s move, and Moscow will undoubtedly take cues from what is voiced during the first weeks of the new U.S. administration.