

Ossetia: War a la carte

Written by Eric Walberg
Friday, 03 July 2009 03:38

The US is inventing wars aplenty these days. Will it be Iran or Ossetia this month, asks Eric Walberg

14/8/8 -- In August 2008, Georgia launched a major military offensive against the rebel province South Ossetia, just hours after President Mikhail Saakashvili had announced a unilateral ceasefire.

Close to 1,500 were killed, Russian officials say. Thirty thousand refugees, mostly women and children, streamed across the border into the North Ossetian capital Vladikavkaz in Russia.

The timing -- and subterfuge -- suggest the unscrupulous Saakashvili was counting on surprise. "Most decision-makers have gone for the holidays," he said in an interview with CNN. "Brilliant moment to attack a small country." Apparently he was referring to Russia invading Georgia, despite the fact that it was Georgia which had just launched a full-scale invasion of the "small country" South Ossetia, while Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin was in Beijing for the Olympics. Twenty-seven Russian peacekeepers and troops have been killed and 150 wounded so far, many when their barracks were shelled by Georgian forces at the start of the invasion. Georgian State Minister for Reintegration Temur Yakobashvili rushed to announce that their mini-blitzkrieg had destroyed 10 Russian combat planes (Russia says two) and that Georgian troops were in full control of the capital Tskhinvali.

Russia's Defence Ministry denounced the Georgian attack as a "dirty adventure". From Beijing, Putin said, "it is regrettable that on the day before the opening of the Olympic Games, the Georgian authorities have undertaken aggressive actions in South Ossetia." He later added, "war has started." Russian President Dmitri Medvedev vowed that Moscow will protect Russian citizens -- most South Ossetians hold Russian passports. The offensive prompted Moscow to send in 150 tanks, to launch air strikes on nearby Gori and military sites, and to order warships to Georgia's Black Sea coast.

Georgia's national security council declared a state of war with Russia and full military mobilisation. US military planes are already flying Georgia's 2,000 troops in Iraq -- the third-largest force after the United States and Britain -- back to confront the Russians. By Sunday, despite early claims of victory, Georgian troops had retreated from South Ossetia, leaving diplomatic rubble behind which will be very hard to clear. Truth is stranger than fiction in Georgia.

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The writing has been on the wall for months. Georgian President Saakashvili's fawning over Western leaders at the "emergency" NATO meeting in April and his pre-election anti-Russian bluster in May made it clear to all that Georgia is the more-than-willing canary in the Eastern mine shaft. The Georgian attack on South Ossetia's capital Tskhinvali -- I repeat -- just hours after Saakashvili declared a ceasefire, looks very much like an attempt to reincorporate the rebel province into Georgia unilaterally. But whoever is advising the brash young president ignores the postscript -- no pasaran! South Ossetia has been independent for 16 years and is not likely to drape flowers on invading Georgia tanks. It also just happens to have Russia as patron.

The aftershocks of this wild gamble by Saakashvili are just beginning. This is Russia's most serious altercation with a foreign country since the collapse of the Soviet Union and could escalate into an all-out war engulfing much of the Caucasus region. Russian warships are not planning to block shipments of oil from Georgia's Black Sea port of Poti, Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin said on Sunday, but reserve the right to search ships coming to and from it. Another naval source said, "the crews are assigned the task not to allow arms and military hardware supplies to reach Georgia by sea." The Russians have already sunk a Georgian missile boat that was trying to attack Russian ships. Upping the ante, Ukraine said it reserved the right to bar Russian warships from returning to their nominally Ukrainian -- formerly Russian -- base of Sevastopol, on the Crimean peninsula. On Saturday, Russia accused Ukraine of "arming the Georgians to the teeth".

Georgia's other separatist region, Abkhazia, was mobilising its forces for a push into the Kodori Gorge, the only part of Abkhazia controlled by Georgia. "No dialogue is possible with the current Georgian leadership," said Abkhazia's President Sergei Bagapsh. "They are state criminals who must be tried for the crimes committed in South Ossetia, the genocide of the Ossetian people." Britain has ordered its nationals to leave Georgia. British charity worker Sian Davis said, "it's really, really quiet, eerily quiet. Everyone was either at home or had packed up and moved out of the city. People are really, really scared. People are panicking." So far the more than 2,000 US nationals in this tiny but strategic country are mostly staying put.

This is yet another made-in-the-USA war. US President George W Bush loudly supported Georgia's request to join NATO in April, much to the consternation of European leaders. NATO promised to send advisers in December. Not losing any time, the US sent more than 1,000 US Marines and soldiers to the Vaziani military base on the South Ossetian border in July "to teach combat skills to Georgian troops." The UN Security Council failed to reach an agreement on the current crisis after three emergency meetings. A Russian-drafted statement that called on Georgia and the separatists to "renounce the use of force" was vetoed by the US, UK and France. To dispel any conceivable doubt, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Friday: "We call on Russia to cease attacks on Georgia by aircraft and missiles, respect Georgia's

territorial integrity, and withdraw its ground combat forces from Georgian soil."

But it's also yet another made-in-Israel war. A thousand military advisers from Israeli security firms have been training the country's armed forces and were deeply involved in the Georgian army's preparations to attack and capture the capital of South Ossetia, according to the Israeli website Debkafiles which has close links with the regime's intelligence and military sources. Haaretz reported that Yakobashvili told Army Radio, in Hebrew, "Israel should be proud of its military which trained Georgian soldiers." "We killed 60 Russian soldiers just yesterday," he boasted on Monday. "The Russians have lost more than 50 tanks, and we have shot down 11 of their planes. They have enormous damage in terms of manpower." He warned that the Russians would try and open another battlefront in Abkhazia and denied reports that the Georgian army was retreating. "The Georgian forces are not retreating. We move our military according to security needs."

Israelis are active in real estate, tourism, gaming, military manufacturing and security consulting in Georgia, including former Tel Aviv mayor Roni Milo and Likudite and gambling operator Reuven Gavrieli. "The Russians don't look kindly on the military cooperation of Israeli firms with the Georgian army, and as far as I know, Israelis doing security consulting left Georgia in the past few days because of the events there," the former Israeli ambassador to Georgia and Armenia, Baruch Ben Neria, said yesterday. Since his posting, Ben Neria has represented Rafael Advanced Defence Systems in Georgia.

By Sunday, Putin was in Vladikavkaz and said it was unlikely South Ossetia will ever be re-integrated into Georgia. There are really only two possible scenarios to end the conflict: a long-term stalemate or Russian annexation of South Ossetia. The former is beginning to look pretty good, and Saakashvili is probably already ruing his rash move. The Georgian president is clearly hoping he can suck the US into the conflict. Alexander Lomaya, secretary of Georgia's National Security Council, said only Western intervention could prevent an all-out war. But it is very unlikely Bush will risk WW III over this scrap of craggy mountain.

When US puppets get out of line, like a certain Saddam Hussein, they are easily abandoned. Saakashvili would be wise to recall the fate of the first post-Soviet Georgian president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, also a darling of the US (in 1978 US Congress nominated him for the Nobel Peace Prize). He rode to victory on a wave of nationalism in 1990, declaring independence for Georgia and officially recognising the "Chechen Republic of Ichkeria". But South Ossetia wanted no part of the fiery Gamsakhurdia's chauvinistic vision and declared its own "independence". Engulfed by a wave of disgust a short two years later, abandoned by his US friends, he fled to his beloved Ichkeria. He snuck back into western Georgia, looking for support

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in restive Abkhazia, but his uprising collapsed, prompting Abkhazia to secede. He died in 1993, leaving the two secessionist provinces as a legacy, and was buried in Chechnya. Saakashvili rehabilitated him in 2004 and had his remains interred in Mtatsminda Pantheon with other Georgian "heroes". Truth really is stranger than fiction in Georgia. Now the burning question is: will history repeat itself?

<http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/910/in1.htm>