

Bush's War in Georgia; Will it be the Flyswatter or the Blunderbuss?

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"I saw bodies lying on the streets, around ruined buildings and in cars. It's impossible to count them now. There's hardly a single building left undamaged." Lyudmila Ostayeva, resident of Tskhinvali, South Ossetia

Washington's bloody fingerprints are all over the invasion of South Ossetia. Georgia President Mikhail Saakashvili would never dream of launching a massive military attack unless he got explicit orders from his bosses at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. After all, Saakashvili owes his entire political career to American power-brokers and US intelligence agencies. If he disobeyed them, he'd be gone in a fortnight. Besides an operation like this takes months of planning and logistical support; especially if it's perfectly timed to coincide with the beginning of the Olympic games. (another petty neocon touch) That means Pentagon planners must have been working hand in hand with Georgian generals for months in advance. Nothing was left to chance.

Another tell-tale sign of US complicity is the way President Bush has avoided ordering Georgian troops to withdraw from a province that has been under the protection of international peacekeepers. Remember how quickly Bush ordered Sharon to withdraw from his rampage in Jenin? Apparently it's different when the aggression serves US interests.

Saakashvili has been working closely with the Bush administration ever since he replaced Eduard Shevardnadze as president in 2003. That's when US-backed NGOs and western intelligence agencies toppled the Shevardnadze regime in the so-called color-coded "Rose Revolution". Since then, Saakashvili has done everything that's been asked of him; he's built up the military and internal security apparatus, he's allowed US advisers to train and arm Georgian troops, he's applied for membership in NATO, and he's been a general nuisance to his Russian neighbors. Now, he has sent his army into battle ostensibly on Washington's orders. At least, that is how the Kremlin sees it. Vladimir Vasilyev, the Chairman of Russia's State Duma Security Committee, summed up the feelings of many Russians like this: "The further the situation unfolds, the more the world will understand that Georgia would never be able to do all this without America. In essence, the Americans have prepared the force, which destroys everything in South Ossetia, attacks civilians and hospitals."

True. That's why Bush is flying Georgian troops back home from Iraq to join the fighting rather than pursuing peaceful alternatives. Bush still believes that political solutions will naturally arise through the use of force. Unfortunately, his record is rather spotty.

But that still doesn't answer the larger question: Why would Saakashvili embark on such a

pointless military adventure when he had no chance of winning? After all, Russia has 20 times the firepower and has been conducting military maneuvers anticipating this very scenario for months. Does Uncle Sam really want another war that bad or is the fighting in South Ossetia just head-fake for a larger war that is brewing in the Straits of Hormuz?

Mikhail Saakashvili is a western educated lawyer and a favorite of the neocons. He rose to power on a platform of anti-corruption and economic reform which emphasized free market solutions and privatization. Instead of raising the standard of living for the Georgian people, Saakashvili has been running up massive deficits to expand the over-bloated military. Saakashvili has made huge purchases of Israeli and US-made (offensive) weapon systems and has devoted more than "4.2% of GDP (more than a quarter of all Georgian public income) to military hardware.

The Chairman of Russia's State Duma Security Committee, Vladimir Vasiliyev, summed it up like this:

"Georgia could have used the years of Saakashvili's presidency in different ways - to build up the economy, to develop the infrastructure, to solve social issues both in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and the whole state. Instead, the Georgian leadership with president Saakashvili undertook consistent steps to increase its military budget from US\$30 million to \$1 billion - Georgia was preparing for a military action." Naturally, Russia is worried about these developments and has brought the matter up repeatedly at the United Nations but to no avail.

Israeli arms manufacturers have also been supplying Saakashvili with state-of-the-art weaponry. According to Israeli newspaper Ha'aretz:

"In addition to the spy drones, Israel has also been supplying Georgia with infantry weapons and electronics for artillery systems, and has helped upgrade Soviet-designed Su-25 ground attack jets assembled in Georgia, according to Koba Liklikadze, an independent military expert in Tbilisi. Former Israeli generals also serve as advisers to the Georgian military." ("Following Russian pressure, Israel freezes defense sales to Georgia" Associated Press)

The Israeli news source DebkaFile elaborates on the geopolitical implications of Israeli involvement in the Georgia's politics:

"The conflict has been sparked by the race for control over the pipelines carrying oil and gas out of the Caspian region....The Russians may just bear with the pro-US Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili's ambition to bring his country into NATO. But they draw a heavy line against his plans and those of Western oil companies, including Israeli firms, to route the oil routes from Azerbaijan and the gas lines from Turkmenistan, which transit Georgia, through Turkey instead of hooking them up to Russian pipelines.

Jerusalem owns a strong interest in Caspian oil and gas pipelines reach the Turkish terminal port of Ceyhan, rather than the Russian network. Intense negotiations are afoot between Israel Turkey, Georgia, Turkmenistan and Azarbaijan for pipelines to reach Turkey and thence to Israel's oil terminal at Ashkelon and on to its Red Sea port of Eilat. From there, supertankers can carry the gas and oil to the Far East through the Indian Ocean." (Paul

Joseph Watson, "US Attacks Russia Through Client State Georgia")

The United States and Israel are both neck-deep in the "Great Game"; the ongoing war for vital petroleum and natural gas supplies in Central Asia and the Caspian Basin. So far, Putin appears to have the upper-hand because of his alliances with his regional allies—under the Commonwealth of Independent States—and because most of the natural gas from Eurasia is pumped through Russian pipelines. An article in "Today's Zaman" gives a good snapshot of Russia's position vis a vis natural resources in the region:

"As far as natural resources are concerned Russia's hand is very strong: It holds 6.6 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and 26 percent of the world's gas reserves. In addition, it currently accounts for 12 percent of world oil and 21 of recent world gas production. In May 2007, Russia was the world's largest oil and gas producer.

As for national champions, Putin has strengthened and prepared Gazprom (the state-controlled gas company), Transneft (oil pipeline monopoly) and Rosneft (the state-owned oil giant). That is why in 2006 Gazprom retained full ownership in the giant Shtokman gas field (7) and took a controlling stake in the Sakhalin-2 natural gas project. In June 2007, it took back BP's Kovytkha gas field and now is behind Total's Kharyaga oil and gas field." ("Vladimir Putin's Energystan and the Caspian" Today's Zaman)

Putin—the black belt Judo-master—has proved to be as adept at geopolitics as he is at "deal-making". He has collaborated with the Austrian government on a huge natural gas depot in Austria which will facilitate the transport of gas to southern Europe. He has joined forces with German industry to build an underwater pipeline through the Baltic to Germany (which could provide 80% of Germany's gas requirements) He has selected France's Total to assist Gazprom in the development of the massive Shtokman gas field. And he is setting up pipeline corridors to provide gas to Turkey and the Balkans. Putin has very deliberately spread Russia's influence evenly throughout Europe with the intention of severing the Transatlantic Alliance and, eventually, loosening America's vice-like grip on the continent.

Putin's overtures to Germany's Merkel and France's Sarkozy are calculated to weaken the resolve of Bush's neocon allies in the EU and put them in Russia's corner. Putin is also attracting considerable foreign investment to Russian markets and has adopted "a 'new model of cooperation' in the energy sector that would 'allow foreign partners to share in the economic benefits of the project, share the management, and take on a share of the industrial, commercial and financial risks'". (M K Bhadrakumar "Russia plays the Shtokman card", Asia Times) All of these are intended to strengthen ties between Europe and Russia and make it harder for the Bush administration to isolate Moscow.

Putin has played his cards very wisely, which makes it look like the fighting in South Ossetia may be Washington's way of trying to win through military force what they could not achieve via the free market.

On Saturday, President Bush issued this statement from Beijing: "We have urged an immediate halt to the violence and a stand-down by all troops. We call for an end to the Russian bombings and a return by the parties to the status quo of August 6th."

That was it. Bush then quickly returned to the Olympic festivities. He was last spotted at a photo op with the US girls volleyball team jumping up and down on the beach-sand in his

wingtips. The pretense that Bush is leading the country has seemingly been abandoned altogether. Cheney is in charge now.

Meanwhile, Putin boarded a plane to Moscow as soon as he heard about the Georgian invasion and after angrily waving his finger in Bush's face. It's doubtful that the friendship between the two leaders will survive the present storm. America's gambit in the Caucasus has aroused the sleeping bear and put Russia on the warpath. There's no telling when the hostilities might end. The conflagration could sweep across the entire region. Currently, news agencies are reporting that Russian warplanes are pounding Georgia's military bases, airfields, and the Black sea port of Poti.

According to Bill Van Auken on the World Socialist Web Site:

"Much of the city (Tskhinvali) was reportedly in flames Friday. The regional parliament building had burned down, the university was on fire, and the town's main hospital had been rendered inoperative by the bombardment."

Vesti radio reported that Georgian forces burned down a church in Tanara in South Ossetia where people were hiding, to the ground, with all the people inside. The Deputy Director of an information agency as an eye witness reported that fragments of cluster bombs were found in Tskhinvali. There have also been reports by a South Ossetian reservist that civilians who were hiding in basements were shot dead by Georgian soldiers.

Wikipedia reports that, "Russian soldiers captured group of American mercenaries on territory of South Ossetia. Group was captured near of Zare village."

An estimated 1,500 people have died in the onslaught and 30,000 more fled across the Russian border. Large swaths of the city have been reduced to rubble including the one hospital that was pounded by Georgia bombers. Georgia has cut off the water supply to the city. The Red Cross now anticipates a "humanitarian catastrophe" as a result of the fighting.

"I saw bodies lying on the streets, around ruined buildings, in cars," Lyudmila Ostayeva, 50, told the Associated Press after fleeing the city with her family to a village near the Russian border. "It's impossible to count them now. There is hardly a single building left undamaged."

At least 15 Russian peacekeepers were killed in the initial fighting and 70 more were sent to hospital. Georgia's army stormed the South Ossetia capital, Tskhinvali, killing more than 1,000 fleeing civilians. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin told news agencies in an interview how the hostilities began:

Russian peacekeepers "were killed by their own [Georgian] partners in the peacekeeping forces. There is a Russian battalion, an Ossetian battalion, and a Georgian battalion... and all of a sudden the Georgians, Georgian peacekeepers, begin shooting their Russian colleagues. This is of course a war crime. I do not rule out that the Hague and Strasbourg courts and institutions in other cities will be involved in investigating these crimes, and this inhuman drama that has been played out."

According to South Ossetia's president, Eduard Kokoyti, Georgian troops had been taking part in NATO exercises in the region since the beginning of August. Kokoyti claims that there

is a connection between the NATO's activities and the current violence.

Clearly, no one was expecting Russia to react as quickly or as forcefully as they did. In a matter of hours Russian tanks and armored vehicles were streaming over the border while warplanes bombed targets throughout the south. The Bush-Saakashvili strategy unraveled in a matter of hours. The Georgia president is already calling for a cease-fire. He's had enough.

Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin has promised to spend \$400 million to rebuild parts of South Ossetia. Large shipments of food and medical supplies are already on the way.

Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said on Sunday:

"The actions of Georgia have led to deaths - among them are Russian peacekeepers. The situation reached the point that Georgian peacekeepers have been shooting at Russian peacekeepers. Now women, children and old people are dying in South Ossetia - most of them are citizens of the Russian Federation. As the President of the Russian Federation, I am obligated to protect lives and the dignity of Russian citizens wherever they are. Those responsible for the deaths of our citizens will be punished."

Indeed, but how will Medvedev bring the responsible people to justice; with tanks and fighter pilots or is there another way?

PUTIN'S OPTIONS: Flyswatter or Blunderbuss?

Sometimes wars provide clarity. That's certainly true in this case. After this weekend's fighting, everyone in the Russian political establishment knows that Washington is willing to sacrifice thousands of innocent civilians and plunge the entire region into chaos to achieve its geopolitical objectives. Bush could call the whole thing off right now; Putin and Medvedev know that. But that's not the game-plan. So, the two Russian leaders have to make some tough decisions that will end up costing lives. What other choice do they have?

Putin needs to carefully weigh his options. Then, on Monday, he should announce that Russia will sell all \$50 billion of its Fannie Mae mortgage-backed bonds, all of its US dollar-backed assets, and will accept only rubles and euros in the future sale of Russian oil and natural gas. Just watch as the dollar crashes and the Dow Jones goes into a death-spiral. Why use a blunderbuss when a flyswatter will do just fine.

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