
Moscow Orchestrates War Scare in South Ossetia

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Ongoing military incidents in South Ossetia serve Moscow's interests. Since July 31, Russian state television channels have been airing inflammatory stories about Georgian forces firing on South Ossetia's administrative center Tskhinvali, inflicting civilian casualties, and causing a refugee exodus to North Ossetia (Russian TV Channel One, Rossiya TV, NTV, Itar-Tass, July 31-August 3). The allegations are not verified by any independent source. Nor can they be verified, given Russia's exclusion of any meaningful international monitoring in South Ossetia, disabling the OSCE and precluding Georgian air surveillance.

Moscow's propaganda wave closely resembles previous ones in the continuing political warfare against Georgia. For their part, leaders in Tskhinvali threaten to escalate the hostilities deeper inside Georgian territory, using 'their own forces,' which would imply Russian operations by proxy. 'We will force [the Georgians] out from the conflict zone ourselves. I state once again that we have the necessary troops and equipment [sil i sredstv] to do this,' the South Ossetian 'president' Eduard Kokoity warned. Shortly afterward he upped the ante: 'We reserve the right to strike Georgian cities, we have the capability to reach them' (South Ossetian Press and Information Committee, Interfax, August 1, 3).

The Russian-delegated 'prime minister' and 'security council secretary' of South Ossetia, Yuriy Morozov and Anatoly Barankevich, appeared on Russian television channels with lurid stories that Georgians had killed six South Ossetian civilians and wounded twice as many and that South Ossetian troops had in turn killed 29 Georgian soldiers. They also alleged that Georgians were forcing a mass exodus of children and women from South Ossetia to North Ossetia. These officials also threatened to take the hostilities deeper inside Georgia, with ostensibly South Ossetian forces (South Ossetian Press and Information Committee, Itar-Tass, August 1, 2).

North Ossetian leaders, meanwhile, seem unwilling to be dragged into a confrontation. Amid all the rhetoric, North Ossetian President Teymuraz Mansurov and other officials in Vladikavkaz have not backed up those atrocity stories; have dismissed the allegations about a refugee exodus; and have advised against any mobilization of North Caucasus 'volunteers.' Thus, official Vladikavkaz contradicts the Tskhinvali leaders directly or indirectly on all three counts. Nevertheless, a public rally in Vladikavkaz did threaten to send 'volunteers' to South Ossetia (Interfax, July 31-August 3).

Moscow has every interest in fostering a brink-of-war atmosphere. It pressured Georgia heavily in Abkhazia in recent months while allowing a temporary lull in South Ossetia. Now, Russia is shifting the pressure onto this front. As in previous years, Moscow deems the month of August propitious for staging military incidents in Georgia, while European officials take their vacations. This year, however, may differ from previous ones in that Russian and proxy forces could stage the seasonal clashes both in Abkhazia and in South Ossetia, and possibly with a higher intensity.

Russia's recent moves in Abkhazia had suggested that an incursion into the upper Kodori valley could be expected in mid-August. This remains a distinct possibility. It may be accompanied by an incident in South Ossetia, ostensibly 'in response' to Georgian 'provocations' there, on the 'evidence' of Russian state media. Moscow is now forcing Tbilisi to guess which option

Russia considers using: escalation in both areas, or a main action in one of them and a side show in the other.

Apart from the usual goal of military intimidation, Moscow has some novel motives this year to escalate tension to an unprecedented level. First and foremost, it wants to demonstrate that NATO would court danger, and risk a breakdown in relations with Russia, if the Alliance approves a membership action plan for Georgia at one of the upcoming NATO meetings (December 2008, April 2009). Germany's insistence at the April 2008 NATO summit, that the unresolved secessionist conflicts disqualify Georgia from a membership action plan, has emboldened Moscow to demonstrate ever more aggressively that the conflicts are indeed unresolved.

Second, by stoking tensions in South Ossetia and anxiety in European institutions, Moscow seeks to force Georgia to return to negotiations in the Joint Control Commission (JCC), which Georgia quit in March of this year. With its grotesquely unbalanced composition (Georgia, Russia, South Ossetia, and Russia's North Ossetia, plus the OSCE as a passive observer), the JCC had only helped perpetuate the 'frozen' conflict, i.e., Moscow-controlled instability.

During the July 31-August 2 incidents, Russia's special envoy on the South Ossetia conflict and chief delegate to the JCC, Ambassador Yuriy Popov, was visiting Georgia trying to resurrect the JCC. Both Popov and a Ministry of Foreign Affairs communiqué from Moscow argued that the continuing incidents showed the urgent need for resuming negotiations in the JCC. The Russian MFA cited the incidents in claiming that Russia's 'peacekeepers' were indispensable and demanding that Georgia sign a 'guaranteed' non-use-of-force agreement with South Ossetia, as well as with Abkhazia (Interfax, July 31, August 1, 2). This is unacceptable to Tbilisi because it would in effect recognize South Ossetia and would retain Russia's 'peacekeeping' troops as 'guarantors.'

Moscow's third, novel reason for orchestrating the incidents is to rebuff the United States, as part of a general propaganda offensive against a Washington perceived to be weak. For the first time in memory, Moscow licensed the South Ossetian leaders in their statements to attack directly the United States and, personally, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, who had visited Georgia in July (South Ossetian Press and Information Committee, Itar-Tass, July 31-August 2).

The OSCE operates a pathetically undermanned and under-equipped observer group, which is present in South Ossetia only intermittently. Russia has for many years used its veto power at OSCE headquarters in Vienna to disable the OSCE in South Ossetia. Meanwhile, with Russia enjoying full control of the air space, Georgia is unable to watch South Ossetia from unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), particularly after Russian forces shot down three Georgian UAVs over Abkhazia and the Black Sea. Thus, Russian television channels and Moscow-installed officials in South Ossetia can present their version of events as befits their interests.

Tbilisi takes the position that any flare-up of the conflict is contrary to Georgian interests. It rules out a return to the JCC but seeks a balanced reconfiguration of it, as well as direct talks without preconditions between Tbilisi and Tskhinvali. It calls for an increase in the number of OSCE observers. And it persists in calling for demilitarization of the area and internationalization of Russia's destabilizing 'peacekeeping' operation.
