
Russia : Facing a Strategic Choice

By Yuriy Rubtsov

<http://en.fondsk.ru/article.php?id=1532> - 10/8/2008

The long-forming abscess has finally broke up: Georgia's authorities that for quite some time had prepared to teach "a lesson of democracy" to the newly formed after the break-up of the USSR de facto independent states in the Caucasus launched a war against South Ossetia.

In an attempt to divert attention from its attack on South Ossetia, Georgians violated ago-long tradition of peace of Olympic Games "making the opening of Beijing Olympics their Day X. If the first excuse the Georgian side voiced to vindicate its attack was the need "to reinstall the Constitutional order in the Tzkhinvali region", by midday of August 8 the Tbilisi leaders urgently changed this formula, acting in the best provocatorial traditions of the leaders of Hitler's Reich, when Miikhail Saakashvili accused Russia of a large-scale aggression, demanding that bombing of Georgian cities be stopped.

More than just that, he chose to take the stance of a victim of aggression, losing all sense of moderation he threatened to launch a war on Russia provided the "reports about Russian tanks entering South Ossetia proved true."

In the afternoon of August 8th there was nothing of the belligerently victorious tone of the Georgian authorities faded out. The stream of triumphant reports about "the capture of five villages, two Russian aircraft shot down and installation of full control of Tzkhinvali" dried out. The Russian peace-keepers and comparatively few militia men were reinforced by a column of Russian Army 58 armoured corps that crossed the border at the Roks Tunnel and moved towards South Ossetia's capital city.

Refugees are now fleeing the country deserting their homes and moving to Vladikavkaz, Rostov-on-Don and other Russian cities. According to reports, more than 1 000 peaceful South Ossetians became victims of the Georgian aggression during its first day. The Georgian artillery totally destroyed the city of Tzkhinval.

The Georgian aircraft bombed a humanitarian aid column moving from the Russian border to the capital of the republic that had been attacked. Moreover, according to early August 9 reports, 12 Russian peace-keepers were killed and dozens of others were wounded in the attack on the Russian peace-keepers unprecedented in international law.

Sitting inside the presidential palace in Tbilisi people unleashed a new Caucasian war, shooting dead and bombing peaceful people hypocritically harp on their preparedness to take their seats at a negotiations table. Now that the situation has changed so much, that would be the best way out of the stalemate for Saakashvili and his men. That could save his regime never changing its fundamentals. The Tbilisi authorities have of late grown accustomed to limitless verbiage, coaxing and exchanges of diplomatic notes, screening Saakashvil's and his instructors' war preparations. Now that we all face the tragedy of Ossetians as a nation it becomes clear that the pugnacious company at power in Tbilisi can understand just one language "that of force.

At an urgent session of the Russian Security Council in the morning of August 8th Dmitry Medvedev said that Russia would not tolerate the unpunished destruction of its citizens in the Caucasus (let us not forget that close to 90% of South Ossetians are Russian citizens!), and his duty as president of

the Russian Federation is "to protect the life and dignity of Russian citizens wherever they could be." The people in Tbilisi were evidently sure that "Moscow would act the way it had always acted", never going farther than talking. The Georgian authorities decided that the statement of Vladimir Putin who is now in Beijing to the effect that the aggression against South Ossetia would cause a Russian answer was just an empty threat.

What the Tbilisi politicians counted on proved a failure. The Georgian people would decide their fate now. What is important for us to realise is that Russia is facing a strategic choice: what its course would be both now and afterwards in the situations of brash and unashamed trampling on its strategic interests.

It is always better to win by diplomacy rather than arms. But Russia has its share of sad experience: its stance of non-interference (to not speak about notes of protest that had never been reinforced) once led to the loss of Russian influence in Yugoslavia, to the relinquishing of Adjara and withdrawals at many foreign policy directions.

Russian noncommittance where the course of the Saakashvili regime was concerned was also viewed as Russia's weakness, provoking Georgian leaders to launch their aggression. Was it not a lesson to learn?

The direct Russian military interference in South Ossetia is a forced scenario, far remote from what an ideal one could be. But this time it was inevitable.

First, as president Dmitry Medvedev underlines, the Russian state has to defend its citizens and ensure the fulfilment of its responsibilities as peace-keeper force.

Second, Russian citizens who live in South Ossetia have never lost hope asking Moscow to put them under its wing. President of the Republic of South Ossetia Eduard Kokoity says: "We do not want to live in two Ossetias. What we need is a united and inseparable Ossetia as a part of Russia."

Third, it would be a mistake to reduce the problem to just a halt to hostilities. Moscow's resolve to put an end to the Saakashvili regime's aggression would be an indication to all the world, our friends and our adversaries, of the thought-out Russia's strategic course in the Caucasus. Its loss of positions in the Caucasus would at least mean that Russia loses control of the situation on both slopes of the Main Caucasian Ridge. To allow the present-day Tbilisi regime to win would mean the guaranteed emergence at the southern geostrategic direction of a NATO bridgehead to look at the pre-Olympic Sochi through a pair of US army binoculars.

It is not accidental that in their assessments of the war in South Ossetia a number of international organisations and third countries take the wait-and-see (or openly anti-Russian) stance. Joseph Biden, head of the US Senate's Foreign Affairs Committee addressed his appeal of stopping hostilities to...

the Russian peace-keepers, simultaneously welcoming the hypocritical Saakashvili's call for "quiet and retention." Well, how could Americans fail to support their puppet! They did not pump money into the regime that emerged during "the revolution of roses" for something like acknowledging Moscow's rightful actions. Is it not known that the United States is behind the Georgian aggression against Tskhinvali, and that the operation of capturing this city was worked out in Pentagon several years ago?

What is required where Georgia is concerned is coercing it to become peaceful.

Russia has more than arms to rely on in this. Moscow would have to enact all the leverage it can muster " political, diplomatic, economic and humanitarian. The forces that brought war to Ossetia made Dmitry Medvedev as the new Russian president face a serious challenge, The way the Kremlin acts in this complicated political situations would become a gauge of Russia's global influence for a long time.
