
The US and the Russian-Georgian conflict

By Yousef Fernandez

Press TV - Madrid - 10/8/2008

Tensions between the former Soviet republic of Georgia and Russia erupted into full-scale war on 7 August, leaving thousands of civilians dead and turning dozens of thousands more into refugees.

The conflict in South Ossetia has great strategic importance because it involves one of the United States' staunch allies and Russia, a re-emerging superpower with vast energy reserves that is showing growing eagerness to defend its interests on the international stage.

President Dmitri Medvedev of Russia said that his country was acting to restore peace in the Caucasus and protect its citizens and peacekeepers who had come under Georgian attack in South Ossetia.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov accused Georgia of utilizing massive violence with the aim of making the Ossetian population flee.

"We are receiving reports that a policy of ethnic cleansing was being conducted in villages in South Ossetia, the number of refugees is climbing, the panic is growing, people are trying to save their lives," said Lavrov.

Russian counteroffensive expelled Georgian forces from the capital of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, after four days of heavy fighting. Georgia's military defeat was already clear and sure at that time.

With Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin in Beijing for the Olympics opening ceremony and the world's attention focused on China, Georgia's President Mikheil Saakashvili may have believed that it had an opportunity to quickly wrest control of South Ossetia.

South Ossetia and Abkhazia are two breakaway provinces that have declared their secession from Georgia. Their political orientation is pro-Russian and most of their inhabitants have Russian passports. South Ossetia longed to be incorporated into Russia, whose province of North Ossetia contains their ethnic brethren.

Tensions rose markedly this year after South Ossetia basked in Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia, calling it an international precedent that legitimized its own refusal to remain part of Georgia. During one meeting on Kosovo in Brussels this year, Sergei Lavrov warned US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and European diplomats that if they recognized Kosovo, they would be setting a precedent for South Ossetia and other breakaway provinces in the former Soviet Union.

In this way, "America and Europe's actions on Kosovo, left Russia feeling threatened, encircled and more convinced that it had to take aggressive measures to restore its power, dignity and influence in a region it considers its strategic backyard", foreign policy experts told The New York Times.

Actually, the conflict must be placed squarely in the context of renewed cold war-style tensions and a struggle between Russia and the United States for regional influence. Georgia is currently the main ally of the US in the Caucasus region.

Washington backed the "Rose Revolution" that paved the way for Saakashvili's rise to power. For his part, Saakashvili agreed on hosting the Baku-Ceyhan

pipeline, which has been designed to transport energy resources from the Caspian Basin to the Mediterranean, while bypassing Russia.

"Russia cannot allow Georgia to solve the South Ossetia problem by military means," Irina Zvigelskaya, an expert with the independent Center for Strategic and International Studies in Moscow, told the Christian Science Monitor.

"Of course the deaths of Russian peacekeepers and the destruction caused by the invading Georgians is an important reason why Medvedev has ordered Russian forces to intervene in the conflict. But there are bigger strategic reasons behind that. Moscow cannot let Saakashvili succeed in his gamble."

Of course, Russia knows that a Georgian victory would be an American one. It would allow the US to control the Caucasus and the Caspian Basin and their enormous energy resources through the assertion of its military power in the region.

The United States and other NATO members have sent substantial aid to build up Georgia's army. The American military has been training and equipping Georgian troops for years. At least 130 US soldiers, Marines and pilots are in Georgia to carry out a program, called Exercise Immediate Response 2008, on military cooperation.

Georgia returned the favor, by sending about 2,000 troops to participate in the occupation of Iraq, which made it the third-largest contributor to "coalition forces" after the US and Britain.

Georgia is also aggressively lobbying to join NATO and is supported by the United States in this goal. At the NATO summit in Bucharest in the spring, US President George W. Bush made one of the stronger speeches of his tenure, stating that the 26-member alliance should accept Georgia and Ukraine.

"We must make clear that NATO welcomes the membership aspirations of Georgia and Ukraine and offers them a clear path forward towards that goal. My country's position is clear: NATO should welcome Georgia and Ukraine into the Membership Action Plans", he said.

However, Germany and France argued against this. Angela Merkel, the German Chancellor, said that a new NATO expansion would annoy Russia too much. Bush tried hard to change the German and French position at the summit but he failed.

The meeting finally denied Georgia a "Membership Action Plan", although it left the door open for future membership of Georgia and Ukraine. In July, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited to Tbilisi, provocatively criticizing Russia and once again reiterating American support for Georgia's NATO membership.

Russia has laid much of the responsibility for the fighting on the door of Washington. Dmitry Rogozin, Russia's Special Envoy to NATO, linked Georgia's attack against South Ossetia with NATO's recent summit in Bucharest stressing that they dropped a hint to the Georgian President: Georgia will get NATO admission, and Mikhail Saakashvili understood he could launch the attack.

Rogozin added, "Though NATO does not want to show it truly sides with Saakashvili, at the latest summit the President got a permit to start a military operation."

Russian officials also told the daily Pravda that it was the United States that had orchestrated the current conflict. Chairman of the State Duma

Committee for Security Vladimir Vasilyev believes that the current conflict in South Ossetia is very reminiscent to the wars in Iraq and Kosovo.

"The things that were happening in Kosovo, the things that were happening in Iraq - we are now following the same path. The further the situation unfolds, the more the world will understand that Georgia would never be able to do all this without America. South Ossetian defense officials used to make statements about imminent aggression from Georgia, but the latter denied everything, whereas the US Department of State reloaded not comments on the matter. In essence, they have prepared the force, which destroys everything in South Ossetia, attacks civilians and hospitals. They are responsible for this. The world community will learn about it," the official said.

US behavior in the United Nations Security Council, where Washington refused to support a Russian-backed resolution calling for an end to the fighting because of its opposition to a clause calling on all sides to "renounce the use of force", has persuaded Russians that Washington is actually backing Georgia's "right" to take military action.

Washington, in turn, blamed Russia for the conflict. Bush used tough language, demanding that Russia stop bombing. Condoleezza Rice issued a statement that effectively condemned Russia, while providing tacit justification for the Georgian intervention.

"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," she said. "We underscore the international community's support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders."

For his part, US President George W. Bush's deputy national security adviser, James Jeffrey, warned that the war could have a negative impact on Washington and Moscow relations.

"We have made it clear to the Russians that if the disproportionate and dangerous escalation on the Russian side continues, that this will have a significant, long-term impact on US-Russian relations".

However, the US government is unwilling to give military support to its ally. "There is no possibility of drawing NATO or the international community into this," said a senior State Department official told the New York Times.

"For the Bush administration, the choice now becomes whether backing Georgia -which, more than any other former Soviet republic has allied with the United States- on the South Ossetia issue is worth alienating Russia at a time when getting Russia's help to rein in Iran's nuclear ambitions is at the top of the United States' foreign policy agenda", the Times report concluded.

In short, the Russian victory over Georgia means a severe blow to the United States, whose strategic position in the Caucasus region has become seriously weakened.

Former Soviet republics have also seen that the United States can do nothing to support them if they try to challenge increasingly strong Russian power. The result will be an expansion of Russian influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia and the reassertion of Russia as a world superpower.
