
Analysis : Russia sends a message to the West

By Tovah Lazaroff
www.jpost.com - 10/8/ 2008

Georgia lost a foolhardy gamble in thumbing its nose at its powerful neighbor Russia, which this weekend bombed Georgian cities and wrested control of its breakaway province of South Ossetia, according to Israeli Russian experts.

Russia had seen a "golden opportunity" to teach Georgia and its neighbors a lesson to "behave properly," said Hebrew University Russian expert Yitzhak Brudny, as he explained how a small military flare-up between Georgia and South Ossetia had turned into a major military exercise for Russia and drawn world attention away from the Olympics in Beijing.

With all eyes turned toward China, Georgia's pro-Western President Mikheil Saakashvili had hoped he could respond harshly to a skirmish with South Ossetia on Friday and try and regain control of the separatist province, said Russian expert Amnon Sella of the Interdisciplinary Center at Herzliya.

"It backfired on him because Georgia, which has a very small army, can't take on Russia," which had obviously been prepared for such a move given its swift response, said Sella.

"Saakashvili is a young president who is not well seasoned in international affairs," said Sella. He had hoped the international community and in particular the West would support Georgia's moves in South Ossetia and that Russia would not respond, he added.

Saakashvili, explained Brudny, has a reputation for being a "hothead" who does not always think through what he is doing.

Instead of responding diplomatically, Russia, which has granted passports to most South Ossetians, sent combat troops into South Ossetia and attacked Georgia from the air.

The bombardment was a way for Moscow to kill a few birds with one stone, Brudny and other academics said.

It showed both Georgia and the West that Russia was a regional superpower to be reckoned with, said Brudny. The message was: "We are going to use force, we are not going to tolerate a hostile regime on our borderland."

"Russia wants to maintain the status quo, meaning they wield influence over the region," including a monopoly on sources of energy, said Sella. Running through Georgia is the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, the second largest in the world for the transport of crude oil, he said.

By flexing its military might against Georgia, Moscow paid the West back for its recognition of Kosovo's independence; a move that Russia had opposed, said Brudny.

In addition, he said, Russia hoped that its violent response would mark the beginning of the end of the Saakashvili government, which seeks to join NATO and had moved the country away from Russia in favor of the West. Moscow would like to see a pro-Russian government replace Saakashvili, he added.

Russia is nervous because NATO is expanding into its back yard with both Georgia and the Ukraine seeking membership at the same time that NATO is putting an anti-missile system in eastern Europe, specifically in Poland

and Chechnya, said Zvi Magen, a former ambassador to Russia and the current chairman of the Institute for Eurasian studies at the IDC in Herzliya.

While the system is supposedly aimed at protecting Europe from Iran, the Russians are still uneasy about it, he added.

Saakshvilli, in a way, had been "ambushed" by the larger forces in play here, said Magen. For some time now Russia had been in opposition to the West in its region, but had been able to do little more than verbally protest - this was an opportunity for it to flex its muscles, said Magen.

In this way, he added, it also sent a message to the American administration that will replace Bush in January: Russia is not a force to be ignored.

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