
Talk is cheap

By Kara S. Flook
National Review - 14/8/2008

Despite the optimism of Nicolas Sarkozy's peace plan, the conflict in Georgia seems to be far from over. Not only do many details of the plan still lack agreement (the plan is based largely on Russian demands), but Russian troops are moving farther into Georgia, breaking their agreement to return to their August 6 positions. As the situation worsens, it is important to understand how and why it came about, and to consider the long-term implications for both the region and U.S. involvement.

On August 8, after a week of fighting between Georgian troops and South Ossetian separatists, Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili, responded by launching a full-scale offensive on the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinvali, in order to restore constitutional order in the region. Russia, which had begun amassing troops on its border with South Ossetia four days earlier, quickly sent in troops, claiming the need to reinforce Russian peacekeeping troops (who had failed to stop South Ossetian fire over the past week) and protect "Russian citizens."

South Ossetia, like Abkhazia, is a separatist region which, despite its claims to independence, is internationally recognized as part of Georgia. Russia supports both South Ossetian and Abkhazian claims (though it does not recognize either as independent) and has maintained a peacekeeping presence in Tskhinvali since 1992 and Abkhazia since 1994. Despite its supposedly neutral role, Russia supported South Ossetia's demands for significant concessions from Georgia before coming to the negotiating table, and severely hampered its objectivity by granting Russian passports (and, in effect, Russian citizenship) to the majority of South Ossetians.

Russia claimed that its peacekeeping role in South Ossetia gave it the right to send in troops in response to Georgia's offensive against Tskhinvali, and quickly overstepped those bounds, conducting air raids on military bases, roads, the oil port of Poti, and other strategic targets all around Georgia, and sending a flotilla from the Black Sea Fleet to the Georgian coast to fire on Georgian targets. Russian troops advanced from South Ossetia into Georgia to take up a position near Gori (some reports indicate that they temporarily occupied the town), while other troops poured into Abkhazia, supporting Abkhaz separatists in an attack on Georgian troops in the Kodori Gorge before advancing into Georgia, first to Zugdidi and then to Senaki.

On the morning of August 12, just before Nicholas Sarkozy's arrival in his capacity as president of the European Council, Russian president Medvedev declared an end to military operations in Georgia, declaring "The aggressor has been punished," but he left a loophole, instructing the military to take care of pockets of resistance. As already mentioned, Sarkozy offered a peace plan biased toward the Russians; Medvedev agreed to return troops to their August 6 positions, but this has not happened.

Furthermore, some of Russia's earlier actions indicate that they expect the conflict to be of long duration: Among the troops sent to the area were the GRU Spetsnaz (Military Intelligence Directorate Special Forces) Battalions "Vostok" (East) and "Zapad" (West), both stationed in Chechnya and known for both their effectiveness and their brutality. It is unlikely they would have been removed from Chechnya, where their presence has been important to ensuring the Kremlin's control over the region, for any minor operation.

Medvedev has also ordered investigations into allegations of genocide against Saakashvili and the Georgian government in South Ossetia. Allowing his 150 forensic experts to carry out their investigation to his satisfaction will certainly require not only maintaining Russian control on the ground, but ensuring that the area is off-limits to all others.

Though Georgia chose to launch its offensive on August 8, it is clear that Russia provoked the conflict and chose its basic timing and location. Not only did Russia begin amassing troops on their border with South Ossetia on August 4, but Russia has also been inciting South Ossetian actions for some time.

It is highly suspicious that just as the situation in Abkhazia began to cool down and international pressure on Russia and Abkhazia to negotiate increased, South Ossetia heated up. What is behind Russia's actions? NATO expansion and the upcoming 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi are both strong motivating factors. Shortly after NATO announced that Georgia would soon become a member in April 2008, Russia expanded its relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

This had the dual benefit of further complicating Georgia's attempts to resolve its "frozen" conflicts (which had been mentioned in refusing Georgia a Membership Action Plan at the same NATO meeting) and opening up trade routes with Abkhazia, on which Russia is heavily dependent for the raw materials (lumber, sand, gravel, and cement) and labor needed to prepare Sochi for the Olympics. Russia has a strong need to maintain the stability of this supply chain within its control.

This second factor is one of the reasons Russia chose South Ossetia for the location of the conflict. Not only was a conflict in South Ossetia unexpected (Abkhazia has been much more volatile), allowing the Russians to better paint a picture of an aggressive Georgia attacking innocent civilians, but any major conflict in Abkhazia would disrupt the supply chain for the Sochi Olympics. Tskhinvali has been destroyed in the conflict; Russia could not risk that with Sukhumi (the capital of Abkhazia).

Russia's aggression is very dangerous for the stability of the region. Neighboring countries were quick to take sides, with Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states quickly declaring their support for Georgia and condemning Russia's acts, while most of Central Asia supported Russia. Though Armenia, Iran and Turkey all have declared neutrality, Armenia and Iran both lean heavily toward Russia, while Turkey leans toward Georgia.

This split of the region mirrors the general split of influence - a split Russia would like to do away with. The states supporting Georgia are all westward-leaning and pro-U.S., while those supporting Russia are strongly tied to it. Russia deeply resents U.S. involvement in what it perceives as its sphere of influence -- the Caucasus and the greater region of the former Soviet states -- and has gambled on this act decreasing that influence. A weak U.S. reaction, such as we have seen thus far, greatly diminishes U.S. standing in the region and, arguably, as a world power. Georgia, a friend and ally, has been left to the mercies of Russia, and partners and potential partners such as Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland are all taking note.

Ukraine must be particularly nervous, as they are likely next in the line of fire. Recent Russian rhetoric has been very aggressive in threatening Ukraine about NATO membership and asserting territorial claims to the Crimea. The presidents of Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland issued a Joint Declaration shortly after Russia's invasion, stating their concern: "Following the unilateral military actions of the Russian military forces, we will use all means available to us as Presidents to ensure that aggression

against a small country in Europe will not be passed over in silence or with meaningless statements equating the victims with the victimizers." Poland's cooperation with the U.S. over the proposed missile shield has earned it direct threats from Russia, while the Baltic States have been the victims of oil-based punishment when their policies incurred Russia's displeasure.

The current response to the situation in Georgia does not bode well for U.S. influence in the region. The U.S. has failed to protect its friend and ally, an ally that had the third-largest troop presence in Iraq, after the U.S. and Britain, and is sending the message that our assurances and promises are meaningless. Russia is trying to show the world that it is the only meaningful power in the region, and the U.S. has done nothing to disprove that.

In order to regain its lost ground, the U.S. needs to offer more than words. The U.S. should firmly tell Russia that unless its troops pull back to their August 6 positions, the U.S. will provide military aid to Georgia, demand and help author a more neutral peace plan, require all future peacekeeping forces in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia be truly international, and move quickly to reassure other U.S. allies by convincing NATO to extend Article 5 protection to Ukraine. It may not be easy, and it may take a lot of political capital, especially to spur NATO to action, but if strong steps are not taken, the political capital and trust that the U.S. will lose will be much greater.

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