
War In South Ossetia Seen From Central Asia

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The "five-day war" in South Ossetia during which the Georgian forces were quickly routed by the Russian 58th Army came as a shock to the post-Soviet Republics. Though the Russian leadership reiterated in the past that a military scenario was likely, nobody expected Moscow's reaction to be so immediate and so harsh. Moscow's using military force against a post-Soviet Republic - for the first time since the split of the USSR - created a difficult situation for the CIS countries many of which also have unresolved territorial disputes with their neighbors.

Central Asian countries, which are often geopolitically bracketed with the South Caucasus, are of particular interest in this context. The analogies between Central Asia and the Caucasus have been described thoroughly by Z. Brzezinski in his *The Grand Chessboard*. The key features common to the two regions are the mixture of ethnic territories, the absence of generally recognized country borders identical to those of ethnic areals, and the incomplete character of statehood in most countries. All of the above led Z. Brzezinski to describe Central Asia and the Caucasus as the Eurasian Balkans, the region US strategists are eyeing now that the US dominance over the Balkans is an accomplished fact.

Central Asian countries can be divided in two groups depending on their response to the conflict in South Ossetia. Whereas Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have formulated their positions on the issue with relative clarity, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan simply expressed no reaction to the conflict. Moreover, for quite some time the tightly controlled Uzbek and Turkmen media gave no indications that there was a war in South Ossetia or that the Abkhazian forces were muscling Georgian troops out of the Kodori Gorge.

The war in South Ossetia was not reported in any of the Uzbek papers during its decisive phase, nor was it reflected by the sites of the country's news agencies. Only the Uzbek *Vecherniy Tashkent* paper published two brief notes, one telling that an aircraft of the Russian Ministry of the Emergency Situations carrying humanitarian aid landed in Vladikavkaz and that Russian Prime Minister V. Putin arrived in the city, another - that urgent sessions of the UN Security Council and the NATO Council were held, but it left its readership oblivious of the causes of the developments. Besides, one short report on the fighting in Tskhinvali was shown by the Uzbek TV using the footage borrowed from the Russian television.

The Turkmen media responded to the war in the Caucasus with total silence.

The national television continued to broadcast 30-minute readings of *Ruhnama* (the "spiritual guidance of the nation" written by late Turkmen President S. Niyazov) and informed the public that a panda was born in a zoo in China. Satellite TV served as the only source of information on the Caucasus war for the population of Turkmenistan.

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan reacted much more actively. Kazakh President N. Nazarbayev who attended the Olympics opening ceremony in Beijing on the first day of the war was the first to speak on the occasion. It was during a meeting with Nazarbayev that V. Putin made a harsh statement that Georgia would get an adequate response to its attack on Tskhinvali. Nazarbayev

replied in a neutrally positive tone. He said that the peacekeeping mission had a UN mandate, Georgia acted in a wrong way, it did not warn about the coming escalation, and there could be no alternative to a peaceful resolution of the problem.

The Kazakh President's reaction voiced on August 13 at a meeting with his Kyrgyz counterpart K. Bakiyev was also generally pro-Russian. Commenting on what was going on in the Caucasus he said that the territorial integrity principle was recognized by the entire international community and that documents adopted by the CIS condemned separatism, but complex inter-ethnic issues still must be resolved peacefully via negotiations, not militarily.

The position of Kyrgyzstan which currently presides over the CIS was rather neutral. Bakiyev opined that according to the norms of the international law the real path to the resolution of the dispute between the Georgian and the South Ossetian sides lay in the political plane. Thus, the Kazakh and Kyrgyz Presidents condemned Georgia's military offensive but refrained from distinctly positive or negative appraisals of the military operation launched by the Russian army.

To an extent, the lack of official reactions from most CIS countries was offset by the statement made by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Collective Security Treaty Organization. Along with Russia, Belarus, and Armenia, this organization comprises four of the five Central Asian Countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The Collective Security Treaty Organization practically echoed Moscow's position in a statement which read: "On the pretext of restoring its territorial integrity, Georgia in effect carried out acts of genocide against the Ossetian people, leading to a humanitarian disaster. Tbilisi's military campaign, which thwarted the budding political dialogue between the parties, destroyed prospects for a peaceful conflict resolution."

Having close economic and political ties with the West Central Asian countries are explainably reluctant to complicate their relations with Western countries by openly siding with Russia. There is yet another key factor behind their restraint in commenting on the "five-day war".

The theme of the "territorial integrity" has been invoked in all statements made by the Kazakh and Kyrgyz Presidents for a serious reason. Realizing that the chances of Russia's recognizing the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and subsequently incorporating them have increased enormously, Central Asian countries are concerned that similar scenarios affecting their territories are possible and hence adopt a cautious stance.

It is of interest to review the assessments of the "five-day war" by Central Asian experts. For example, Kyrgyz political analyst M. Sariev regards the events in the Caucasus not as a conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia but as one between Russia and the US. He expects Kyrgyzstan to face toughly formulated questions concerning the future of the Gansi US airbase in its territory at the coming meeting of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. In Sariev's view, as the Collective Security Treaty Organization member the country is going to align itself with Russia since the same events as in Georgia can take place in Kyrgyzstan - this is Russia's sphere of interests and Russia is not going to stop. Explaining the motivation underlying his position, Sariev says: "We should be aware that we are in the same culturally Eurasian areal with Russia". M. Suyunbaev, another Kyrgyz political analyst, points quite reasonably to the fact that the "five-day war" is a product of the "Kosovo process" which the West has set in motion totally ignoring Russia's position. If the process evolves, it will quite likely affect Central Asia, for example Tajikistan or Karakalpakstan whose histories, in the expert's opinion, are similar to those of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Analyzing the potential results of Georgia's leaving the CIS, he notes that

the consequences for Georgia are going to be extremely negative as complication can arise for the workforce migration from Georgia to Russia and for the trade between the two countries. Suyunbaev's forecast includes not only the intensification of the struggle over the existing US military base in Kyrgyzstan but also greater efforts aimed at creating new military bases in the southern part of the Republic.

On the whole, there is a consensus among Kyrgyz experts that the rivalry between Russia and the US over Central Asia is bound to escalate, and that Russia's resolute defense of South Ossetia shows that for Central Asian countries a totally pro-Western orientation can entail highly undesirable consequences.

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