
Georgia: Reckless Saakashvili took on Russian Goliath Putin

By Robert Bedrosian <rbedrosian@gmail.com>
Michael Evans, Defence Editor
www.timesonline.co.uk - 11/8/2008

Georgia's attempt to seize control of the secessionist South Ossetia region has been a gamble too far, reckless in its timing and founded on a fundamental misjudgment.

President Saakashvili of Georgia thought that he had the West on his side but he has been outsmarted by Vladimir Putin, the Russian Prime Minister, who now holds all the cards.

Although Mr Saakashvili has had American military personnel training his army to serve in Iraq, there was never any question of Washington taking on the Russians on his behalf.

The military adventure had all the hallmarks of rushed planning and a fingers-crossed strategy, launched in the hope and expectation that the Russians would not react, but that if they did, the Americans and Georgia's other Nato friends would come to his aid in one form or another. With President Bush at the Beijing Olympics, was, perhaps, the US eye off the ball when the Russians moved in?

After only three days, the Georgian leader has had to pull back, partly because his troops failed to seal off the Roki tunnel, 2½ miles (4km) long, that links South Ossetia with North Ossetia and provided passage for dozens of Russian tanks and armoured vehicles. It was a military blunder.

Five battalions of Russia's 58th Army, which fought in Chechnya, drove through the tunnel. With 150 tanks, heavy artillery and overwhelmingly superior firepower, the Russian troops were able to seize control of all the heights around Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia.

The 58th, which is based at Vladikavkaz in the North Caucasus military district in Russia, was backed by ground-attack aircraft, presenting a formidable fighting package. At the same time there were indications that the Russians planned a second front, moving into Abkhazia. The tiny Georgian Army never stood a chance.

It was also a classic misreading on Mr Saakashvili's part of the relationship between Washington and Moscow, and a misunderstanding of what Mr Putin was prepared to do to maintain his image as the tough guy in the region and on the world stage.

Mr Putin has on a number of occasions publicly dismissed any possibility that the Cold War could return. But the decision by Mr Saakashvili gave the Russian leader the opportunity he was waiting for to stamp his authority over Georgia and at the same time to cock a snook at the West. He knew that he could get away with pouring troops, armoured vehicles and artillery into South Ossetia to "protect" the majority Russian passport-holding inhabitants. All he had to do was wait for Mr Saakashvili to make the first move.

The seeds of the Georgian misadventure were sown in Bucharest at the Nato summit in April, where alliance leaders gave out mixed messages about their enthusiasm for Georgia to join the US-dominated organisation. Adroit diplomatic pressure by Mr Putin when he was Russian President forced a split in the alliance, with President Bush finding himself in a minority when he

urged his colleagues to sign up Georgia for Nato's membership action plan, the key stage to joining as a full member eventually.

Despite the summit's declaration that both Georgia and Ukraine would definitely, some day, join the alliance, Mr Putin would have realised that Nato was not yet prepared to go all the way, fearing the damage that it might cause to relations with Moscow.

Mr Saakashvili put on a bold front, despite his disappointment, especially after Mr Bush had been so publicly in favour of Georgia joining Nato, and, probably, at that moment, started thinking about launching a military operation against the secessionists in South Ossetia, and, if successful, possibly to move against Abkhazia, the other separatist region. Perhaps he judged that Nato would then be spurred into action.

However, with Russian troops never far away, it was always going to be David versus Goliath. But this time a slingshot was not good enough. He had Mr Putin to deal with and there was never any doubt who would win that battle.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article4500160.ece>
