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# The Russian-Georgian War : Implications For The Middle East

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Russia's long-term strategic goals include increasing its control of the Caucasus, especially over strategic energy pipelines. If a pro-Russian regime is established in Georgia, it will bring the strategic Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Erzurum (Turkey) gas pipeline under Moscow's control.

In recent years, Moscow granted the majority of Abkhazs and South Ossetians Russian citizenship. Use of Russian citizenship to create a "protected" population residing in a neighboring state to undermine its sovereignty is a slippery slope which is now leading to a redrawing of the former Soviet borders.

Russian continental power is on the rise. Israel should understand it and not provoke Moscow unnecessarily, while defending its own national security interests staunchly. Small states need to treat nuclear armed great powers with respect.

U.S. intelligence-gathering and analysis on the Russian threat to Georgia failed. So did U.S. military assistance to Georgia, worth around \$2 billion over the last 15 years. This is something to remember when looking at recent American intelligence assessments of the Iranian nuclear threat or the unsuccessful training of Palestinian Authority security forces against Hamas.

The long-term outcomes of the current Russian-Georgian war will be felt far and wide, from Afghanistan to Iran, and from the Caspian to the Mediterranean. The war is a mid-sized earthquake which indicates that the geopolitical tectonic plates are shifting, and nations in the Middle East, including Israel, need to take notice.

## Russia's Goals

Moscow formulated far-reaching goals when it carefully prepared - over a period of at least two and a half years - for a land invasion of Georgia, as this author warned.<sup>1</sup> These goals included:

Expelling Georgian troops and effectively terminating Georgian sovereignty in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia is preparing the ground for independence and eventual annexation of these separatist territories. Thus, these goals seem to be on track to be successfully achieved.

"Regime change" - bringing down President Mikheil Saakashvili and installing a more pro-Russian leadership in Tbilisi. Russia seems to have given up on the immediate toppling of Saakashvili, and is likely counting on the Georgian people to do the job once the dust settles. Russia, for its part, will pursue a criminal case against him for genocide and war crimes in South Ossetia,

trying to turn him into another Slobodan Milosevic/Radovan Karadzic. This is part of psychological operations against the Georgian leader, of which more later.

Preventing Georgia from joining NATO and sending a strong message to Ukraine that its insistence on NATO membership may lead to war and/or its dismemberment. Russia succeeded in attacking a state that has been regarded as a potential candidate for NATO membership since April 2008. The Russian assault undoubtedly erodes the NATO umbrella in the international community, even though Georgia is not yet formally a member, especially if it emerges that Moscow can use force against its neighbors with impunity. While it remains to be seen whether Georgia ultimately is fully accepted into NATO, some voices in Europe, especially in Germany, will see in the war a vindication of their opposition to such membership. Georgia's chances will decrease further if the next U.S. president is noncommittal on the conflict. Ukraine is standing tall in solidarity with Georgia for the time being, and has taken a strong step to limit the movements of Russia's Black Sea fleet, but has little domestic support for NATO membership.

Russia's long-term strategic goals include:

Increasing its control of the Caucasus, especially over strategic energy pipelines.<sup>2</sup> If a pro-Russian regime is established in Georgia, it will bring the strategic Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku-Erzurum (Turkey) gas pipeline under Moscow's control. Israel receives some of its oil from Ceyhan, and has a stake in the smooth flow of oil from the Caspian.

Russian control over Georgia would outflank Azerbaijan, denying the U.S. any basing and intelligence options there in case of a confrontation with Iran. This kind of control would also undermine any options for pro-Western orientations in Azerbaijan and Armenia, along with any chance of resolving their conflict based on diplomacy and Western-style cooperation.

Recreating a nineteenth-century-style sphere of influence in the former Soviet Union and beyond, if necessary by use of force. Here, the intended addressees included all former Soviet republics, including the Baltic States. The message may have backfired as the presidents of Poland, Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania came to Tbilisi and stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Saakashvili. However, without Western European and U.S. support, "New Europe" alone cannot stand up to Moscow.

Russian Proxies Inside Georgia

Russian relations with Georgia were the worst among the post-Soviet states. In addition to fanning the flames of separatism in South Ossetia since 1990, Russia militarily supported separatists in Abkhazia (1992-1993), which is also a part of Georgian territory, to undermine Georgia's independence and assert its control over the strategically important South Caucasus.<sup>3</sup>

Despite claims about oppressed minority status, the separatist South Ossetian leadership is mostly ethnic Russians, many of whom served in the KGB, the Soviet secret police; the Russian military; or in the Soviet communist party. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have become Russia's wholly-owned subsidiaries, their population largely militarized and subsisting on smuggling operations.

This use of small, ethnically-based proxies is similar to Iran's use of Hizbullah and Hamas to continuously attack Israel. Tbilisi tried for years to deal with these militias by offering a negotiated solution, including full autonomy within Georgia.

In recent years, Moscow granted the majority of Abkhazs and South Ossetians Russian citizenship and moved to establish close economic and bureaucratic

ties with the two separatist republics, effectively enacting a creeping annexation of both territories. Use of Russian citizenship to create a "protected" population residing in a neighboring state to undermine its sovereignty is a slippery slope which is now leading to a redrawing of the former Soviet borders.

On August 7, after yet another Russian-backed South Ossetian military provocation, Saakashvili attacked South Ossetian targets with artillery and armor. Yet, Tbilisi was stunned by the ferocity of the Russian response. It shouldn't have been, nor should Americans be surprised. The writing was on the wall, but Washington failed to read it, despite repeated warning from allied intelligence services and a massive presence of diplomats and military trainers on the ground. The results for Georgia are much more disastrous than for Israel in summer 2006.

"Kill the Chicken to Scare the Monkey"

Aggression against Georgia also sends a strong signal to Ukraine and to Europe. Russia is playing a chess game of offense and intimidation. Former president and current Prime Minister Vladimir Putin spoke last spring about Russia "dismembering" Ukraine, another NATO candidate, and detaching the Crimea, a peninsula which was transferred from Russia to Ukraine in 1954, when both were integral parts of the Soviet Union.

Today, up to 50 percent of Ukrainian citizens speak Russian as their first language and ethnic Russians comprise around one-fifth of Ukraine's population. With encouragement from Moscow, these people may be induced to follow South Ossetia and Abkhazia to Mother Russia's bosom. Yet, Ukraine's pro-Western leaders, such as President Victor Yushchenko and Prime Minister Yulia Timoshenko, have expressed a desire to join NATO, while the pro-Moscow Ukrainian Party of Regions effectively opposes membership. NATO opponents in Ukraine are greatly encouraged by Russia's action against Georgia.

In the near future, Russia is likely to beef up the Black Sea Fleet, which has bases in Tartus and Latakia in Syria, and used to have an anchorage in Libya. For over two hundred years the navy has been the principal tool of Russian power projection in the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean.

Beyond this, Russia is demonstrating that it can sabotage American and EU declarations about integrating the Commonwealth of Independent States members into Western structures such as NATO.

By attempting to accomplish regime change in Georgia, Moscow is also trying to gain control of the energy and transportation corridor which connects Central Asia and Azerbaijan with the Black Sea and ocean routes overseas - for oil, gas and other commodities. Back in 1999, Western companies reached an agreement with Central Asian states to create the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. So far, this has allowed Azerbaijan to bypass Russia completely and transport its oil from the Caspian Sea basin straight through Georgia and Turkey, without crossing Russian territory. The growing output of the newly independent Central Asian states has been increasingly competing with Russian oil. By 2018, the Caspian basin, including Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, is supposed to export up to 4 million barrels of oil a day, as well as a significant amount of natural gas. Russia would clearly like to restore its hegemony over hydrocarbon export routes that would considerably diminish sovereignty and diplomatic freedom of maneuver in these new independent states.

A Russian S-300 Anti-Aircraft Shield for Iran?

Russia's Georgian adventure also emboldens Iran by securing its northern tier through denial of bases, airfields, electronic facilities and other

cooperation in Georgia and Azerbaijan to the U.S. and possibly Israel. At the same time, in March 2009, Russia is likely to deploy modern S-300 long-range anti-aircraft missiles in Iran. By June 2009 they will become fully operational, as Iranian teams finish training provided by their Russian instructors, according to a high-level Russian source who requested anonymity.<sup>4</sup>

The deployment of the anti-aircraft shield next spring, if it occurs, effectively limits the window in which Israel or the United States could conduct an effective aerial campaign aimed at destroying, delaying or crippling the Iranian nuclear program.

The Islamic Republic will use the long-range anti-aircraft system, in addition to the point-defense TOR M-1 short-range Russian-made system, to protect its nuclear infrastructure, including suspected nuclear weapons facilities, from a potential U.S. or Israeli preventive strike.

The S-300 system, which has a radius of over 90 miles and effective altitudes of about 90,000 feet, is capable of tracking up to 100 targets simultaneously. It is considered one of the best in the world and is amazingly versatile. It is capable of shooting down aircraft, cruise missiles, and ballistic missile warheads.<sup>5</sup> The S-300 complements the Tor-M1 air defense missile system, also supplied by Russia. In 2007 Russia delivered 29 Tor-M1s to Iran worth \$700 million.

Israel has been very effective in electronic warfare (EW) against Soviet- and Russian-built technologies, including anti-aircraft batteries. In 1982, Israeli Air Force F-16s smashed the Syrian anti-aircraft missiles in the Beka'a Valley and within Syria, allowing Israel full air superiority over Syria and Lebanon. As a result, Syria lost over 80 planes, one-third of its air force, in two days, while Israel lost one obsolete ground support A-4 Skyhawk to ground fire.

In 1981, Israeli F-15s and F-16s flew undetected over Jordan and Saudi Arabia on their mission to destroy Saddam Hussein's Osirak reactor. More recently, the Israeli Air Force surprised the Syrians when they destroyed an alleged nuclear facility in the northeast of the country in September 2007, apparently flying undetected to and from the mission.

However, a mission over Iran, if and when decided upon, is very different than operations over neighboring Syria. First, if Israel waits until March 2009, there may be a president in the White House who emphasizes diplomacy over military operations. Even if the George W. Bush Administration allows Israel over-flight of Iraqi air space and aerial refueling, a future administration might not, opting for an "aggressive diplomacy" approach instead - especially with an emboldened and truculent Russia as a geopolitical counter-balance.

Second, Israel, military experts say, does not have long-range bomber capacity, such as the Cold War-era U.S. B-1 heavy supersonic bomber, or the B-2 stealth bomber. Israel, a Russian source estimated, can hit 20 targets simultaneously, while the Iranian nuclear program may have as many as 100. Many of the Iranian targets are fortified, and will require bunker busters.

Operational challenges abound. Israel's EW planes, needed to suppress anti-aircraft batteries, are slow and unarmed, and could become a target for Iranian anti-aircraft missiles or even fighter sorties. But the most important question analysts are asking is whether the current Israeli leadership has the knowledge and the gumption to pull it off. After all, the results of the 2006 mini-war against Hizbullah were disastrous for Israel, and the Israel Defense Forces have exposed numerous flaws in its

preparedness, supply chain, and command, control, communications and intelligence.

#### The Need to Defang Tehran

Nevertheless, the need to preemptively defang Tehran may prove decisive in view of Tehran's hatred and intransigence.

As noted by Professor Stephen Blank of the U.S. Army War College:

When one is dealing with a national leadership which is motivated by ethnic and religious hatred, one needs to remember that such a leadership becomes obsessed and loses its ability to calculate things. They may risk war rather than seek accommodation. This was not only the case with Nazi Germany, but also with the antebellum American South of the 1840s and 1850s, where racial hatred of the slave owners cause them to lose sight of what was at stake.

Blank goes on to conclude that the Iranian leadership believes that Russia and China will provide them with protection, of which the S-300 is an important component, and that the sanctions are not effective.

Under the circumstances, an Israel-only preventive bombing campaign - without the United States - might be too risky to pull off. If the United States sits this crisis out, Israel could possibly settle for deterring Iran by taking its cities and main oil facilities hostage.

This was known during the Cold War as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD), brought to you courtesy of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and President Ahmadinejad. Going MAD would make the Middle East even more fragile than it already is, and would make the life of its inhabitants ever more difficult and tragic.

Clearly, with the renewal of East-West tensions as a result of Russia's moves against Georgia, it will be much more difficult to obtain Moscow's agreement to enhance sanctions and international pressures on Iran. The struggle to diplomatically halt its nuclear program will become far more difficult.

#### Lessons from the War

Lessons for the Middle East and Israel from the Russian-Georgian War abound, and apply both to military operations, cyber-warfare, and strategic information operations. The most important of these are:

Watch Out for the Bear - and Other Beasts! Russian continental power is on the rise. Israel should understand it and not provoke Moscow unnecessarily, while defending its own national security interests staunchly. Small states need to treat nuclear armed great powers with respect. Provoking a militarily strong adversary, such as Iran, is worthwhile only if you are confident of victory, and even then there may be bitter surprises. Just ask Saakashvili.

Strategic Self-Reliance. U.S. expressions of support of the kind provided to Georgia - short of an explicit mutual defense pact - may or may not result in military assistance if/when Israel is under attack, especially when the attacker has an effective deterrent, such as nuclear arms deliverable against U.S. targets. In the future, such an attacker could be Iran or an Arab country armed with atomic weapons. Israel can and should rely on its own deterrent - a massive survivable second-strike capability.

Intelligence Failure. U.S. intelligence-gathering and analysis on the Russian threat to Georgia failed. So did U.S. military assistance to Georgia, worth around \$2 billion over the last 15 years. This is something to remember when looking at recent American intelligence assessments of the Iranian nuclear

threat or the unsuccessful training of Palestinian Authority security forces against Hamas. Both are deeply flawed. There is no substitute for high-quality human intelligence.

Air Power Is Not Sufficient. Russia used air, armor, the Black Sea Fleet, special forces, and allied militias. Clausewitzian lessons still apply: the use of overwhelming force in the war's center of gravity by implementing a combined air-land-sea operation may be twentieth century, but it does work.<sup>6</sup> Israel should have been taught this lesson after the last war with Hizbullah.

Surprise and Speed of Operations Still Matter - as they have for the four thousand years of the recorded history of warfare. To be successful, wars have to have limited and achievable goals. Russia achieved most of its goals between Friday and Monday, while the world, including President George W. Bush, was busy watching the Olympics and parliaments were on vacation.

Do Not Cringe - within reason - from taking military casualties and inflicting overwhelming military and civilian casualties at a level unacceptable to the enemy. Georgia lost some 100-200 soldiers and effectively capitulated. A tougher enemy, like the Japanese or the Germans, or even Hizbullah, could well suffer a proportionally higher rate of casualties and keep on fighting.

Information and Psychological Warfare Is Paramount. So is cyber-security. It looks like the Russians conducted repeated denial of service attacks against Georgia (and in 2007 against Estonia), shutting down key websites. Russia was ready with accusations and footage of alleged Georgian atrocities in South Ossetia, shifting the information operation playing field from "aggressor-victim" to "saving Ossetian civilians from barbaric Georgians." These operations also matter domestically, to shore up support and boost morale at home.

#### Conclusion

The Russian-Georgian war indicates that the balance of power in western Eurasia has shifted, and that U.S. power may be deteriorating in the face of its lengthy and open-ended commitments in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Global War on Terror, which are leading to a global overstretch.

While the Middle East, and especially the Persian Gulf, will remain a top priority in U.S. foreign policy regardless of who wins the White House, Israel is heading towards a strategic environment in which Russia may play a more important role, especially in its southern tier, from the Black Sea to Afghanistan and western China. Twenty-first century geopolitics is presenting significant survival challenges to the Jewish state and the region.

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