
Putin's Winning Hand

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Once the Atlantic Alliance is shattered, America's lifeline to the world is kaput

There are no military installations in the city of Tskhinvali. In fact, there are no military targets at all. It is an industrial center consisting of lumber mills, manufacturing plants and residential areas. It is also the home to 30,000 South Ossetians. When Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili ordered the city to be bombed by warplanes and shelled by heavy artillery last Thursday, he knew that he would be killing hundreds of civilians in their homes and neighborhoods. But he ordered the bombing anyway.

There was no "Battle of Tskhinvali"; that's another fiction. A battle implies that there is an opposing force that is resisting or fighting back. That's not the case here. The Georgian army entered the city unopposed; after all, how can unarmed civilians stop armed units. Most of the townspeople had already fled across the border into Russia or hid in their basements while the tanks and armored vehicles rumbled by firing at anything that moved.

What took place in South Ossetia last Thursday, was not an invasion or a siege; it was a massacre. The people had no way to defend themselves against a fully-equipped modern army. It was a war crime.

In less than 24 hours, the Russian army was deployed to the war zone where it chased the Georgian army away without a fight. Journalist Michael Binyon put it like this, "The attack was short, sharp and deadly--enough to send the Georgians fleeing in humiliating panic." Indeed, the Georgians left in such haste that many of their weapons were left behind. It was a complete rout; another black-eye for the US and Israeli advisers who trained the clatter of thugs they call the Georgian army. Soon vendors on the streets of Tskhinvali will be hawking weapons that were left behind with a mocking sign: "Georgia Army M-16; Never used, dropped once."

By the time the army was driven out, the downtown area was engulfed in flames and the bodies of those who had been killed by sniper-fire were strewn along the streets and sidewalks. Many of people who stayed behind were simply too old or infirm to leave. Instead, they huddled in their basements waiting for the shelling to stop. It was a bloodbath. The city's only hospital was deliberately targeted and destroyed; another war crime. By day's end, over 2,000 people were killed in an operation that was clearly engineered with the assistance of the Bush White House. Bush regards Saakashvilli as his main client in the region; they are friends. He is America's cat's paw in the Caucasus. Saakashvilli's assignment is to try to get Putin to overreact militarily and demonstrate to European allies that Russia still poses a threat to their national security. Fortunately, many Europeans see through the ruse and know that the trouble originates in Washington.

For the most part, Americans are still in the dark about what really happened last weekend. There's a great video circulating on the Internet by a Russian citizen that has been living in USA for the last 10 years. He sums up the role of the US media with great precision. He says, "The western media--especially CNN--is feeding you complete horseshit. Russia did not invade Georgia first." The youtube can be seen here:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0c26Q-gxDEA>

The coverage of the western media has been abysmal. Nearly every article and TV news segment begins with accusations of Russian aggression concealing the fact that the Georgian Army bombarded and invaded the capital of South Ossetia one full day before the first Russian even tank crossed the border. By the time the Russians arrived, the city was already in a shambles and thousands were dead.

These facts are not in dispute by those who followed the developments as they took place. Now the media is revising the facts to manage public perceptions, just as they did with the fictional WMD in Iraq. Many people think that the media learned its lesson after they were exposed for using bogus information in the lead up to the war in Iraq. But that is not true. The corporate media--especially FOX News, CNN and PBS (the smug, liberal-sounding channel)---continue to operate like the propaganda arm of the Pentagon. Its disgraceful.

In a 2006 referendum, 99% of South Ossetians said they supported independence from Georgia. The voter turnout was 95% and the balloting was monitored by 34 international observers from the west. No one has challenged the results. The province has been under the protection of Russian and Georgian peacekeepers since 1992 and has been a de facto independent state ever since. If Putin applied the same standard as Bush did in Kosovo, he would unilaterally declare South Ossetia independent from Georgia and then thumb his nose at the UN. (Sauce for the goose, is sauce for the gander) But Putin and newly-elected Russian President Dmitry Medvedev have taken a conciliatory attitude towards the international community and tried to resolve the issue through diplomatic channels. So far, they have conducted themselves with restraint and avoided any confrontation.

Still, Russia's operation in South Ossetia has ignited a firestorm in the US political establishment and Democrats and Republicans alike are demanding that Russia be "taught a lesson". Condoleeza Rice flew to Tbilisi on Friday and ordered Russian combat troops to withdraw from Georgia immediately. Saakashvili topped off Rice's comments by saying that the Russian troops were "cold-blooded killers" and "barbarians". So much for reconciliation.

Saakashvili's hyperbolic rhetoric was followed by a surprise announcement from Poland that they had approved Bush's plans for deploying the Missile Defense Shield in Eastern Europe. The system is supposed to defend Europe from the possibility of attacks from so-called "rogue states" like Iran, but the Kremlin knows that it is intended to neutralize their nuclear arsenal. Political analyst William Engdahl explains the importance of the proposed system in his recent article, "Missile Defense: Washington and Poland just moved the World closer to War":

"The signing now insures an escalation of tensions between Russia and NATO and a new Cold War arms race in full force. It is important for readers to understand...the ability of one of two opposing sides to put anti-missile missiles to within 90 miles of the territory of the other in even a primitive first-generation anti-missile missile array gives that side virtual victory in a nuclear balance of power and forces the other to consider unconditional surrender or to pre-emptively react by launching its nuclear strike before 2012."

The new "shield" will be integrated into the larger US nuclear weapons system placing the world's most lethal weapons just a few hundred miles from Russia's capital. It is a clear threat to Russia's national security and it must be opposed at all cost. It is no different than nuclear weapons in Cuba. The timing of the announcement is particularly troubling as it only adds to the tensions between the two superpowers.

President Medvedev made this statement after hearing of Poland's decision: "This decision clearly demonstrates everything we have said recently. The deployment of new anti-missile forces in Europe is aimed at the Russian Federation."

It was President Ronald Reagan, the darling of the neoconservatives, who decided to remove short-range nuclear weapons from the European theater. Now, ironically, it is his ideological heir, George W. Bush, who is on track to restart the Cold War by putting a high-tech nuclear system on Russia's perimeter. The younger Bush has already broken his father's commitment to Mikhail Gorbachev to never expand NATO beyond Germany. Presently, Bush is pushing to gain NATO membership for two former-Soviet states; Ukraine and Georgia. If they are approved, then any future dispute with Russia will pit the United States and Europe against Moscow. It's no wonder Putin is trying to derail the process.

The Bush administration has been planning for a confrontation with Russia for more than a year. In fact, Raw Story reported on operations that were conducted by the military on July 14, 2008 which were probably a dress rehearsal for the current conflict. According to Raw Story:

"US troops on Monday (July 14) began military exercises near the Russian border in ex-Soviet Ukraine and were poised to launch them in Georgia, amid tense relations between Moscow and Washington. A ceremony inaugurating the Sea Breeze-2008 NATO exercise was held off Ukraine's Black Sea coast against anti-NATO protests and a hostile reaction from officials in Russia. Sea Breeze-2008...includes forces from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Denmark, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Latvia, Macedonia and Turkey...'The US-Georgia joint exercises will be held at the Vaziani military base' less than 100 kilometers (60 miles) from the Russian border with a total of 1,650 servicemen taking part."

So, it appears the Bush administration, working in conjunction with the Pentagon, did have contingency plans for dealing with a flare-up with Georgia. The real question is whether or not they planned to initiate those hostilities to advance their own regional agenda? No one knows for sure.

Now that Georgia's American-trained army has been humiliated in front of the world, Bush is trying desperately to save face by demanding that Russia allow the US Air force to deliver humanitarian aid via C-17 military aircraft to the tens of thousands of Georgians who were displaced in the fighting. It is worth noting that, as yet, Bush has never delivered as much as a bag of rice to the 2 million Iraqi refugees living in Jordan and Syria due to his war in Iraq. Bush's magnanimity is not only suspect, it also creates real problems for Putin who will have to decide whether the offer is sincere or just a ploy to open up the ports and airfields so that more weaponry and ordnance can be delivered. As Barry Grey suggests in his article "Bush Dispatches US Military forces to Georgia" the humanitarian operation could be a scam:

"This is a formula for an injection of US military and naval forces into Georgia of indeterminate scope and duration. It will certainly involve the presence of hundreds if not thousands of uniformed US military personnel on the ground, and a substantial number of warships in the region. The US is introducing this military force into a situation that remains highly unstable and combustible, raising the possibility of a direct military clash between the United States and Russia."

Grey is right, but what choice does Putin have? His task is to avoid a military confrontation with the United States while demonstrating to his European partners that their future lies with Russia not America. That's the real goal. To achieve that, he needs to expose Bush as reckless, petulant,

and incapable of being a responsible steward of the global system. Maybe Putin will have to back-down at some point and swallow his pride; it makes no difference. What matters, is the endgame; showing that Russia is strong and dependable and will provide its European allies with oil and natural gas in a Businesslike manner. That's the winning hand. Meanwhile, the United States will be forced to take a long-overdue look in the mirror and revisit its strategy for perennial war. Unfortunately, once the Atlantic Alliance is shattered; America's lifeline to the world is kaput.

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