
Ossetia War : Lessons For Armenia

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WASHINGTON - Within hours the long-running stand-off between Georgia and Russia-backed South Ossetia became a full-blown war causing hundreds of deaths and thousands of injuries, primarily among Ossetians but also among the now-decimated Georgian army.

The fighting took place less than 100 miles from Armenia and had an immediate impact on it. Above all, it exposed the security vacuum in the region, of which Armenia is also a part.

Is Armenia ready for a repetition of a similar scenario in Karabakh?

Immediate consequences of Ossetia fighting

Half the world away - on the other end of Asia - most of the world leaders, including President George Bush and Russia's Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, gathered for the opening of the Olympic Games. As they sat in the VIP seats of the Beijing stadium, Georgia's President Mikheil Saakashvili, longtouted as Mr. Bush's foreign policy "success story" and a thorn in Mr. Putin's side, threw most of his U.S.-trained army into a savage attack on South Ossetia.

That happened just hours after the Georgian leader, in a televised address, promised to cease shelling of the Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali, which was surrounded on nearly all sides by Georgian military positions. As events unfolded, it became clear that the Georgian operation was planned in advance, but its planners had failed to anticipate what came next.

Russia intervened within hours and on a massive scale. Had it not been for that intervention, which resulted in a defeat of the "NATO standard" Georgian army within 48 hours, and subsequent Western diplomacy to check Russian military moves within Georgia, large-scale fighting might well have claimed even more lives.

Nevertheless, the three days of shelling and shooting resulted in nearly a wholesale destruction of Tskhinvali - a town about the size of Stepanakert - and displacement of close to 100,000 people, both Ossetians and Georgians.

The rapid pace of these events, the human toll involved, the apparent shifts in the regional balance of forces and, above all, Armenians' security predicament in Nagorno-Karabakh necessitate an urgent review of Yerevan's policies.

Lesson 1: Ethnic hatreds and advanced weapons make for a deadly mix

Mr. Saakashvili studied in some of the best schools in Europe and the United States. He has made it clear that he wants Georgia to be part of Europe. Georgia has already adopted the European Union flag. While his record on corruption and democracy in Georgia is checkered, under the Saakashvili presidency, Georgia has made obvious progress.

None of this stopped the Georgian president from launching a massive indiscriminate bombardment of South Ossetia and an attempt to wipe out both its small self-defense forces and, effectively, the fewer than 70,000 ethnic Ossetians living in the area.

Now let's look at Azerbaijan. It has much more money and more deadly firepower than Georgia did before this week. Azerbaijan's ruling family does not care much for promoting democratic facades or currying Western favor, and it has repeatedly for years threatened to attack Armenia (including the Nagorno-Karabakh Republic).

This combination of capability and stated intent creates an immediate present danger to Armenian lives and must be appreciated more seriously and addressed more effectively than has happened to date both in Armenia and the diaspora.

The quick and devastating defeat of a country that, like Azerbaijan, sought to "restore its territorial integrity," or more accurately avenge old grievances through fresh violence only to bring new humiliation upon itself, should serve as a cold shower for Azerbaijan.

But Armenians cannot rely on President Ilham Aliyev's rational cost-benefit calculation. The risks are just too high. Considering the levels of anti-Armenian rhetoric - which are beyond anything Georgia's leaders have ever employed vis-a-vis Ossetians, Abkhaz, or Russians - Mr. Aliyev or, to borrow from the words of the Russian president, another "lunatic" Azerbaijani leader may feel the "need to shed [Armenian] blood" overwhelm other cares he or she might have.

The threat is real and must be addressed.

Lesson 2: Crisis preparations are necessary before a crisis arrives

Still, most Armenians - and this is especially true for the diaspora and Yerevan - live in a blissful ignorance of threats their homeland and their lives are facing.

Even among professional individuals whose job it is to protect Armenia and neutralize its enemies, one frequently observes the attitude that Azerbaijan either "doesn't have the balls," "doesn't have the army," "won't risk losing oil," or "the United States and Russia won't stand for it."

After the Georgian attack on Ossetia, the Armenian government needs to answer a number of key questions.

Does it consider losing hundreds, if not thousands of civilians within a matter of hours, an acceptable risk? Azerbaijan today has the capability to cause such destruction.

What is it doing to stop the flow of weapon systems to Azerbaijan - particularly the type of weapons that can cause such devastating harm? Like Georgia, Azerbaijan gets most of its weapons, including the more deadly ones, from one state - another Western darling, Ukraine. What has Armenia done to try to stop and reverse this process?

Has the Armenian government made it clear to Azerbaijan that it would too pay a disproportionate price for causing Armenian civilian deaths? How has that been demonstrated?

What has the Armenian government done to prepare its population for a possible attack?

Do Armenians sitting in Yerevan cafés, chewing sunflower seeds at opposition rallies, or watching television in their homes know the location of the nearest bomb shelter?

When were Armenian reservists last gathered on any significant scale? When were they last trained or tested? Do they know where to report in case of war?

Crisis requires more than planning for immediate security and military operations. Considering the rapid nature of warfare today, once again demonstrated in Ossetia, and the role public opinion plays in shaping policy, preparations for crisis management must include a strong media component.

Are Armenian-Americans ready for such a crisis?

Lesson 3: External guarantees carry unacceptable risks

The main reason Georgians thought they could attack Ossetia with impunity is because as part of the peace agreement the parties signed after their brief 1991-92 war, Ossetians had to yield firing positions they captured from Georgians to Russian peacekeepers.

Before the August 8 Georgian assault, Russian peacekeepers repeatedly failed to address recurring violations by Georgia of its agreements and provide for the security of the Ossetian population. As a result, even if Russia intervened faster than anticipated, Ossetian civilians bore the brunt of human casualties and material losses, with their community devastated.

Armenia too experienced "peacekeeping" of Soviet Russian forces when they were sent to "protect" the Armenian-Azerbaijani border in the late 1980s. By 1991, on orders from Moscow, went as far as to help Azerbaijan expel Armenians from parts of Karabakh.

But this is not a Russia-specific problem.

Too many United Nations peacekeeping operations in recent years - from Croatia and Rwanda in the mid-1990s, to more recent NATO policing in Kosovo and African Union operations in Sudan have failed in their stated effort to protect populations whose lives are threatened.

The reality is the peacekeepers and the countries that dispatch them care more about their own security than a foreign country they have pledged to protect.

Armenians are fortunate that foreign peacekeepers were never introduced after the Karabakh war ended in 1994. Combat capabilities of the Armenian Armed Forces along with the territories they currently hold in and around Nagorno Karabakh form two basic foundations of Armenian security.

Lesson 4: The "peace process" must be about strengthening peace and preventing war

Exchanging territories under Armenian control for promises of foreign protection without a clear and unambiguous resolution of the Armenian-Azerbaijan dispute carries deadly risks for Armenians.

But, with the possible exception of the 2001 Key West deal, this is exactly what mediators have proposed throughout the conflict mediation efforts that followed the 1994 cease-fire.

This clear and unambiguous document must establish a new border between the two countries and a transparent process of disarmament and demilitarization. Clearly at this time Azerbaijan is not ready for such a resolution and would rather protract the status quo. But, under such circumstances, neither should it receive any of the territories now under Armenian control.

In fact, in recent years, in addition to a refusal to talk peace seriously, Azerbaijan has been following a policy of provocations and testing Armenian positions along the Line of Contact, just as Georgia had in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The central focus of Armenia's foreign policy should not be the endless search for a "mutually acceptable" settlement with Azerbaijan, but urgent measures to prevent a repetition of the Ossetia events, only on a more devastating scale between Armenia and Azerbaijan.

This must include strengthening of the cease-fire with Azerbaijan through an expansion of the unarmed international monitoring mission; enforcement of the 1995 agreement on preventing violations of the ceasefire; Azerbaijani pull-out from the no-man's lands it occupied in recent years dangerously nearing Armenian defense lines; and development of an agreement on the peaceful settlement of the conflict that would include specific disarmament clauses.

As Russia's retired Ambassador Vladimir Kazimirov has warned repeatedly, and most recently just three months ago at a conference in Stepanakert, an Armenian campaign for peace, involving the elements listed, is urgently needed.

Lesson 5: The regional balance of forces has shifted

After years of confused and contradictory policies and an often simply disinterested attitude toward the Caucasus, Russia is back with guns blazing. This is not a Soviet monster, but a new country that very much is trying to be a copycat of the United States, at least in its foreign policy.

Russian propaganda about Ossetia in recent weeks would remind American viewers of what they saw on the eve of and during the Iraq war, including references to humanitarian causes and legal grounding for the intervention, and demonization of the opponent's leadership.

In another sign of increased sophistication, Russian armed forces in their Georgia operations have succeeded in limiting the "collateral damage" the air strikes inevitably cause.

The Russian command even accommodated the request of the local officials in the town of Poti, and instead of air strikes on the U.S.- and European-equipped Georgian navy, Russian military men arrived in person to dynamite and sink Georgian naval vessels at sea at a safe distance away from the port.

Even more impressive was Russia's ability to deceive Mr. Saakashvili and his U.S. supporters. The apparent trap Russia set for the Georgian army in Ossetia followed by a wholesale dismantlement of the Georgian military - for which the United States spent a billion dollars or more since 2001 - showed the Russian leadership's new-found ability to fuse its resource-driven enrichment with inherited intellectual capacities into an effective conduct of war.

Signs that the United States is losing its "unipolar moment," as some U.S. commentators have described America's dominance in world affairs since the collapse of the USSR, have been there for some time.

After becoming bogged down in Afghanistan and Iraq, the Bush Administration has so far failed to achieve its goal of confronting Iran effectively. Iran's neighbors, even the two occupied by the United States, have publicly declined involvement in anti-Iranian policies.

And earlier this year even Israel has for the first time began direct contacts with Iranbacked Hezbollah in Lebanon and, through Turkey's mediation, resumed talks with Syria.

And this week Turkey, a longtime, but by now apparently former U.S. ally, reportedly declined access to U.S. naval vessels into the Black Sea to deliver aid to Georgia.

Armenia has benefited greatly from its relations with the United States.

But America's contribution to Georgia's assault on Ossetia raises troubling questions. In fact, as the Ossetians were being devastated on the night of August 8, Assistant Secretary of State Dan Fried accused them of "provoking" the Georgian aggression and to this day there has been no clear American condemnation of the Georgian action.

The major lesson of Ossetia war is that Russia, Armenia's strategic partner, is capable of conducting destructive military operations against a purported U.S. ally in the Caucasus, and U.S. is powerless to stop Russia.

Armenia's relationship with Russia has been longer and, on the balance, may be even more positive than with the U.S. But Armenia is also troubled that Russia is now essentially dismantling the Georgian state - one of Armenia's two oldest and friendliest neighbors.

In these unfortunate circumstances, Armenia should try to contribute to normalization of Russian-Georgian relations by all possible means. But more importantly it should act on lessons learned from this crisis to safeguard Armenians.
