
Georgia Caused This War

By Vadim Mukhanov
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The war in South Ossetia must be understood for what it really is -- Georgia's one-sided escalation of the conflict. This places full responsibility for the bloodshed on Georgia's side. Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's decision to send in heavy equipment and artillery late Thursday led to large civilian casualties in South Ossetia.

In all likelihood, the opportunistic Saakashvili saw the opening day of the Olympics in Beijing on Friday as his best chance for a successful blitzkrieg against recalcitrant South Ossetia. He also wagered that Russia's reaction would not be fast or powerful enough to stop Georgian divisions from seizing a large part of the unrecognized republic under their control, or from forcing the civilian population to flee through the Roki Tunnel into neighboring North Ossetia.

Russia's response turned out to be timely and effective. It brought to a halt Georgia's wanton murder of civilians in South Ossetia and the bombing of its villages. The Georgian forces that had savagely destroyed Tskhinvali and surrounding towns were routed.

The main goal of Georgia's leadership is to join NATO and to become integrated into European political and economic organizations. Toward that end, Tbilisi regularly complained about the incompetence of Russian peacekeeping forces in the conflict zones between Georgia and its breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, requesting that those forces be replaced with international peacekeepers. Saakashvili probably thought that the departure of Russia's peacekeepers would enable him to make the leaders of the unrecognized republics more compliant and to bring Abkhazia and South Ossetia under Georgia's control.

Since he was unable to replace the Russian peacekeepers, Saakashvili opted to resolve the conflict by the simplest of means - by force. Georgia's position is undeniably advantageous. Should it emerge victorious, Georgia would earn the honor and respect of the United States and the other NATO members. Should it lose and suffer a retaliatory strike by Russia, NATO will have great sympathy for Tbilisi. Thus, a tactical defeat could turn into a strategic victory if NATO decides at its December summit to grant Georgia membership. On the other hand, Georgia's recklessness may strengthen the position of NATO members, such as Germany, who are opposed to granting Tbilisi membership.

It was inevitable that this conflict, which had been simmering for years, would eventually erupt into open warfare. Moreover, since South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the other breakaway republic, are allies, the Abkhaz leadership understood clearly that if Georgia was successful in Tskhinvali, it would turn its war machine toward Sukhumi.

Georgia's disagreements with South Ossetia and Abkhazia escalated into open warfare, and this will mean an end to the peace initiatives for the breakaway republics that were proposed by Russia and the European Union. Incidentally, Russia's quick and decisive repelling of Georgia's aggression sent a clear signal to Azerbaijan, which -- not unlike Georgia -- has also considered using military force to resolve its Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In the post-Soviet period, the key to subduing and managing such conflicts in the Caucasus has been for Russia to threaten the use of force against the side exhibiting excessive aggression.

Obviously, as Prime Minister Vladimir Putin correctly stated Saturday, there is now no chance of South Ossetia or Abkhazia ever being incorporated into Georgia. Thus, the likelihood of these regions receiving a Kosovo-like independence is greater than ever.

The past week's events have shown that Georgia, with its current leadership, is incapable of behaving responsibly, either domestically or in the international arena. With its \$2 billion in foreign debt, Georgia is on the verge of bankruptcy. But instead of developing its domestic political and economic programs, Saakashvili's administration continues to send shock waves throughout the Caucasus.

It seems that relations between Moscow and Tbilisi will be strained for the foreseeable future, and they could become openly adversarial should Georgia gain NATO membership. The Russia-Georgia war has already put a strain on relations with the West and particularly with the United States. Some of the sharpest statements against Russia have come from the White House as well as presidential candidate John McCain, and Russia's relations with the West will only worsen if a peaceful solution to the conflict is not found.

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