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# The Goals Behind Moscow's Offensive in South Ossetia

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As anticipated (see EDM, July 11, August 4) Moscow has initiated an offensive military operation by proxy against Georgia in South Ossetia. Although the blow had been expected in upper Abkhazia and may yet materialize there, Russia shifted the direction of attack to the South Ossetian front.

The brazen attacks during the night of August 7 to 8 in South Ossetia left Tbilisi with no choice but to respond. Continuing Georgian unilateral restraint would have resulted in irreparable human, territorial, and political losses. Moscow's military and propaganda operation bears the hallmarks of its blitzkriegs in Transnistria in 1992 and Abkhazia in 1993. Georgia's defensive response in South Ossetia since August 8 is legally within the country's rights under international law and militarily commensurate with the attacks.

Russia usually stages military incidents in Georgia in August, while European officials take their vacations. This year, however, the operations are systematic, lengthier, and considerably higher on the ladder of escalation than in previous years. After concentrating supplementary forces in Abkhazia during the spring and expanding its military infrastructure there in early summer, Moscow switched on the escalation process in South Ossetia.

On July 3 an assassination attempt targeted Dmitry Sanakoyev, head of the Tbilisi-backed interim administration of South Ossetia, which controls at least one third of the region's territory. The blast injured Sanakoyev's bodyguards. On July 9 Moscow demonstratively acknowledged that four Russian Air Force planes had flown a mission over South Ossetia. That action sought to deter Georgia from flying unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), thus blinding Tbilisi to Russian and proxy military movements in the area. A series of roadside bomb blasts targeted Georgian police patrols. During the second half of July and the first days of August, Russian-commanded Ossetian troops under the Russian-led South Ossetian authorities fired repeatedly at Georgian-controlled villages, forcing Georgian police to fire back defensively.

Meanwhile, Russia's state-controlled media orchestrated a war scare, accusing Georgia of intentions to attack. In the North Caucasus and Russia proper, Cossack chieftains on government payroll threatened to send 'volunteers' to fight against Georgia. The North Ossetian authorities, apparently aware of Moscow's plans, showed nervousness at the prospect of becoming embroiled in a major military operation by proxy to their south.

The goals behind Moscow's operation are threefold, each with its own time frame. The immediate goal is to re-establish the authority of Russian-controlled negotiating and 'peacekeeping' formats. By firing on Georgian positions unremittingly and escalating the intensity of the fire with every passing day, Moscow hopes to force Georgia to turn to those same Russian-controlled formats to relieve the pressure. Furthermore, Moscow wants to force Tbilisi to acknowledge a Russian role as main 'guarantor' of an eventual political settlement.

Moscow's next goal, on a timeframe overlapping with the first, is to capture Georgian-controlled villages in South Ossetia. The pattern of

attacks since August 6 indicates the intent to reduce the Sanakoyev administration's territory to insignificance or even remove it from South Ossetia altogether. If successful, this undertaking may well be replicated in upper Abkhazia by Russian and proxy forces attempting to evict authorities loyal to Tbilisi.

The strategic political goal is to dissuade NATO from approving a membership action plan (MAP) for Georgia at the alliance's December 2008 or April 2009 meetings. More immediately, Moscow seeks to derail the North Atlantic Council's assessment visit to Georgia, scheduled for September, or at least to influence the visit's assessment about Georgia's eligibility for a MAP. Since NATO's 'Russia-Firsters' insist that unresolved conflicts disqualify Georgia from a MAP, Russia seeks to demonstrate that those conflicts are indeed unresolved. NATO's hesitations

on the Georgian MAP at the April 2008 summit emboldened Russia to escalate military operations against Georgia.

Moscow also seeks to bleed Georgia economically through protracted military operations. Russia can not tolerate the successful economic performance of a Western-oriented government on Russia's border. Aware, furthermore, that Georgia's government is accountable to public opinion, Moscow seeks to force the government to choose between yielding at the risk of a domestic backlash or, alternatively, fighting back in a costly confrontation

Resemblances with the Russian interventions in the early 1990s in Transnistria and Abkhazia are unmistakable. In that scenario, the Russian media create a hysterical, brink-of-war atmosphere, portraying the small country targeted for attack as a dangerous aggressor. Russian-armed proxy troops, already in place on the target country's territory, attack localities and seats of authority. Cossacks and North Caucasus 'volunteers' are sent in. Russian officials can claim that the attackers act on their own, outside Moscow's control. Russian military intelligence coordinates the operation, while air and ground forces provide cover and would intervene directly if the target country defends itself. In the final stage of this scenario, Russian 'peacekeepers' perpetuate the gains achieved on the ground. Throughout the crisis, most Western governments are confused and react irrelevantly by urging restraint on 'both sides,' ultimately tolerating the Russian faits accomplis.

That scenario started unfolding in South Ossetia in late July. By August 6 and 7, heavily armed proxy troops opened fire on Georgian villages, while the secessionist authorities refused to talk with Tbilisi. The attacking forces began destroying the transmission antennae of Georgian mobile telephone systems. Arms and paramilitary groups began streaming in from Russia to South Ossetia through the Russian-controlled Roki tunnel. Russian 'peacekeeping' troops allowed them through. Russian officials in Georgia claimed that the attacking forces were out of Russia's control. Officials in Moscow, meanwhile, justified the attacks directly and indirectly by accusing Georgia of aggression (Interfax, Itar-Tass, Russian Television, August 4-7).

At 7:00 P.M. local time on August 7, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili spoke live on national television, announcing a unilateral ceasefire and asking the other side also to cease hostilities. In highly conciliatory words, Saakashvili called for talks 'in any format'; reaffirmed the long-standing offer of full autonomy for South Ossetia; proposed that Russia should guarantee that solution; offered a general amnesty; and pleaded for international intercession to stop the hostilities (Rustavi-2 TV, August 7).

Following Saakashvili's address, attacks on Georgian villages

intensified. The village of Avnevi was almost completely destroyed, Tamarasheni and Prisi shelled, and the police station in Kurta, seat of the Sanakoyev administration, smashed by artillery fire. Civilians began fleeing the villages.

These attacks forced Tbilisi to take defensive action. By 10:30 P.M. local time on August 7 the Georgians returned fire. During the night, Georgian forces including armored columns began advancing toward Tskhinvali, the secessionist authorities' administrative center. These Georgian actions may have halted the repetition of a 1992-1993 type scenario in 2008.

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