
Striking after-war balance : the world is changing

By Ilya Kramnik
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It has been 40 days since the outbreak of Georgia's military aggression against the self-proclaimed republic of South Ossetia and the onset of Russia's "peace enforcement" operation.

Incidentally, the 40th day after death is a special commemoration of death in the Orthodox Christian tradition. In this case, it is also another hallmark, a time to reflect on the outcome of the five-day war.

The more time passes, the more details on the August hostilities become known, so analysts and the public in general have more to go on as they try to recreate a wholesome picture of how it happened. Although it would take too much time to tell the whole story here, it would still be useful to recall the basic facts and a few important details.

Open hostilities in the vicinity of Tskhinval, the capital of South Ossetia, began in the small hours of August 8, when Georgian artillery struck at the city and the Russian peacekeepers' positions in it. Georgian peacekeepers participated in the attack as well, having turned their arms against their Russian allies.

The first strike hit a 220-strong peacekeeping battalion under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Konstantin Timerman. It was his men's tenacity that helped repulse the first assault, which had a decisive influence on the ensuing events: Georgia failed to seize the city right away and make the world face an accomplished fact.

It was during that night (or rather early in the morning) that Russia's war machine began responding to events, and news came of Russian fighter jets seen above the Georgian forces' position. The air strikes performed by Su-25 fighters and Su-24 bombers also played an important role in repulsing the first attack on Tskhinval.

On the afternoon of August 8, the first Russian units entered South Ossetia (135th Motorized Rifle Regiment of the 19th Motorized Rifle Division) to defend local residents and reinforce peacekeeping forces, but it was not until August 9 that they actually reached the besieged peacekeepers.

Battles in local villages were mainly fought by local militia and volunteer units, while Russian troops interfered only if they had to take on large Georgian army units, for which the militia was no match.

Russian forces also undertook the mission of suppressing Georgian artillery, while the Russian air force struck Georgian rear infrastructure.

Russian special units also took on a Georgian task force. There is information that their successful operation prevented Georgian commandos from blowing up the Roki Tunnel, a mountain pass on the Caucasus Main Motorway. If blocked, it could have seriously hampered the operation because alternative routes lack sufficient traffic capacity.

The fighting in and around Tskhinval went on for three full days, and by the end of the third day Georgia's artillery was mostly destroyed, and what was left of it retreated. Georgian ground forces left the city, too.

It is important that throughout the operation, the Russian army was restricted by a series of political commitments, which prevented it from using heavy weapons in populated areas, and it greatly limited its counter-fire activities.

Russian aircraft continued strikes on Georgia's military infrastructure until August 12, making it impossible for its armed forces to carry on fighting.

Russia's navy also took part in the operation - a group of Black Sea Fleet warships patrolled the coasts of Abkhazia and Georgia. The group included the fleet's main ships, including the Moskva cruiser, three frigates, two small submarine chasers, small missile carrier Mirage, four guided-missile boats, a communications ship, and a marines group including landing ships Saratov and Tsezar Kunikov, and a troop ship, General Ryabikov, which carried two marine battalions.

The marines eventually landed in Abkhazia thus expanding the operation area. The reconnaissance units of the marines and the 7th Air Assault Division marched all the way to Poti and seized important Georgian military cargo and burned Georgian naval boats.

Much is unclear in this marine episode of the Russian-Georgian war. On August 11, we heard the news that Russian warships had sunk a Georgian missile boat, the Tbilisi. Later it turned out that the Tbilisi had been burned in Poti by Russian marines. Since the remaining boats retreated to Batumi, it was impossible to find out which of them was destroyed, if any, in the fight with the Russian navy. There are some reports that Georgia lost two ships.

By August 11, the Georgian army was no longer an organized force, as the footage of its ignominious retreat from South Ossetia, Gori and other areas was shown around the globe. Its units fled south, mostly to Tbilisi, leaving their weaponry behind, while Russian forces along with Abkhazian and South Ossetian units carried the hostilities on to Georgia's own territory, seizing the abandoned equipment and destroying what remained of the country's military infrastructure.

On August 12, President Dmitry Medvedev announced the completion of the operation.

The five-day war exposed the Russian army's strong and weak points. Its strengths included a fast start, the methodical and consistent tactics they used to suppress Georgia's artillery and rear infrastructure and a successful anti-sabotage operation. All that credits the high qualifications of Russian command and headquarters staff.

As for their weaknesses, they failed to completely suppress Georgia's air defense units and air force. They also lacked cutting-edge equipment and used obsolete communications systems.

Some of these faults were recognized by the military leaders. Colonel General Anatoly Nogovitsyn, who was the army press spokesman during the conflict, admitted the loss of a Tu-22MR jet due to imperfect combat training of the air force.

Casualties are estimated differently on both sides. Russia reported 71 killed and 19 missing and four aircraft shot down. It also said it lost several dozen combat machines, including 10-15 tanks.

The Georgian Defense Ministry reports less than 300 Georgian soldiers killed, although other sources have more realistic figures, 1,000-1,500. Several Georgian battalions were destroyed entirely.

It is hard to estimate Georgia's loss of equipment. According to various estimates, around 50 machines were destroyed in combat, including 20 tanks, and about 100 (65 tanks) were seized by Russian forces after the Georgian army retreated.

The Russian force was not significantly superior to Georgia's; Georgia even had the advantage of fighting on its own familiar grounds.

This leads us to a conclusion that Russia has won a decisive victory, defeating the aggressor's army, and destroying or seizing a great number of military equipment. The victory guarantees Abkhazia and South Ossetia against further attempts at forceful annexation for a substantial period of time, unless the Georgian leadership rushes into another senseless adventure.

The main political outcome of the war apart from the recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent countries on August 26 was a split in NATO, where the United States, Britain and Eastern Europe became opposed to Western Europe. The former group insisted on all-out support of Georgia, while the latter voiced understanding of Russia's position in this conflict and dismissed the idea of imposing sanctions as counterproductive.

The Russian media are clearly dominated by pro-Russian sentiments, which also meet with some understanding and support in the West, despite the landslide of anti-Russian and even Russo-phobic articles in the foreign press.

Incidentally, as time passes, western assessments of the five-day war, which is now history, grow more weighted and objective. A unified anti-Russian bloc never formed here, except perhaps Poland and the Baltic nations with their strong dislike of Russia and Ukraine, which joined the club with U.S. support.

The outcome of the war can be expressed in a few short words: The world is changing rapidly. Russia's self-assertion as one of the key players on the international arena, combined with snowballing global financial crisis and a revision of many liberal values we inherited from the 1990s, suggests that we are witnessing a turn in history with global consequences. We are being swept by the winds of change.

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