

War in the Caucasus: Towards a Broader Russia-US Military Confrontation?

By Michel Chossudovsky

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During the night of August 7, coinciding with the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics, Georgia's president Saakashvili ordered an all-out military attack on Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia.

The aerial bombardments and ground attacks were largely directed against civilian targets including residential areas, hospitals and the university. The provincial capital Tskhinvali was destroyed. The attacks resulted in some 1500 civilian deaths, according to both Russian and Western sources. "The air and artillery bombardment left the provincial capital without water, food, electricity and gas. Horrified civilians crawled out of the basements into the streets as fighting eased, looking for supplies." (AP, August 9, 2008). According to reports, some 34,000 people from South Ossetia have fled to Russia. (Deseret Morning News, Salt Lake City, August 10, 2008)

The importance and timing of this military operation must be carefully analyzed. It has far-reaching implications.

Georgia is an outpost of US and NATO forces, on the immediate border of the Russian Federation and within proximity of the Middle East Central Asian war theater. South Ossetia is also at the crossroads of strategic oil and gas pipeline routes.





Georgia does not act militarily without the assent of Washington. The Georgian head of State is a US proxy and Georgia is a de facto US protectorate.

Who is behind this military agenda? What interests are being served? What is the purpose of the military operation.

There is evidence that the attacks were carefully coordinated by the US military and NATO.

Moscow has accused NATO of "encouraging Georgia". Russia's Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov underscored the destabilizing impacts of "foreign" military aid to Georgia: .

"It all confirms our numerous warnings addressed to the international community that it is necessary to pay attention to massive arms purchasing by Georgia during several years. Now we see how these arms and Georgian special troops who had been trained by foreign specialists are used," he said. ([Moscow accuses NATO of having "encouraged Georgia" to attack South Ossetia](#), Russia Today, August 9, 2008)

Moscow's envoy to NATO, Dmitry Rogozin, sent an official note to the representatives of all NATO member countries:

"Russia has already begun consultations with the ambassadors of the NATO countries and consultations with NATO military representatives will be held tomorrow," Rogozin said. "We will caution them against continuing to further support of Saakashvili."

"It is an undisguised aggression accompanied by a mass propaganda war," he said.

(See [Moscow accuses NATO of having "encouraged Georgia" to attack South Ossetia](#), Russia Today, August 9, 2008)

According to Rogozin, Georgia had initially planned to:

"start military action against Abkhazia, however, 'the Abkhaz fortified region turned out to be unassailable for Georgian armed formations, therefore a different tactic was chosen aimed against South Ossetia', which is more accessible territorially. The envoy has no doubts that Mikheil Saakashvili had agreed his actions with "sponsors", "those with whom he is negotiating Georgia's accession to NATO ". (RIA Novosti, August 8, 2008)

Contrary to what was conveyed by Western media reports, the attacks were anticipated by Moscow. The attacks were timed to coincide with the opening of the Olympics, largely with a view to avoiding frontpage media coverage of the Georgian military operation.

On August 7, Russian forces were in an advanced state readiness. The counterattack was swiftly carried out.

Russian paratroopers were sent in from Russia's Ivanovo, Moscow and Pskov airborne divisions. Tanks, armored vehicles and several thousand ground troops have been deployed. Russian air strikes have largely targeted military facilities inside Georgia including the Gori military base.

The Georgian military attack was repelled with a massive show of strength on the part of the Russian military.



In this image made from television, Russian military vehicles are seen moving towards the capital of South Ossetia, Tskhinvali, on Friday, Aug. 8, 2008. (AP / APTN)

Act of Provocation?

US-NATO military and intelligence planners invariably examine various "scenarios" of a proposed military operation-- i.e. in this case, a limited Georgian attack largely directed against civilian targets, with a view to inflicting civilian casualties.

The examination of scenarios is a routine practice. With limited military capabilities, a Georgian victory and occupation of Tskhinvali, was an impossibility from the outset. And this was known and understood to US-NATO military planners.

A humanitarian disaster rather than a military victory was an integral part of the scenario. The objective was to destroy the provincial capital, while also inflicting a significant loss of human life.

If the objective were to restore Georgian political control over the provincial government, the operation would have been undertaken in a very different fashion, with Special Forces occupying key public buildings, communications networks and provincial institutions, rather than waging an all out bombing raid on residential areas, hospitals, not to mention Tskhinvali's University.



Tskhinvali's University before the bombing

The Russian response was entirely predictable.

Georgia was "encouraged" by NATO and the US. Both Washington and NATO headquarters in Brussels were acutely aware of what would happen in the case of a Russian counterattack.

The question is: was this a deliberate provocation intended to trigger a Russian military response and suck the Russians into a broader military confrontation with Georgia (and allied forces) which could potentially escalate into an all out war?

Georgia has the third largest contingent of coalition forces in Iraq after the US and the UK, with some 2000 troops. According to reports, Georgian troops in Iraq are now being repatriated in US military planes, to fight Russian forces. (See [Debka.com](http://www.debka.com), August 10, 2008)

This US decision to repatriate Georgian servicemen suggests that Washington is intent upon an escalation of the

conflict, where Georgian troops are to be used as cannon fodder against a massive deployment of Russian forces.

US-NATO and Israel Involved in the Planning of the Attacks

In mid-July, Georgian and U.S. troops held a joint military exercise entitled "Immediate Response" involving respectively 1,200 US and 800 Georgian troops.

The announcement by the Georgian Ministry of Defense on July 12 stated that they US and Georgian troops were to "train for three weeks at the Vaziani military base" near the Georgian capital, Tbilisi. ([AP, July 15, 2008](#)). These exercises, which were completed barely a week before the August 7 attacks, were an obvious dress rehearsal of a military operation, which, in all likelihood, had been planned in close cooperation with the Pentagon.

The war on Southern Ossetia was not meant to be won, leading to the restoration of Georgian sovereignty over South Ossetia. It was intended to destabilize the region while also triggering a US-NATO confrontation with Russia.

On July 12, coinciding with the outset of the Georgia-US war games, the Russian Defense Ministry started its own military maneuvers in the North Caucasus region. The usual disclaimer by both Tbilisi and Moscow: the military exercises have "nothing to do" with the situation in South Ossetia. (*Ibid*)

Let us be under no illusions. This is not a civil war. The attacks are an integral part of the broader Middle East Central Asian war, including US-NATO-Israeli war preparations in relation to Iran.

The Role of Israeli Military Advisers

While NATO and US military advisers did not partake in the military operation per se, they were actively involved in the planning and logistics of the attacks. According to Israeli sources ([Debka.com, August 8, 2008](#)), the ground assault on August 7-8, using tanks and artillery was "aided by Israeli military advisers". Israel also supplied Georgia with Hermes-450 and Skylark unmanned aerial vehicles, which were used in the weeks leading up to the August 7 attacks.

Georgia has also acquired, according to a report in Rezonansi (August 6, in Georgian, BBC translation) "some powerful weapons through the upgrade of Su-25 planes and artillery systems in Israel". According to Haaretz (August 10, 2008), Israelis are active in military manufacturing and security consulting in Georgia.

Russian forces are now directly fighting a NATO-US trained Georgian army integrated by US and Israeli advisers. And Russian warplanes have attacked the military jet factory on the outskirts of Tbilisi, which produces the upgraded Su-25 fighter jet, with technical support from Israel. ([CTV.ca, August 10, 2008](#))

When viewed in the broader context of the Middle East war, the crisis in Southern Ossetia could lead to escalation, including a direct confrontation between Russian and NATO forces. If this were to occur, we would be facing the most serious crisis in US-Russian relations since the Cuban Missile crisis in October 1962.

Georgia: NATO-US Outpost

Georgia is part of a NATO military alliance (GUAM) signed in April 1999 at the very outset of the war on Yugoslavia. It also has a bilateral military cooperation agreement with the US. These underlying military agreements have served to protect Anglo-American oil interests in the Caspian sea basin as well as pipeline routes.

Both the US and NATO have a military presence in Georgia and are working closely with the Georgian Armed Forces. Since the signing of the 1999 GUAM agreement, Georgia has been the recipient of extensive US military aid.

Barely a few months ago, in early May, the Russian Ministry of Defense accused Washington, "claiming that [US as well as NATO and Israeli] military assistance to Georgia is destabilizing the region." ([Russia Claims Georgia in Arms Buildup, Wired News, May 19, 2008](#)). According to the Russian Defense Ministry

"Georgia has received 206 tanks, of which 175 units were supplied by NATO states, 186 armored vehicles (126 - from NATO) , 79 guns (67 - from NATO) , 25 helicopters (12 - from NATO) , 70 mortars, ten surface-to-air missile systems, eight Israeli-made unmanned aircraft, and other weapons. In addition, NATO countries have supplied four combat aircraft to Georgia. The Russian Defense Ministry said there were plans to deliver to Georgia 145 armored vehicles, 262 guns and mortars, 14 combat aircraft including four Mirazh-2000 destroyers, 25 combat helicopters, 15 American Black Hawk aircraft, six surface-to-air missile systems and other arms." ([Interfax News Agency, Moscow, in Russian, Aug 7, 2008](#))

NATO-US-Israeli assistance under formal military cooperation agreements involves a steady flow of advanced military equipment as well as training and consulting services.

According to US military sources (spokesman for US European Command), the US has more than 100 "military trainers" in Georgia. A Pentagon spokesman Bryan Whitman "said there were no plans to redeploy the estimated 130 US troops and civilian contractors, who he said were stationed in the area around Tbilisi" ([AFP, 9 August 2008](#)). In fact, US-NATO military presence in Georgia is on a larger scale to that acknowledged in official statements. The number of NATO personnel in Georgia acting as trainers and military advisers has not been

confirmed.

Although not officially a member of NATO, Georgia's military is full integrated into NATO procedures. In 2005, Georgian president proudly announced the inauguration of the first military base, which "fully meets NATO standards". Immediately following the inauguration of the Senakskaya base in west Georgia, Tblisi announced the opening of a second military base at Gori which would also "comply with NATO regulations in terms of military requirements as well as social conditions." (Ria Novosti, 26 May 2006).

The Gori base has been used to train Georgian troops dispatched to fight under US command in the Iraq war theater.

It is worth noting that under a March 31, 2006, agreement between Tblisi and Moscow, Russia's two Soviet-era military bases in Georgia - Akhalkalaki and Batumi have been closed down. (Ibid) The pullout at Batumi commenced in May of last year, 2007. The last remaining Russian troops left the Batumi military facility in early July 2008, barely a week before the commencement of the US-Georgia war games and barely a month prior to the attacks on South Ossetia.

The Israel Connection

Israel is now part of the Anglo-American military axis, which serves the interests of the Western oil giants in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Israel is a partner in the Baku-Tblisi- Ceyhan pipeline which brings oil and gas to the Eastern Mediterranean. More than 20 percent of Israeli oil is imported from Azerbaijan, of which a large share transits through the BTC pipeline. Controlled by British Petroleum, the BTC pipeline has dramatically changed the geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Caucasus:

"[The BTC pipeline] considerably changes the status of the region's countries and cements a new pro-West alliance. Having taken the pipeline to the Mediterranean, Washington has practically set up a new bloc with Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey and Israel, " (Komerzant, Moscow, 14 July 2006)



While the official reports state that the BTC pipeline will "channel oil to Western markets", what is rarely acknowledged is that part of the oil from the Caspian sea would be directly channeled towards Israel, via Georgia. In this regard, a Israeli-Turkish pipeline project has also been envisaged which would link Ceyhan to the Israeli port of Ashkelon and from there through Israel's main pipeline system, to the Red Sea.

The objective of Israel is not only to acquire Caspian sea oil for its own consumption needs but also to play a key role in re-exporting Caspian sea oil back to the Asian markets through the Red Sea port of Eilat. The strategic implications of this re-routing of Caspian sea oil are far-reaching. (For further details see Michel Chossudovsky, [The War on Lebanon and the Battle for Oil](#), Global Research, July 2006)

What is envisaged is to link the BTC pipeline to the [Trans-Israel Eilat-Ashkelon pipeline](#), also known as Israel's Tipline, from Ceyhan to the Israeli port of Ashkelon.

"Turkey and Israel are negotiating the construction of a multi-million-dollar energy and water project that will transport water, electricity, natural gas and oil by pipelines to Israel, with the oil to be sent onward from Israel to the Far East,

The new Turkish-Israeli proposal under discussion would see the transfer of water, electricity, natural gas and oil to Israel via four underwater pipelines.

<http://www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1145961328841&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull>

"Baku oil can be transported to Ashkelon via this new pipeline and to India and the Far East. [via the Red sea]"

"Ceyhan and the Mediterranean port of Ashkelon are situated only 400 km apart. Oil can be transported to the city in tankers or via specially constructed under-water pipeline. From Ashkelon the oil can be pumped through already existing pipeline to the port of Eilat at the Red Sea; and from there it can be transported to India and other Asian countries in tankers. (REGNUM)"

In this regard, Israel is slated to play a major strategic role in "protecting" the Eastern Mediterranean transport and pipeline corridors out of Ceyhan. Concurrently, it also involved in channeling military aid and training to both Georgia and Azerbaijan.

A far-reaching 1999 bilateral military cooperation agreement between Tbilisi and Tel Aviv was reached barely a month before the NATO sponsored GUUAM agreement. It was signed in Tbilisi by President Shevardnadze and Israel's Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. These various military cooperation arrangements are ultimately intended to undermine Russia's presence and influence in the Caucasus and Central Asia.

In a pro forma declaration, Tel Aviv committed itself, following bilateral discussions with Moscow, on August 5, 2008, to cut back military assistance to Georgia.

Russia's Response

In response to the attacks, Russian forces intervened with conventional ground troops. Tanks and armored vehicles were sent in. The Russian air force was also involved in aerial counter-attacks on Georgian military positions including the military base of Gori.

The Western media has portrayed the Russian as solely responsible for the deaths of civilians, yet at the same time the Western media has acknowledged (confirmed by the BBC) that most of the civilian casualties at the outset were the result of the Georgian ground and air attacks.

Based on Russian and Western sources, the initial death toll in South Ossetia was at least 1,400 (BBC) mostly civilians. "Georgian casualty figures ranged from 82 dead, including 37 civilians, to a figure of around 130 dead.... A Russian air strike on Gori, a Georgian town near South Ossetia, left 60 people dead, many of them civilians, Georgia says." (BBC, August 9, 2008). Russian sources place the number of civilian deaths on South Ossetia at 2000.

A process of escalation and confrontation between Russia and America is unfolding, reminiscent of the Cold War era.

Are we dealing with an act of provocation, with a view to triggering a broader conflict? Supported by media propaganda, the Western military alliance is intent on using this incident to confront Russia, as evidenced by recent NATO statements.

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