

1. INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AFTER THE CAUCASIAN CRISIS¹

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Events around the conflict in South Ossetia that happened in August 2008 are less serious by all standards than most clashes in the post Soviet space and Yugoslavia, let alone local wars in the Cold War period. However, the political fallout of the Caucasian crisis may exceed all crucial episodes after the break-up of the USSR, including the impact of NATO attack against Yugoslavia in 1999 and ‘the black September’ in the U.S.A. in 2001.

Consequences of the crisis have local, regional and global dimensions.

In addition, inadequacy of the existing international security organizations, which are called upon to resolve such conflicts, has become obvious. Notwithstanding the great number and possibly because of their diversity and complexity – all of them proved to be practically paralyzed: the U.N. Security Council, OSCE, NATO, RNC, EU (ESDP), CIS, and CSTO.

If the Southern Caucasus crisis is followed by a conflict in Ukraine, around the Crimea and Sevastopol, unfolding according to the same model, events may get out of control.

The post Soviet space is becoming one of the major arenas of international contradictions and risks to global security on the level with the Extended Middle East and South Asia.

Of special concern is the likelihood that the rivalry will not be limited to the economic and political spheres but escalate to military confrontation of leading powers and alliances in the conflict zones.

A new ‘Cold War’ could become a real possibility (with all the reservations made in regard to this parallel).

What are the goals, which Russia has succeeded in achieving during the conflict and at its conclusion?

First. Russia has been true to its commitments as the guarantor of the 1992 and 1994 Peace Accords, by giving protection to the tiny peoples of South Ossetia and Abkhazia against armed suppression, and, possibly, genocide practiced by the Tbilisi nationalist and adventurous regime.

Second. Moscow has demonstrated to all the world, that henceforth its words are no longer at variance with its deeds and that its warnings against unilateral arrogant handling of such issues as the Southern Caucasian conflict, the recognition of Kosovo, NATO expansion to the post Soviet space and the deployment of a third U.S. GMD site in Europe should have been taken seriously in the past and definitely must be considered earnestly in the future.

Third. Russia has shown that its increased economic power and domestic consolidation allow it to stand up as an independent and bold player in international politics capable of applying force and challenging the mightiest power of the world.

What has Russia failed to attain?

First. Russia has not succeeded in convincing the outside world, and not only the West, of the lofty aims of its military operation. (The operation was preceded by 16 years of fruitless negotiations on South Ossetia with Russian mediation; by mass distribution of Russian passports to residents of the enclave; by the restoration of economic relations with the unrecognized republics after the West’s unilateral action on Kosovo; by the calls of many Russian politicians, experts and TV showmen to recognize the independence of the enclaves prior to 7 August 2008. ‘The five-day war’ was quickly followed by the recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by Russia and the conclusion of the treaties providing for the establishment of military bases.)

Second. Moscow has failed to win wide support of the Russian version of the development of the conflict. (In this connection one should mention differing estimations of the timing of the Georgian army’s attack on Tskhinvali and of engagement of the Russian forces, conflicting versions of the number of victims from shelling and of operations in ‘security zones’ and air strikes against the infrastructure, and so on).

Moscow’s assessments of the dynamics of the events imply a continuous and logically sustainable sequence of its moves – from the engagement of troops up to the conclusion of the security treaties with the two republics. Outside Russia this assessment is precisely split in three parts. Now, when the initial wave of the anti-Russian isteria has passed, very few individuals (not only in Europe, but in the United States, as well) cast doubt on the judgment that overt battle actions were initiated by the Georgian side upsetting the

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status quo in South Ossetia and come to the conclusion that Russian military intervention in those conditions was entirely natural, predictable and even justified.

But the trespassing of the borders of South Ossetia by Russian troops; collateral damage of the strikes against the Georgian infrastructure (especially in Gory), the introduction of troops and the action in Abkhazia – these moves are perceived as ‘overreaction’. However, this too could be accepted following the logic of the military operation (especially in contrast to the immeasurably greater application of force by NATO against Yugoslavia in 1999).

But the recognition of the independence of two republics by Russia, which quickly followed the cessation of hostilities, is perceived as absolutely unacceptable, and not only in the West. This step is viewed as an infringement of the six-point ceasefire plan.

The recognition issue is the main target in the campaign criticizing Russia and the principle cause for the rift between Russia and foreign states (not only locally but on a regional and global scale). It is from this that Moscow’s intentions are retrospectively viewed. The Russian operation in the Southern Caucasus is not assessed as a step to rescue innocent local residents and peacekeepers. It is viewed as: (1) a ‘public flogging’ of the most disobedient and impertinent regime in the CIS; (2) a tough warning to the Ukrainian authorities in connection with their plans to secure NATO membership; (3) a demonstration to the West of Russia’s determination to uphold its interests, including by force; (4) ‘a public slap in the face’ of the United States and a reprisal for all Russia’s humiliations and concessions made in the last twenty years.

All these interpretations were implied by A. Lukashenko, the closest ally of Russia, during his visit to Moscow immediately after the cessation of hostilities when he noted that ‘Moscow acted quietly, calmly and thoroughly’.

The increase of tensions between Russia and the West, unmatched for the last twenty and, possibly, thirty years, has raised the specter of a new Cold War.

The Caucasian conflict is unprecedented in a number of ways:

- It is the first time since 1979 that Moscow resorted to military force against another state;
- It is the first time that Russia has used force against a state party to the CIS and questioned the principle of territorial integrity, as far as the states in the post Soviet space are concerned, and followed the Kosovo precedent for the OSCE space;
- Probably, for the first time in the history of bilateral relations, Russia militarily defeated a factual, if not official, ally of the U.S.A. and threw into a helpless rage ‘the sole superpower’. All the more so, since Washington, undoubtedly, incited Tbilisi’s military adventure (whether officially or nearly so), trained and equipped the Georgian army, made use of its assistance in Iraq and assured the Georgian elite of its patronage and support in securing NATO membership. In addition to this, the defeat of the Georgian army occurred during the American election campaign.

- Whatever may have been said officially, Russia has embarked at high profile military activity in the following two months, obviously challenging the USA and NATO and demonstrating its ability to counter any actual or hypothetical adversary. (In this connection one may mention the bomber Tu-160 flights to Venezuela; visits to this country of a group of naval ships led by the nuclear cruiser ‘Pyotr Velikiy’; military-staff exercises jointly with Belarus with the view of repulsing terrorists and air-space attacks; the flight-testing of the naval strategic missile ‘Bulava’).

This military demonstration hardly impresses the strategic expert community in the West but allows some circles there to start campaigns against the ‘Russian military challenge’.

The new ‘Cold war’, if the current tense situation leads to it, is likely to become to some extent more dangerous than the previous one.

- There is no approximate parity in the military capabilities between the Russian Federation and the USA. In a possible confrontation Russia would try to prove that it had become much stronger than in the 1990s while the USA would try to demonstrate that it has not become weaker.

- No zones of influence, tacitly recognized both by Russia and the West, exist any more. The post Soviet space, Latin America, the zone of the Persian Gulf may be affected by the rivalry escalating to stand-offs.

- The great powers lack sufficient control of their allies and partners, which are capable of drawing them into confrontation against their will.

At the same time, a number of important features conditioned by the multipolarity of the international system and increasing interdependence and globalization contrast strikingly with the ‘classical’ Cold War period. This was vividly demonstrated by the current global financial crisis which had begun in the USA and immediately affected Russia, Europe and Asia.

In addition, other factors emerged.

For the first time in history a serious military operation launched by Moscow has not led to NATO's cohesion. On the contrary, a deep rift occurred within NATO and the EU over the issue of reprisals.

The EU, for the first time in a similar situation, stood up both as an economic and political center of power, taking upon itself (through President Nicolas Sarkozy) an intermediary role between Russia and Georgia and indirectly – between Russia and the U.S.A.

Such international organizations as the CIS, CSTO, and SCO have not demonstrated unity, either. During the conflict they had kept silent and after the cessation of hostilities approved Russian peacekeeping efforts in a general way though they did not support the recognition of the independence of the two republics.

It is especially indicative since the Russian Federation has invoked Art. 51 of the U.N. Charter (regarding the right to self-defense), as well as Art. 4 of the CST (Tashkent Treaty), on mutual assistance in contrast to this, NATO in 2001 for the first time had invoked an analogous provision (Art. 5) of the North Atlantic Treaty after the 11 September events.

In the multipolar system the third parties had taken advantage offered by the crisis between Russia and the West and begun to raise stakes in their dealings with the RF and USA: China, India, Venezuela, Iran, DPRK, Turkey, the Islamic world, Russia's allies in the CIS, etc.

After the August crisis the main challenge can be formulated in the following way: Will the event remain an isolated episode in the post Soviet space and in relations between Russia and the West (which can be remedied quickly enough on a new basis of a more differential and serious attitude of NATO partners to Russian declared interests and on a more specific and realistic articulation of these interests by the Russian side)? Or should one view the events around South Ossetia as 'a first swallow', a new phase in the disintegration of the Soviet empire similar to the Yugoslavian model? Subsequently these developments may be followed by crises and armed conflicts involving reviews of the frontiers with Ukraine in respect of the Crimea, with Kazakhstan – in its Northern and Western provinces populated by Russian-speaking communities and in other states. Conflicts may flare up between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Northern Karabachos involving Turkey and Russia; between Tajikistan and Kirghizia over Fergana and fresh water.

Conflicts in the Southern Caucasus could quickly spread to the Northern Caucasus and transformed the whole region into a vast zone of instability and violence with most harmful direct consequences for Russia.

Such developments would have involved political, and, in the long term, probably, military intervention by countries 'of the distant abroad'. As an extreme case one cannot exclude an armed conflict between Russia and NATO (or between Russia and China) in the post Soviet area, in which Russia would most likely loose combat engagements with the use of conventional forces and might be forced to resort to nuclear means with unpredictable consequences for all the world.

Two basic points of view on this key subject are advanced in Russia. In the view of the country's leadership articulated by President D.A. Medvedev, 'a final full stop' should be put to what had occurred. He also indicated that cooperative relations must be built on a new basis.

An alternative thesis is colorfully expressed by some individuals in the State Duma, political circles, mass media and the public. They perceive the combat operation in South Ossetia as a prelude to the restoration of the Soviet Union or the Russian empire, and a process, which should transform Russia again into a superpower capable of challenging the West.

In the West similarly the 2008 August crisis has brought about two differing approaches to the developments in the post Soviet space directly related to Georgia and Ukraine.

Proponents of the first school of thought argue that NATO expansion to the CIS against Russia's wishes generates dangerous conflicts and should be postponed, while cooperation with Russia should be encouraged and developed.

Advocates of the second approach insist on accelerating such expansion in order to thwart 'Moscow's ambitions to subordinate by force disobedient neighboring countries' and resuscitate the traditional strategy of 'Russian imperialism'.

Several essential circumstances will determine which vision is likely to prevail.

First. Results of the investigation into the origin of the conflict, including, a more precise assessment of the number and causes of victims among the civilian population of South Ossetia (at the time of writing the figures vary from 500 up to 2100 killed).

Second. A future pattern of negotiations on security in the Southern Caucasus and Russia's attitude to them.

And, finally, a crucial role will be played by Moscow policies toward Ukraine, Crimea and Sevastopol, which will be assessed abroad from the point of view of the likelihood of the repetition of 'the Caucasian model'. In the circumstances one may suggest two interconnected directions for Moscow strategic course. First. There is a need as soon as possible to alter Ukrainian elite's perception of NATO as a guarantor of the Ukrainian territorial integrity and sovereignty, and of Russia as a threat. Second, it is necessary to highlight the factual value of Russia to the EU and the West, as a whole, through diverse channels of cooperation (the so called 'capitalization' of the relations).

Practical implementation of this twin-track strategy necessitates that Russia should at the highest level make the main focus on its role as a most important and influential guarantor of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of its CIS neighbors (provided they continue to hold on to their current neutral military-political status). It is especially important to accomplish this mission after the August events in order to strengthen the shaken unity of the CIS and CSTO.

Having effectively applied military force and won greater esteem, Russia needs to enhance its improved standing by prudent restraint, pursuing flexible and constructive diplomatic line toward the West.

The Russian Federation should activate its Afghan policy, in addition to humanitarian and economic assistance, by sending more Russian advisors and increasing military deliveries, taking due account of the growing difficulties and high NATO stakes in the Afghan operation.

At the same time it would be useful to involve Russian allies – party to the CSTO in the effort and by pursuing this line to facilitate the formal recognition of this organization by NATO. It is especially important to do this since Russia not less and even more than NATO is interested in the prevention of Taliban's return to power.

It would be imperative to activate negotiations (linked to an indefinite postponement of NATO expansion) on such subjects as U.S. missile defense facilities in Europe; reductions of nuclear arms; revival of the CFE Treaty.

In this context it should also be reasonable to pursue more consolidated policies towards Iran (through the U.N. Security Council) and on DPRK (at the Six-Party Talks).