Russia’s Strategy in the War Against Georgia  
Robert E. Hamilton  
August 14, 2008

Q1: What are Russia's objectives in this war?  
A1: Although Russia claimed to be protecting Russian citizens and peacekeepers in South Ossetia, it entered this war in pursuit of the following larger objectives:

- End Georgia’s presence in and sovereignty over both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Russia has actively supported and protected separatist movements in both these ethnically distinct border enclaves, which are part of Georgian territory.
- Damage Georgia’s military capability.
- Undermine Georgia’s chances of NATO accession by demonstrating to Europe and the United States both the “unreliability” of the Georgian government and the danger of extending NATO’s protection to Georgia.
- Punish the Georgian government for its refusal to give up its NATO aspirations.
- Punish the West for its support of Georgia and its recognition of the Kosovo Unilateral Declaration of Independence.
- Give pause to other post-Soviet states—especially Ukraine and Azerbaijan—with Euro-Atlantic leanings and NATO aspirations.

Russia’s larger political goal was to weaken or precipitate the collapse of Mikheil Saakashvili’s government. The Russian leaders have made clear that they will not negotiate with Saakashvili. President Dmitri Medvedev refused to take a call from Saakashvili during the height of the conflict and publicly called him a “lunatic,” while Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov openly called for the Georgian leader to resign. So it remains unclear how implementation of the six-point EU peace plan that both Presidents Medvedev and Saakashvili accepted will be finalized.

Russia’s strategic goal is for Georgia to renounce its intention to integrate into Euro-Atlantic structures, primarily NATO, and return to a Russian sphere of influence—giving Russia a voice in Georgian foreign and security policy. Achieving that outcome requires the departure of the Saakashvili government and its replacement by a more compliant, Russia-friendly regime.

Q2: How did this erupt from a frozen conflict to a military confrontation?  
A2: This war began after a long period of Russian actions designed to either provoke Georgia into conflict—the end result of which would be Russian control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia—or to result in a de facto annexation of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia if Georgia failed to respond to Russia’s actions. Some of these Russian actions were the following:

- Attacking Georgian territory in South Ossetia with attack aircraft in August 2007.
- Unilaterally withdrawing from military and economic sanctions against Abkhazia, allowing for transfer of armaments to the separatist military there in March 2008.
- Issuing instructions for Russian government authorities to deal directly with the separatist authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia instead of using the Georgia government as an interlocutor in April 2008.
- Shooting down an unarmed Georgian reconnaissance drone over Abkhazia in April 2008.
- Deploying additional Russian forces to Abkhazia and subsequently deploying railroad troops to repair the rail line from Russia into Abkhazia in April to May 2008.
- Overflying South Ossetia with multiple Russian fighter aircraft in July 2008.
Whether the direct cause of the war was a Georgian operation to retake Tskhinvali after the separatists there refused to respect a Georgian-declared ceasefire or a Georgian dash to secure Tskhinvali after Russian armored and mechanized forces entered South Ossetia from Russia may never be clear. If the former was the case, we can argue that the war resulted from a miscalculation by a Georgian government that was under considerable stress and in considerable confusion after a series of Russian or Russian-backed provocations. If the latter was the case, it is a clear and premeditated invasion of Georgia by Russia. We may never have an unambiguous picture of how the initial conflict unfolded.

Q3: Why did Russia announce a suspension of its operations in Georgia?

A3: Russia announced a suspension of its operations on August 12 because it substantially achieved all but one of its objectives. The only objective not achieved was the removal of the Saakashvili government, which Russia determined was not crucial to the success of a short, limited war against Georgia. There were reports that Russia continued to conduct military operations deep inside Georgia near the town of Gori, as well as in South Ossetia, on August 13. These operations may be intended to enable a security cordon around South Ossetia by destroying military and civilian infrastructure that could support Georgian forces in the region after Russian forces withdraw.

Another factor leading to Russia’s suspension of its operations was the imminent arrival of the French-Finnish delegation with a peace agreement that would return the situation to the status quo of August 6. Russia probably did not want to get drawn into negotiations—it would rather let the facts on the ground speak for themselves. While President Medvedev accepted the terms of the EU six-point peace plan, Russia is unlikely to reduce its forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to the levels authorized under the existing peacekeeping agreements (i.e., the levels of pre-August 6) without significant concessions from Georgia. Indeed, the accord calls for Georgian forces to return to their place of “permanent deployment,” which Russia may see as a provision to prevent the return of the Georgian peacekeeping contingent back into South Ossetia. While the sixth point of the EU peace plan originally called for international discussions on the future status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, President Saakashvili told President Nicolas Sarkozy of France that he could not accept negotiations over status, and the plan now calls for discussions on “security and stability” in the two breakaway regions. Russia’s continued military presence in the regions and its diplomatic strategy will be designed to ensure that both Abkhazia and South Ossetia are lost to Georgia for good, that Georgia’s NATO chances are significantly degraded, and that Russia’s power is respected both within and outside the post-Soviet space.

Critical Questions is produced by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), a private, tax-exempt institution focusing on international public policy issues. Its research is nonpartisan and nonproprietary. CSIS does not take specific policy positions. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the author(s). The assessments expressed here are his own and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army or the Department of Defense.

© 2008 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.