

The drawn-out blitzkrieg

By Avtandil Jokhadze

Who are the winners and the losers of the brief Russian-Georgian war in August? The Russian media are boasting about a “brilliant blitzkrieg”, but it is definitely too early yet for such blissful assessment: it is the achieved political goals that determine who are the winners and the losers in a war. From this viewpoint, Georgia’s situation does not look bad, while Russia’s position is obviously unenviable. The Russian government’s ill-thought-out actions attracted widespread international condemnation. Faced with western accusations Russia is now trying to justify its aggression against Georgia by pretty silly arguments. According to Russian politicians, personal animosity towards one man is the main reason of the problem. The Kremlin strategists make it clear, quite blatantly, that once Saakashvili is replaced with a pro-Russian man the problem will be over and the Russian stance will “sweeten”. But reducing a foreign relations problem, especially a war, to the matter of personal sympathy-antipathy is a futile tactic. It is widely known – at home and abroad – that the real reason of the war is completely different: as a matter of fact, the conflict was caused by NATO enlargement and, respectively, the Georgian nation’s aspiration to escape from the Russian “prison” and join the civilised world. Before the August blitzkrieg Georgia’s efforts to achieve this goal had never been successful. *But now Georgia is closer to Europe and NATO than it has been at any time in its history.*

Russian policy makers hoped that the war would split the camp of Georgia’s supporters, just as it happened at the NATO summit in Bucharest in March. This time, however, there were no serious disagreements between the EU countries and, besides, the EU and the USA actually spoke with one voice on the problem. The destruction of the Georgian infrastructure also did not produce the results the “smart” strategists had expected to achieve. Although the Russian bombs caused substantial material damage to Georgia, the country will rebuild quite quickly, thanks to western assistance. And Russia will hardly benefit from wreaking havoc in one of Georgia’s central regions, Kartli. It is also important that in military terms, too, Georgia is going to become even stronger than in it was before the war.

And still, apart from the unprecedented international support, the biggest positive outcome of the blitzkrieg for Georgia is that the problem of annexed territories is now viewed from a proper angle: Russia has lost its peacekeeping status obtained by heavy political trickery, while its aggression against Georgia has become the number-one topic in the global political agenda.

Defending Georgia is not only the matter of prestige for the West. Russia’s open aggression against a sovereign state is in fact a life-or-death challenge for the West, much more serious than the one posed to the USA by September 11-2001 terrorist attacks. The present world order is facing two main threats (Azar Gat - "The Return of Authoritarian Great Powers" - "Foreign Affairs", July/August 2007). The first is radical Islam, though it is a smaller evil, as the countries that represent the breeding ground for Islamic terrorism do not pose any serious military challenge to the western civilisation. A much bigger danger comes, and came in the past, from autocratic state systems with liberal economies such as, for instance, Kaiser’s or Hitler’s Germany, Japan prior to both world wars, and Russia on the eve of WWI. All these countries instigated global wars at some point in the past. After WWII these state systems transformed, but only to revive in the XXI century in the shape of Putin’s Russia and Communist China (though the latter does not have any aggressive attitudes towards its neighbours yet).

The invasion of Georgia was not the first Russian challenge to the civilised world. But the West used to turn a blind eye to its previous moves. After August 8, 2008, however, such a western tactic is already out of the question – Russia has crossed the Rubicon.

Despite a cease-fire agreement, the patriotic war continues in Georgia. The only way for Russia to reverse its failure to achieve desired results in the war is to deprive Georgia of its political victory. Moscow is trying to fulfil this goal by deceiving the Georgian people. Pro-Russian elements in Georgian media and public organisations are sowing the seeds of discontent in the society. Russia is anxious to capitalise on the growing public frustration and indignation caused by the bitter experiences of the war and turn the Georgian people against their own government. No doubt, its ultimate aim is to help pro-Russian forces to topple the government and seize power. Since November 2007 Russia has used all means at its disposal to this end. The August blitzkrieg had the same objective. If Moscow succeeds, Georgia's partners will have their hands tied and Georgia will find itself alone against Russia. If so, the country will really fall in great trouble. The anti-government propaganda campaign keeps running day and night. Fault-finding "experts" of public organisations, professional windbags of opposition parties and a hell of cynical intellectuals who have lost the sense of responsibility for their country are doing their best to re-ignite the simmering tempers that somehow abated after the well-known events of last November. At first they lashed out with their shrewd accusations in the backstage; now their loud voices are already heard in public – "Well, why did Saakashvili rushed into taking Tskhinvali as if he were a military genius like Hannibal?", etc. The subversive propaganda machine will fabricate even more lies against the government but what is striking is that their every argument and statement perfectly matches the Russian Duma's accusations against our government. Russian politicians and analysts are trying hard to prove, by fair means or foul, that it was the Georgian government that started the war in South Ossetia. But their cheating efforts are futile and doomed to fail.

It is common knowledge that *mobilisation is already a war*. Russian troops not only amassed at Georgia's borders (and even carried out a military exercise codenamed "Peace enforcement in the Caucasus") but crossed the border and took positions on the occupied territories long before August 8. It is exactly what the political dictionary defines as "aggression" – illegal intrusion of one country's armed forces into the territory of another sovereign state.

Even on the assumption that the party that fired the first shots should bear the responsibility for starting the war, Georgia is in no way to blame. The Georgian army began the fighting only after three days of shelling of Georgian villages by Ossetian and Russian forces. Soon afterwards Georgia declared a unilateral cease-fire, but Ossetian and Russian troops intensified artillery bombardment, while hundreds of Russian tanks and armoured vehicles poured into Georgia through the Roki Tunnel.

Contrary to the pacifists' arguments, the Georgian army could not remain passive in the face of the joint assault by Ossetian separatists and Russian troops. To test the Georgian government's patience, the separatists did not fire from Tskhinvali. Their plan was very simple: the invading army would force residents of the villages along the administrative border to flee (if the Georgian troops had not returned fire, local residents would have had no other option but to leave) and use them as a human shield to advance on Tbilisi. By turning thousands of people refugees, the occupants also hoped to spark civil unrest across the country. Under such circumstances, it would have been very easy to overthrow the government. But what an army is needed for? Do pacifist demagogues think that the army should act only after an enemy is at the government building's door? Had the invaders targeted homes and families of these unscrupulous faultfinders, I am sure their pacifist ideas would have vanished without trace at once.

Apart from the Kodori Gorge, the Russian military planned to invade the neighbouring densely populated Swaneti. The Georgian troops that were defending this vitally important Georgian province (they were trying to repel the Russian attack by artillery fire) would have been forced to fight on two fronts and, as a result, nothing would have prevented the Russian army's thrust from Roki-Tskhinvali to the capital and the eventual fall of the government. Such an outcome would have dealt a disastrous and practically lethal blow to the Georgian nation – the country would have simply collapsed. Russia's success in establishing a puppet government in Tbilisi would have rendered political or any other kind of intervention of the West useless. To buy time – several hours or days – for the huge and cumbersome international mechanisms to start up, Georgian governmental troops needed to mount strong defences on the Gori-Tbilisi direction. There was only one right way to achieve this goal: Georgian army units were re-deployed from western Georgia to the east of the country, leaving behind a minimal number of troops to check the Russian assault, and took defensive positions on the Gori-Tbilisi road as close to Tskhinvali as possible. Launching a surprise attack at the aggressor's strongholds in Tskhinvali was the only right decision. And it was great success that Georgian troops managed to expel the enemy and take the town. But it would have been a mistake for the Georgian army to continue its advance towards Java and Liakhvi Gorge, since concentration of large forces in a narrow gorge is very risky and may lead to entrapment. Besides, the Russians had already reinforced their positions in the gorge by that time. That is why Georgia decided to use long-range artillery to hit Russian forces there.

The Georgian army's success led Russia to concentrate its attention, and its troops, on the Tskhinvali direction. For some time the Georgian army was able to withstand the Russian assault but it was soon forced to fall back, though it was, on the whole, an organised retreat, not a panicked escape and the main goal – to buy time – was achieved.

There were few illusions that the Georgian army would be able to defeat the incoming Russian troops. The military theory tells that in the face of the overwhelming odds the main objective is to survive and avert losing the war rather than try to destroy the enemy completely. The main goal is to evade defeat. And it was achieved successfully. In such cases, according to the Georgian national security doctrine, the main mission of the Georgian armed forces is to deter an invading army until allies come to rescue.

It must be noted that despite significant superiority in troop numbers and military hardware, the Russian army suffered much heavier losses than the Georgian military did. It was not only because the attacker is usually more vulnerable, while the defender, lying in ambush and entrenched, is more secure. It was the peaceful civilian Georgian population, not pre-reinforced positions of the Georgian army, that became the first target of the joint Russian-Ossetian assault. As the Georgian military command decided to set up the forward defence line as far from Tbilisi as possible, on the outskirts of Tskhinvali, the Georgian army had to begin its counter-offensive right where the enemy had built up a strong defence system. Afterwards, when additional Russian troops entered South Ossetia through the Roki Tunnel, the Georgian forces simply had no time to reinforce their positions or even dig more trenches. However, even though the Georgian military had no advantage in the conflict, Russian troops sustained more casualties and lost more military equipment (after all, they lost up to 20 aircraft, including a strategic bomber). The war demonstrated that, by and large, the Georgian armed forces are better trained and organised than the Russian army – it is a principally important aspect.

Although it was the West that saved the country from total defeat, courage and outstanding military skills of the Georgian servicemen are undisputed. Being unable to resist an enemy without allies' assistance is not a weakness in a war. But having no allies at all is a serious

weakness indeed. Russia has never been so isolated and estranged as it is now. If the current balance of forces remains unchanged, Russia will be unable to endure the international pressure and will have to pull out its forces from the occupied territories.

The chess game has been adjourned with Georgia's clear advantage. The only thing that can reverse the outcome of the patriotic war is the Georgian society's, not the government's, mistake. We must understand that despite all the above-described aspects, the enemy is still too strong. Under no circumstances the Georgian society should turn its bitterness and resentment caused by the war against the government. Some may argue that the government's responsibility is to ensure security of its citizens at any cost, even through backstage bargaining with an enemy. But enemies are different. There is no point in bargaining with Russia. The Russian State is not the Georgian government's enemy. It is the entire Georgian society's foe. Respectively, this war is not only the government's business. It is our, the Georgian people's war.