

MILITARY AND POLITICAL DENOUEMENT OF THE FIVE-DAY WAR

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The article covers the basic outcome of the “Five-day War”, August 2008, between Russia and Georgia, and the emerging political situation in the South Caucasus region. Analysis is made of their impact on the political processes within the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone including those relating to the efforts to spur the policies of Russia and Turkey in the post-war South Caucasus, as well as to the regional security and conflict resolution. A separate scrutiny is given in the article to the military outcome of the “Five-day war” with a reference to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

Introduction

Late at night on August 7, 2008, the Georgian army started a massive shelling of Tskhinvali, Capital of South Ossetia, and other Ossetian population centres along the entire zone of conflict, using multiple rocket launchers, heavy artillery and mortars [1]. Strikes by the Georgian Army were also directed at outposts and barracks of the Russian and North-Ossetian peace keepers. In early morning on August 8, the Georgian troops passed to the offensive on Tskhinvali, as well as to the west Znaur Region, and further to the north-west, towards the Zarsk road as well as Dzava and the Dzava Gorge. The Georgian offensive was effected by the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th Infantry Brigades, as well as a number of sub-units of 1st and 5th Infantry Brigades, a detached tank battalion, an artillery brigade, special forces units of Georgia’s Ministry of Defence and of the Interior. Air support to the advancing Georgian troops was provided by SU-25 attack aircraft and the attack helicopters Mi-24 of the Georgian Air Force. That was how the Five-day War started in South Ossetia...

The outcome of combat activities in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Georgia along with the subsequent political developments in the zone of the conflict is widely known. The direct involvement of the Russian Army into the military actions, opening of the second front in Abkhazia, carrying out a “inverse blitzkrieg” in the form of the Russian Army breaking into Georgian territory, a sudden drop in

morality and a subsequent retreat by the Georgian troops have received a wide coverage by the world media, estimations and statements by the experts, politicians, International organizations and world leaders. And although basically the time has yet to come for a detailed review of all military and political outcomes of the Five-day war, quite a few initial lessons can still be drawn from what happened for the South Caucasus region.

1. New Regional Status-quo

It is to be noted quite certainly that the situation in the region in the wake of the Five-day war has created potentials and perspectives, as well as new threats and challenges to the regional security and sustainable development. Indeed, this type of critical situations, military conflicts and force-majeure mostly inflate the common stakes in the regional geopolitical games, wherein the potential losses and gains of the parties are significantly on the rise. In this regard the total configuration and the geopolitical breakup of the internal and external actors in the region are reminiscent of the situation in South Caucasus in the early 1990s.

It is very likely that within the medium-term geopolitical perspective in South Caucasus there is an emerging situation when the weakened and certainly unstable and defeated Georgia will try, not without success, to obtain even more political and economic aid by the West; Azerbaijan will be in confusion projecting the consequences of the August military actions upon the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, being aware of the real threat to the country's oil network and having revived the vision of the Russian threat, while Armenia will seek its place in the new situation, trying to gain advantage by making use of the regional political processes.

On the other hand, the region has seen a situational boosting of the image of Russia, which is still somewhat euphoric. Although in the short- and medium-term outlook Russia has consolidated its status and presence in South Caucasus, suffice it to remind of its Georgian campaign, recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence and the manifestly deployed Russian military bases in those former Georgian autonomies. Nonetheless, in the long-range aspect the deterioration of the relations with the West caused by the events of August 2008 and recreating the new aggressive image of Moscow in Western political mind will still yield new serious problems while carrying out the Russian policies in South Caucasus. Russia has effectively lost its ability to exert any political influence on Georgia, thus effectively restricting its hold of South Caucasus to the areas of South Ossetia and Abkhazia (having been secured therein for indefinite period of time), as well as to the bridgeheads of Armenia

and Azerbaijan. To continue an active policy in South Caucasus, Moscow can only use its clout with Yerevan and Baku, also with regard to the issue of Nagorno-Karabakh, which has been linking those conflicting countries for over 20 years.

Perhaps by virtue of realizing this fact the Russian leadership is trying to initiate a process around the peaceful settlement of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict (like a semblance of its efficient resolution with Moscow mediation). The aim of this Russian initiative is an attempt to play down in the West the negative aftermath of the Georgian war and of recognizing by Moscow the South Ossetian and Abkhazian independence. However, those Russian initiatives on Nagorno-Karabakh will hardly be successful not only because of the internal resistance by the conflicting parties, but also through fully anticipated opposition to those Russian plans on the part of the US and the EU. It can be assumed that the efficiency of the Russian initiative on Karabakh conflict settlement has been clearly demonstrated by the outcome of the Azerbaijan-Armenia summit meeting in suburban Moscow on November 2, 2008 attended by the president of the RF Medvedev. In a certain sense, the mentioned actions by Moscow look like a mirror reflection of the previous attempts by Washington to settle the Karabakh conflict prior to winter-summer 2006 (those attempts peaked while Presidents R. Kocharyan and I. Aliev were in Rambouillet and Bucharest). It is however not the American or American-European initiatives this time that would encounter the Russian opposition, but rather the US, NATO and the European structures did all they could to wreck all attempts by the Russian party to make the conflicting sides endorse the agreement, according to which (by the ambitious Kremlin arrangement) the role of peace keepers separating the Azeri, Armenian and Nagorno-Karabakh parties will be awarded to the Russian troops.

Thus, the Kremlin activity in Nagorno-Karabakh conflict settlement has actually pursued quite a pragmatic, though restricted aim of generating a semblance of constructive approach by Russia, which is capable of not only winning wars in post-Soviet areas against the dwarf countries (as against Georgia in August 2008), but it is also able to control the regional ethnopolitical conflicts, like the one around Nagorno-Karabakh or Transdnistria. It seems that now Moscow will think that the "Three-Presidents Declaration" (the first document jointly endorsed by the Armenian and Azerbaijani leaders on Karabakh after the 1994 armistice) has resolved that task, while S. Sargsyan and I. Aliev have managed to play into D. Medvedev's hand with regard to their relevant reasoning.

The role and place of the EU were manifested in a sustainable way in the August crisis around South Ossetia: Brussels is striving to occupy its niche in regional

policies, looking for new formats of institutionalizing its presence in South Caucasus. Actually, placing the European observers in the buffer zones around the boundaries of South Ossetia and Abkhazia was the first serious original initiative by the European Union on projecting its political and partly military potential to implementing the peace-keeping operations beyond the domestic areas with no direct support from the US or NATO. However there is no doubt that coordinating the positions of the EU on South Caucasus with the US and NATO is proceeding in a very condensed environment.

Despite the augmenting anti-Russian rhetoric in the West we can see a sharp decline in the probability of Georgia being granted the MAP (NATO's Membership Plan) in December 2008. Despite all optimistic statements by the Georgian officials, as well as the outcome of the EU-sponsored Conference of donor countries in October 2008, which was quite successful for Tbilisi and afforded the financial aid to the war-stricken Georgia, it is clear that a number of key European members of NATO strongly oppose the speedy admittance of Georgia (as well as Ukraine) to NATO.

Turkey, under changed circumstances, is also trying to play its regional game, offering a new initiative on stabilizing South Caucasus. Despite the regional initiative put forward by Ankara being rather poorly evaluated by the political scientists, it may be, perhaps, one of those frequent cases when the political process is more essential than its predicted outcome. Anyway, the Turkish initiative deserves a detailed scrutiny.

It is not quite clear against this background, how much has the role of the US changed in the region, whether we are looking at a situational drop of the US status following the events in Georgia, and everything will resume its normal course, or else what happened is a start of deeper processes that were to modify the place of South Caucasus in the American policies. Anyway, there is a consensus in the expert community that retaliation in South Caucasus by Washington will closely follow the first steps of the new American administration under Barak Obama. Nevertheless, it will depend not so much on the new persons in the Democratic administration who will take up the regional problems in South Caucasus but rather upon the global financial, economic and political developments, whether the US activities in South Caucasus will go on the increase, or if the change of general political priorities will suppress the significance of this region in Washington planning. It is however hard to believe that against the background of the domestic economic issues, the global financial crisis and B. Obama's commitment to produce serious changes within the United States proper, South Caucasus, in the midst of many relevant world problems,

will be of such a great significance for the new American administration.

One of the most crucial regional outcomes of the August conflict was a significant rise in Georgia's risk assessment as a country of transit communications, a passage way for energy and transport, particularly with regard to the precedent of the Russian military invasion of Georgia, to capturing and establishing control over strategic communications in Georgia's population centres, like the port of Poti, the cities Gori, Senaki and Khashuri. The image of Georgia has suffered an unrecoverable blow not only as the "Beacon of Democracy" in the region, but all in all as a normal predictable country with an efficient system of governance.

At differing intervals during the hostilities nearly all large-scale international projects involved in energy and communication passing over the Georgian territory ceased operation in the zone of conflict. There was a stoppage of the gas pipeline "Baku – Tbilisi – Ceyhan" and "Baku – Supsa", the gas pipeline "Baku – Tbilisi – Erzurum, there was no oil transport on the "Baku – Batumi" railroad, there was an indefinite suspension of the "Kars – Akhalkalaki" railroad construction. Kazakhstan resolved to backtrack on the construction of a large refinery in Batum. As a result, in August 2008 the State Oil Company of Azerbaijan was unable to use any one of those transportation routes to export oil from the country during that month. In its turn, in August 2008, the Azerbaijan International Operating Company (AIOC) had to use only the "Baku – Novorossiysk" oil pipeline to redirect all export oil flows to the Russian route [2].

The situation around Georgia and the standby time of the Caspian oil and gas pipelines running across this country also had a significant impact upon the general finance and economic situation in Azerbaijan [3]. With the regard to Baku's dependence on oil and gas export, the August events had a negative impact not only upon the fulfilment of state budget for 2008, but also introduced substantial corrections into developing the country's next year budget. Moreover, the aggravation of the world financial crisis and the plummeting oil prices coincidental in time with termination of hostilities in Georgia, can produce still more serious problems for Azerbaijan being already on the oil needle not only in the economic, but also in political and social domains, and it will also negatively tell on the processes of further Islamization of the Azerbaijani society [4].

Of all major political consequences for the immediate participants of the military actions by Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Russia, note is to be made of a complete liquidation of the Georgian-populated enclaves in South Ossetia (Tamarsheeni, Kekhvi, Eredvi), deportation of the local Georgian population and establishing

control of Tskhinvali over the whole territory of the South-Ossetian Autonomous District, as well as over Akhalskgori (former Leningorski) district, which, since 1992, had actually been controlled by the Georgian administration¹.

In Abkhazia the establishment of complete control by Abkhazian authorities over the complete territory of the former Abkhazian Autonomous Republic following the Russian-supported seizure by the Abkhazian troops of the Kodori gorge (the so-called Upper Abkhazia) was the major aftermath of rapid military action.

Thereby, having obtained the actual ethnic uniformity, South Ossetia (even under the complete Russian political control) has currently become a real ethno-political factor in the region of South Caucasus, which significantly boosted the profile of its physical security. Abkhazia, which established control over Kodori Gorge, in its turn, has resolved the problems of its autonomous economic and political development.

Quite naturally, the existing situation of the actual ethnic demarcation in South Ossetia in the foreseeable future will obstruct any attempts by the Georgian party to achieve a pro-Georgian development in South Ossetia, nonetheless in Abkhazia. Possibly, after some rehabilitation Tbilisi will make another try to revitalize the projects of “the Alternative Governments of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Exile”, however they will now achieve a genuine exile, being outside of all previous administrative borders of those former Georgian autonomies.

And finally, the recognition of independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia on August 26, 2008, along with the decision of Moscow to deploy the Russian military bases on the territories of those Republics and an actual fixation of the current situation by implementing the two versions of the political document «Six Items by Medvedev – Sarkosi» are the events of tremendous political importance far beyond the regional scale.

2. Turkish Initiative on South Caucasus

Quite naturally, not only the countries of South Caucasus, but also other regional and transregional forces will try to reap gain from the new status-quo, which emerged in the region, trying to exploit the chances that offered themselves through the military defeat of Georgia, through deterioration of relations between Russia and the West, and other attending regional processes.

¹ According to the the International Crisis Group, the UNHCR (United Nation High Commissioner on Refugees) showed the number of Georgian refugees deported from South Ossetia in August 2008 at ca. 15 000. See in Detail: Russia against Georgia: aftermath// European Report # 195, International Crisis Group, Tbilisi - Brussels, 22.08.2008. S. 4.

Among other things this situation yielded a new Turkish political initiative, or the so-called “Caucasus Platform”, presented for the first time by R. Erdogan, Prime-Minister of Turkey, while visiting Moscow on August 12, 2008. Although the Ankara initiative has been developed by the Turkish party as a general outline before the hostilities in South Ossetia, nevertheless the «Five-day war» has created a favourable regional background for promoting that initiative. The substance per se of that initiative, formally aiming at establishing peace and stability in the Caucasus region is hardly generally known, and actually resembles all previous initiatives on a certain establishment of regional stability in the Caucasus, like “The Caucasian Home” of the 1990s, or the European initiative like the Pact of Stability in the early 2000s.

There is another thing to be noted here: by putting forward this initiative, Turkey (by approbation from Moscow) was trying to start its own game in the Caucasus, to make use of the slackened US positions in the Caucasus, though temporary but tangible, following the Five-day war. In the meantime, while the EU response to the Turkish initiative was rather positive in the lump, Washington was initially more surprised than worried. Although later on Ankara managed to somewhat soften Washington’s attitude to its initiative, perhaps by indicating that a complete displacement of the US from the region had not been intended, there can however be no doubt that both Turkey and Russia tried hard to make use of the period of a certain relaxation of the American positions in South Caucasus and play both ends against the middle.

In their turn, both Armenia and Azerbaijan supported the Turkish initiative in its entirety, while Georgia showed more apprehension. Tbilisi’s stand was quite clear, since the Turkish initiative assumes a deep involvement of Russia, which in the context of the recent Russian-Georgian war is unacceptable for Georgia. On the other hand, Tbilisi would be very unwilling to go into some regional process wherefrom the US would be deliberately excluded.

Anyway, initially in mid-August 2008, in Baku as well the Turkish initiative was perceived with apprehension, particularly in anticipation of Turkish President A. Gul’s visit to Yerevan. There was a nervous apprehension in Azerbaijan that this initiative by Turkey on indicating the general lines of regional cooperation can jeopardize the idea of extending the campaign of economic and communicational “strangulation” of Armenia through its blockade both by Azerbaijan and Turkey. In fact, this idea has been a corner stone of Azerbaijan’s policies since the 1990s in all the years of its confrontation with Yerevan and Stepanakert [5]. Despite the fact that in all this time the mentioned concept has not substantiated its efficiency, being

countered by a heavy double-figure economic growth in Armenia within the last few years under the “quasi-blockade” by Turkey and Azerbaijan though in Baku until recently it was highly credited. Therefore, as early as mid-August 2008, the very news of the forthcoming visit to Armenia by President of Turkey has been causing negative feelings in the Azerbaijan information and political fields, since it was by the same token busting the very concept of effectiveness at all the levels of whatever open Turkish involvement into the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict on the side of Baku. However, visits by Turkish high officials to Baku and bilateral consultations with their Azerbaijani counterparts have somewhat changed and appeased the approaches by the Azerbaijan leadership. Moreover, perhaps the Azerbaijani leadership might even have a flash of hope by lobbying Ankara to achieve useful developments in Nagorno-Karabakh problem just within the new regional initiative by Turkey.

For Armenia the Turkey’s August initiative was originally acceptable as a whole, particularly within the context of the visit to Yerevan by A. Gul, the Turkish President, planned on September 6, 2008. The Armenian-Turkish relations had started to show positive trends prior to the August hostilities in South Ossetia (suffice it to remember the invitation of the President of Armenia S. Sargsyan sounded as early as May 2008, addressed to his Turkish counterpart, to visit Yerevan that very much enlivened the Armenian-Turkish political dialogue). Nevertheless, the communicational risks of Georgia manifested by this war have even more spurred the interest by Ankara, of all others, to the capabilities of opening the border with Armenia and to using its territory as an alternative transport and even energy passage for Turkey. In the context of the Five-day war results and suspension of all communicational and energy projects passing through Georgia, the Turkish experts and politicians, even as high as Ali Babajan, the Turkey’s Minister of Foreign Affairs, started to utter opinions that “Armenia could have become an alternative route for the gas pipeline going to the West from the Caspian through Georgia, which has become undependable after the Russian intervention” [6]. In all, it can be stated that the war in South Ossetia has significantly activated, or rather, resuscitated the Caucasian policies of Turkey. The resulting unprecedented visit by A. Gul, the President of Turkey, to Yerevan on September 6, 2008, and the entire outlook of adjusting the Armenian-Turkish relations have created prospects of a completely new geopolitical situation in the entire region of South Caucasus. At the same time, in the course of events in August-September 2008 it was confirmed that within the general format of the Armenian-Turkish relations the significance of the Nagorno-Karabakh agenda is purely instrumental ceding in relevance to the problem of the Genocide recognition,

or of adjusting normal relations with Armenia within the context of Turkish ambitions to the membership of the European Union.

At the same time, it is possible that in a certain sense the aforementioned Turkish initiative may contain certain risks and threats for Armenia. Although the initiative had been coordinated by Yerevan with Moscow (and then favourably nodded to in Washington and Brussels), the Armenian party has some misgivings that Turkey and Russia may develop underhand agreements on some regional projects, that may jeopardize Armenia's interests. All the more so that there are direct historical parallels, like the Russian-Turkish agreements in the 1920s against Armenia and the notorious Moscow agreement of March 16, 1921 between the Bolshevik Russia and the Kemalist Turkey. The current political context in the region is, however, quite different: both Turkey and Russia, while tactically supporting the joint political initiatives in South Caucasus, directed against Washington, still remain rival allies, mutually apprehensive of each other's consolidation in the region. As noted by some Russian experts, «the new state of affairs is making Ankara seek the modes of coexistence with Russia against the background of its aspiration for the role of a powerful regional leader» [7]. However, Russia, too, judging by some appearances, displays some tacit apprehension that a speedy Turkish-Armenian thawing caused by successful bilateral talks may create prerequisites for a decreased Russian military and political influence in Armenia.

As previously noted, the Turkish initiative had initially contained elements of displacing the US and partly the EU from the specific political processes in the Caucasus. In particular, that concerned the efforts to find ways of replacing the format of the OSCE on Karabakh by some trilateral (Armenia, Turkey, Azerbaijan) or a quadrilateral (with Moscow) negotiating mechanism. However, this initial sounding by Ankara has come to be quite superficial, since the tendencies or threatening of a speedy collapse of the Minsk Group is not to be any more expected, particularly after endorsing the "Three-presidents declaration" on November 2, the text of which distinctly confirmed the format of the Minsk Group co-chairmanship.

It should however be particularly noted that the Turkish initiative per se does not possess real perspectives for its successful and long-time realization because of the weakness of its basic stimulating effort to leave Washington and partly Brussels out of the framework of the regional processes. Despite the situational relaxation of the US and the EU status in the region, it does not mean at all that a complete displacement of Washington and Brussels from the regional politics in South Caucasus is included in the long-time outlook. That seems to be quite well understood in Ankara,

but for them the significance of this initiative is in providing an opportunity for some shift to their advantage in the regional balance of South Caucasus. Similar results, though in some other context, can also be yielded by Turkey's intentions to sideline Iran as well from the political processes in South Caucasus.

As to the capability to achieve the claimed goals of the Turkish initiative, it seems to enjoy little credit even in Turkey. "The Caucasian Platform" is only Ankara's political resource within quite a short period of time, wherein the political initiative itself is much more important than its declared result.

3. Changing Political Background around the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Another important result of the new geopolitical situation or even of the new regional status quo in South Caucasus was the change of the general political and psychological background around the Karabakh conflict. The perception of ongoing processes around the Karabakh settlement has been significantly updated inside the political elites and communities of the conflicting parties. That has been primarily manifested by considerably downgrading the probability of initiating combat activities in Karabakh by Azerbaijan and the awareness of this fact by that country's political elite. This situation has been greatly stipulated by the Azerbaijani politicians and experts projecting the failed military operation upon retrieving South Ossetia by Georgia as the former host country.

Quite naturally, in the morning of August 8, 2008, many in Azerbaijan welcomed the news of the Georgian army having started the offensive on Tskhinvali, seeing it as a logical example to follow suite in Nagorno-Karabakh. In all, it is to be recognized that an important element of the so-called "Karabakh strategy" by Azerbaijan has for a long time been an open public threat to re-start the hostilities in the zone of conflict. The power blackmail manifested itself both in statements by the ruling and political figures of Azerbaijan at different levels, and in the feelings and assessments of most of Azerbaijani elite and general public. The mentioned policies of Azerbaijan also used to be additionally argued in the eyes of its leadership and political elite by overextended anticipations of the role of the oil factor and the intention to intrude upon Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh an economically exhausting spiral of arms race.

Therefore it was natural that the field of information and propaganda of Azerbaijan nurtured the peak of those feelings exactly on August 8-9, 2008, when the whole Azerbaijani information field was filled up with reports and commentaries of the

Baku experts, political scientists and even the official representatives of the Azerbaijani MFA, actively supporting the action by the Georgian leadership, putting up speculations on Moscow's inability to make whatever steps against M. Saakashvili and offering countless analogies to "the now close similar operation" to be triggered by Azerbaijan, to regain Karabakh [8]. And then, in a few more days, all that noise subsided.

For nearly two weeks, since the afternoon of August 8, when it became clear that Russia did levy war, not a single Azerbaijani official has come forward with a statement or commentaries with regard to the military action in Georgia. Even experts and political scientists kept mum or were confined to descriptive generalizations following the shocking outcome of the five-day war.

The August "inverse Blitzkrieg" and the unexpectedly rapid defeat of the former host nation's or Georgia's army, that had decided to re-capture the break-away autonomy – South Ossetia, and later, perhaps, Abkhazia, produced a very clear and predictable impression on Baku. The analogies for Azerbaijani political elite, that suggested themselves, were quite transparent. The failure of the very possibility of the "Ukrainian precedent" in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, the clear evidence of a complete loss by Georgia in a medium-range perspective of even a glimpse of hope for re-establishing control over Sukhum and Tskhinvali, the legal recognition of independence for those former Soviet autonomies even though by only a single powerful International actor, the multiple casualties and the virtual moral default of the Georgian army, the risk of losing of power in the country by the team of M. Saakashvili – all those instances could hardly become a desirable goal for the government of Ilkham Aliev in case the military operations were to recommence in the zone of Karabakh conflict.

The fact that ongoing power blackmail to Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh could unexpectedly lead to hazardous effects for Azerbaijan itself, in case of renewed military action, seems to have also been appreciated in Baku as well. Those implications have produced radical changes of the rhetoric by the Azerbaijani leaders with regard to the outlook for the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict since the late August 2008: a certain "constructability" and references to the need for the parties to continue the peaceful negotiating process came about, there were no more mandatory references to a quick and unavoidable rehabilitation by Azerbaijan of the "constitutional order" in Karabakh by all means, etc.

Though, a rapid growth within the last two months of anti-Western feelings among the Azerbaijani political elite and a further escalation of the long-present tendency for the country's Islamization, as well as a rise of the pro-Russian orientation

among parts of Azerbaijan's population are to be added here. Those are however expenses or rather results of implementing the "Azerbaijani complementarity", because being friendly with Russia, de-facto victorious in a regional war (perhaps even self-surprisingly), is nicer and safer than pushing forward against it in South Caucasus along with the US and the European countries that have not yet recovered after the August events. It was fully demonstrated by the results of the US Vice-President R. Chainey blitz-visit to Baku, not too fortunate for the American party in early September 2008 [9]. This consideration was even further confirmed by Ilkham Aliev's signature endorsing the "Three Presidents' Declaration" on November 2, 2008, brokered by Moscow and actually suggesting a declaratory abandonment by the official Baku of the attempts to resolve the Karabakh conflict through military means.

Anyway, it is not only the awareness of the Russian threat that can explain this lurch in Azerbaijan's political orientation. Under the new conditions Baku finds itself in a wittingly disadvantageous situation as the initiator of the renewed military action in Karabakh. Among the politicians and experts dealing with the problems of regional policies and security of South Caucasus awareness has existed for a long time that under any external circumstances Armenia will always be more pro-Western than Azerbaijan, while Moscow will see it as a regional partner and an ally far closer than Azerbaijan. By the same token, under any geopolitical disposition, the hypothetical commencement of military operation against Karabakh and Armenia would be perceived in the West with greater disappointment than a similar effort by Georgia in South Ossetia, while support by Moscow in fighting against its only military and political ally in South Caucasus and member of the CSTO will be denied to Azerbaijan. Moreover, Baku would never be able to present the situation in the conflict zone to the West as a direct collision of the pro-Russian Armenia and the pro-Western Azerbaijan. The Western political perception of Nagorno-Karabakh is very much unlike the vision of Abkhazia or, all the more so, of South Ossetia for the following reasons: absence of whatever peace-keeping forces or military bases of third countries, the US Congress granting Stepanakert direct financial aid, and active contacts of the Karabakh authorities and community with many European structures and entities, etc.

Meanwhile, the Yerevan-conducted official policy of complementarity during the 17 years of Independence has resulted in real allied relations with Russia and the format the CSTO against the background of the close level of political contacts with the US and the European countries. In its turn, Russia has quite specific commitments to Armenia in the security domain. Though of course, the fact of Armenia's

membership in the CSTO does not mean that Yerevan should hope that all members of that military political organization will support it in case of Azerbaijani aggression. The Kazakh Navy can hardly be imagined at the shores of Apsheron, or the Tajik infantry fighting on the side of Karabakh. However, the situation whereby the bilateral format of the Russian-Armenian military and political relations is directly involving Russia in case of a renewed military phase of the Karabakh conflict, is undisputed even by the most belligerently-minded politicians in Baku.

Combat activities in South Ossetia have pushed upward the internal political risks for Azerbaijan in case of starting war in Karabakh. A defeat in a new war for Azerbaijan would spell not only a final loss of Karabakh. The new defeat may spell a fall of the ruling regime of the Aliyevs, and a replacement of the entire political elite of Azerbaijan, collapse of the oil-and-gas and communicational sectors of Azerbaijani economy and other possible losses.

4. Military Lessons with regard to the Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict

Assessment of the initial lessons of the Five-day war in the military-technical sphere, shows firstly that compared to many recent local wars and conflicts the August military action in South Ossetia was characterized by a very active usage of heavy artillery and combat aircraft both by the Georgian and the Russian parties. In particular, the operation of Georgian forces in South Ossetia in the initial period was characterized by an unusually massive use of heavy artillery, multiple rocket launchers, while in the first two days, up until active involvement of the Russian Air Force and combat aircraft, when SU-25 attack aircrafts were put into action. Anyway, at the final stage the actions of the Russian artillery and Air Force were deployed at such a wide scale, which resulted as a principal cause in the speedy demoralizing and crushing defeat of the Georgian troops in South Ossetia.

The stake of the Georgian command on a successful rapid long-distance contactless war proved wrong. The massive use of multiple rocket launchers by the Georgian troops during the first firing raid on Tskhinvali and its suburbs on the night of August 8 looked of course very effective and frightening, but from the purely military viewpoint it neither resolved the assigned tasks nor could it suppress the Ossetian troops and the Russian peace keepers in Tskhinvali. Moreover, despite the multiple civilian casualties claimed by the Ossetian authorities and the Russian media, the losses from using multiple rocket launchers against the residential areas in the capital of South Ossetia and the surrounding villages were in reality not so high.

Although the bombardment by the Georgian “Grad” multiple rocket launchers and their Czech analogues – Systems RM-70 – caused Tskhinvali a considerable material damage, nonetheless, casualties among the civilian population and the Ossetian homeguard, according to the reports by a number of International organizations (e.g., the centre “Memorial” and Human Rights Watch) have in actual fact come to be much lower than had been previously reported [10].

Anyway, inefficient use of the 122-mm multiple rocket launcher “Grad” by the Georgian troops in their assault on Tskhinvali, was perhaps compensated by a more efficient use of several systems of a larger gage (122/160-mm Israeli weapons, or, possibly, the Yugoslav 262-mm “Orkans”). In particular, those systems, as accounted by eyewitnesses, were used in shelling the more distant population centres to the north of Tskhinvali, as well as in remote mining and shelling the communications in the direction of the Roki tunnel and Transkam, which aimed at blocking the arrival of reinforcements to the defenders of the Ossetian capital.

More efficiency in the course of the combat was shown by the gun-barrel and self-propelled artillery of the Georgian army: 152-mm cannon “Hiacinth B”, 152-mm self-propelled unit “Dana” and 2C3 “Acacia”, as well as the artillery battalion of 6 heavy 203 self-propelled “Pion” units. They operated actively using data from drones and contemporary Western control, targeting and fire adjustment systems. It was seen clearly in the action of the afternoon, August 8, until the day of August 10, when the Georgian heavy self-propelled artillery (with the cannon and battalion mortars of 2nd and 3rd Infantry Brigades) fired quite efficiently at the columns of the 58th Russian Army making their way over the bypass Zarsk road. It is known that those columns of the 19 motorized infantry division of North Caucasus Military District as well as the detachments of Russian troops fighting to the north of Tzkhinval around Tliakan and the height Sarabuk sustained the heaviest losses within the whole period of the Five-day war, primarily from the Georgian artillery fire adjusted by drones, special forces, etc.

Quite efficient operation was shown by the anti-aircraft defence of the Georgian Army equipped by the Ukraine-supplied “Buk-M1” middle-range air defence system and the “OSA” and “OSA AKM” short-range air-defence system. By unverified data, the inventory of the Georgian Army also included several new short-range air defence systems “Spider”, supplied by Israel. At modest estimations, the Georgian air defence brought down at least 7 aircrafts of the Russian AF, including one middle-range strategic bomber TU-22M3. However, efficiency of the Georgian air defence could be much better, and the Russian losses much bigger, had they been in

action throughout the operation. But the panic striking the Georgian army, perhaps did not spare the anti-aircraft gunners either, otherwise the Russian troops would not have captured several launchers “Buk-M1” dumped by the Georgian Army in operational condition, while the group of Russian troops in South Ossetia captured a few Georgian air defence missile complexes “Osa”.

According to the available data, the Russian army in the final phase of combat operations in South Ossetia inflicted very efficient strikes on the Georgian positions in South Ossetia using the Multiple Rocket Launchers “Uragan” and the tactical missile complexes “Tochka U”, and also possibly “Smerch”. It was with those systems combined with massive bombing and strafing assaults that the Russian army inflicted many losses on the Georgian troupes, resulting in their loss of morals and defeat.

Some of the aforementioned aspects of the Five-day war attract many analysts on security problems dealing with the Karabakh conflict. It can be stated that in many aspects, the lessons of the August military action present nearly mirror images with the military and political situation around Nagorno-Karabakh; on the other hand, there are some essential differences.

There is, e.g., a similar situation in the issue of speeding up the militarization and the outfitting of their armed forces by the two former host countries on their way to get ready to the military resolution of the conflicts with their former client states. That can be easily noticed by the hasty massive purchases of assault weaponry, particularly armour, as well as heavy artillery and missile systems. In particular, Azerbaijan has lately purchased different heavy artillery systems, multiple rocket launchers, and even the short-range missiles. Moreover, Azerbaijan, like Georgia, in the last few years has purchased 203-mm heavy self-propelled howitzers “Pion” and Israeli multiple rocket launchers GradLAR. In contrast to Tbilisi, Baku has also acquired an updated and more powerful version of the Israel multiple rocket launcher Lynx with 300-mm missiles EXTRA [11]. It is assumed that the Azerbaijan’s weapons inventory must also include the 220-mm multiple rocket launchers “Uragan”, which is an updated version of the 122-mm system BM-21 “Grad”. The Ukrainian acquisitions by Azerbaijan also include the analog-free 300-mm multiple rocket launchers “Smerch”, while Russia supplied the theatre missile complexes “Tochka U”. Moreover, the Azerbaijani army, like the Georgian army has lately acquired a large number of Israeli drones of different types, enabling them to make a better use of the artillery and missile systems to make strikes against the Nagorno-Karabakh military positions and the Armenian Army. The effect is going to be particularly appreciable in case of the first strike by the Azerbaijani artillery and missile systems against the

air defences of the Army of Nagorno-Karabakh.

Like Georgia, Azerbaijan, during the last few years is actively enlarging the tank park of its armed forces, its main supplier still being Ukraine, where Baku has purchased scores of T-72 tanks since 2003. Following the example of Tbilisi, Baku, too, made a decision to purchase the missile complexes “Buk-M1” from Ukraine, perhaps stimulated by their good performance during the Five-day war. According to the contract signed in the fall of 2008, to the amount of \$36 000 000, the company “Ukrspetsexport” is planning to supply to Azerbaijan 46 T-72 tanks and 3 missile complexes “Buk-M1” (the missile complexes “Buk-M1” are to be put on the alert only in spring 2009, since the Azerbaijani service crews will have to go through special training in Ukraine.) [12]. However, it is not by Ukraine alone that the tank stock of Azerbaijan is being replenished. According to the UN Register on Conventional Weapons, Russia, too, supplied two battalion complexes or 62 T-72 tanks to Baku in 2007, as well as 4 BBMs [13].

Despite active use of long-range ordnance¹ by the parties as well as multiple rocket launchers and combat aircrafts, the Five-day war in South Ossetia, like many other local conflicts of modern times, corroborated that the fundamental outcome of combat activities is resolved in face-to-face combat. It is the coordination, technical rigging, combat morale and psychological motivation of small detachments that are the determinants of the combat outcome in local armed conflicts of this kind, especially in the ethno-political conflicts². That was again fully re-attested by the combat operations in Tskhinvali, August 8-10, 2008, when despite the multiple numerical advantage the Georgian troops failed to gain control of South Ossetian capital and fight through to the Georgian-populated enclaves north of the city – Tamarasheni, Kekhvi, Kurta. According to Army General V.Boldirev, Commander-in-Chief of Russia’s Land Forces, up until August 9, 2008, the numerical advantage of the Georgian troops over the Russian units and the Ossetian detachments was almost ten-fold, and further on, too, the Russian troops in South Ossetia remained numerically comparable with the Georgian troops [14].

¹ According to the Georgian sources, only one 203-mm self-propelled gun shot more than 600 rounds on Tskhinvali and the neighboring population centers, while the Israeli-made GradLAR multiple rocket launcher – over 300 missiles. See in detail: Aladashvili I. “300 artillery rounds were shot simultaneously, as noted by the Chief of Staff of the Georgian Artillery Brigade” // *Quilis Palitra*, 25.08.2008 (in Georgian).

² A very similar situation is also emerging in the zone of Karabakh stand-off. In particular, it was corroborated by the outcome of the battle on March 3-4 near Village Leonarkh, Mardakert Region of the NKR, that was the most large-scale combat action on the line of Karabakh stand-off after the armistice of May 1994. In the course of this action the Reconnaissance Company of the 703rd Brigade of Azerbaijan army, availing itself of the post-election events in Yerevan on March 1-2, 2008, initiated a reconnaissance in force, but failed, incurring tangible losses.

The rapid Five-day war in South Ossetia and the operation of the Abkhazian forces in Kodor Gorge have also shown the role in modern local conflicts of a proper ratio and a correct usage by the parties of regular constant-ready units and massive contingents of reservists. In the rapid development of combat activities the massive mobilization has turned out to be a complete failure for the Georgian reservists who had done minimal training and were little familiar with military service or the theatre of operations. They had not only dropped the fighting efficiency, but quite the contrary: on the one hand, masses of unprepared reservists were clogging the communications of the Georgian troops, on the other hand, the panic that soon started among the reservists spread to the regular army and to the local population in the Georgian-populated enclaves of South Ossetia¹. Moreover, after the fighting a large part of small arms remained in possession of the reservists, has been never handed over to the authorities, and this will certainly facilitate the country's criminalization.

And vice versa, in the unrecognized republics the mobilization of reservists came out to be very efficiently carried out with a hundred-percent result (considering the situation whereby in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as in Nagorno-Karabakh, the reserve is organized on the so-called militia basis from effectively the entire male population). The matter is that the population of unrecognized republic is highly motivated to take part in combat activities. Meanwhile, among the Abkhazian and Ossetian reservists the specific weight of veterans and participants of combat activities was incomparably higher than among the raw Georgian reservists. With regard to, for example, Nagorno-Karabakh that means that in case of renewed combat activities the NKR Army of Defence will have the capabilities to raise the numbers of their armed forces by using a combat-ready reserve far in excess of Azerbaijan. Incidentally in a situation of this kind the problem of reservists may confront not only Azerbaijan, but Armenia as well.

The Georgian Army, having a high level of technical equipment and initially high moral spirit, was mainly demoralized in the waning third or fourth days of combat activities in South Ossetia (save for the Special Forces units and part of the ordnance) and was unable to rehabilitate its combat readiness by drafting new reservists. The army of Azerbaijan may become confronted with a similar situation. Thus, with regard to the August fighting, the probability of conducting prolonged warfare in Karabakh from the military viewpoint is not going to be as advantageous

¹ As of today, Georgia has yet to publish the losses among the reservists in the course of the August fighting, 2008, although there are lists of casualties issued by the Ministry of Defense and the Interior. That enables us to assume that despite low efficiency of the reservists, their losses were quite substantial.

as it may seem at first glance for Azerbaijan.

Another serious lesson of both the Five-day war and many latest local wars is to be a reevaluation of efficiency of field structures and long-time fortification works erected with regard to the lay of land. One of the crucial lessons of the Lebanon war in 2006 was a successful use by Hezbollah of a complex system of fortification works mostly adapted for mobile defence along the whole southern border between Lebanon and Israel. As a result, in the summer of 2006 the Hezbollah fighters could not only inflict considerable damage on the adversary, but could substantially impede his advancement into Lebanon under a complete domination of the Israeli air force and a considerable advantage of TSAKHAL in ordnance and armour, without sustaining any serious losses. As to the August fighting in South Ossetia, the Ossetian units had not been able to prepare the fortification lines of this kind (because of the chess-board arrangement of population centres with mixed Georgian and Ossetian population and insufficient depth of positions). It was therefore quite natural that the Georgian forces made a speedy break through the Ossetian positions and the outposts of the Russian peacekeepers south of Tskhinvali to the city centre. Viewing this situation with regard to Nagorno-Karabakh clearly shows that the current front line and the existing fortification positions of the NKR Army of Defence along the entire contact line will greatly facilitate a defensive action by the Karabakh Army, bring down the power of the first strike by the Azerbaijani troops, ruling out the very contingency of blitzkrieg. Fortification lines are not a cure-all in modern local wars, but it is clear that their skilful use will make the objectives of the advancing party extremely complicated yielding essential advantages to the defenders.

The Russian military experts explain the rapid demoralization and collapse of the Georgian army in the fighting of August 2008 by the Georgian leadership having, besides the demonstrative self-confidence, an excessive faith in the a priori precedence of the Western military standards. The truth is that in the military sphere and in public and political life, imitations and artificial implementation of the Western standards provide no guarantees for their efficient usage. Reverting to an analogy with the rapid collapse of the South Vietnam army in 1975, the experts note that like the Georgian forces, the South Vietnamese army was well equipped and armed with American weapons, structured and trained to the American military standards and rules, and taught by the American instructors, but in a very short time it was crushed by the Army of North Vietnam consisting of a semi-guerrilla formations using the Soviet and Chinese military organization and armaments. The Western standards per se do not guarantee supremacy over the non-Western armies [15]. Analysis

of military reforms currently being implemented by the army of Azerbaijan enables an assumption to be made that the military leadership of Azerbaijan by all appearances may have taken a similar way of declarative copying of the Western standards along with the numerical growth of arms, military equipment and manpower instead of the real increase in combat ability of their armed forces through deep structural reforms in control systems, recruitment and personnel. As a result, as noted by the experts of the International Crisis Group (ICG), the stereotypically thinking military leadership of Azerbaijan uses the pro-NATO propaganda and formally implements the Western military standards, which cannot in any way raise the combat readiness of the Azerbaijan army [16].

And finally, the most decisive result of military actions was a habitual corroboration of the everlasting truth by Clausewitz that any initial success in war is useless if it has no political component. Despite the essential defects in the purely military sphere, the principal causes of the Georgian army's defeat in the Five-day war lie in the political plane. The outcome of the Five-day war had been pre-determined by the fact that the capability of a rapid and open involvement of the Russian Army into the combat activities in South Ossetia had never been seriously considered by the Georgian authorities. Bato Kutelila, Georgia's Deputy Minister of Defence even conceded in an interview that the probability of an open military collision with Russia had not been considered and was absolutely unexpected for Georgia's military and political leadership [17]. Moreover, as noted by the Western military experts, the Georgia's military and political leadership had not only failed to seriously consider the rapid and open involvement of Russia into the military operations, but rather the texts of the operational fundamental documents of the country in the domain of national defence and security, like Strategy of National Security, Military Strategy and National Threat Assessment, directly pointed out a very low probability "of the open military aggression against Georgia" [18].

With the involvement of the Russian Army into the military operations against Georgia their outcome was not dependent upon any factors of surprise, initial technical or psychological supremacy or upon the level of combat readiness of the individual units of the Georgian army – it was now a matter of simple arithmetic. It seems that it is the priority of the political situation (or political limiting factors) with regard to any military capabilities, even initially advantageous for one of the parties, should be regarded as the crucial military lesson of the war of August 2008.

Conclusion

Those are the major settings of development for the political processes and positions of the basic world centres of power in South Caucasus following the August Georgia-Russia war. It can be stated that after the Five-day war the dynamical processes around Nagorno-Karabakh remain mainly unchanged, but the regional background and the political components around the conflicting parties have somewhat changed. The political background for the renewal of military operations in the zone of Karabakh conflict also devaluated, which means that the overall military risks in the region of South Caucasus have diminished.

Certainly, the abovementioned circumstances are incapable to bring down the overall tension in the zone of Karabakh conflict in the foreseeable future, or, to completely eliminate the risk of resuming of the military operations by Baku (even against the background of the obvious analogy with the outcome of the war in South Ossetia, disagreeable for another former host country, or with regard to the endorsement by Ilkham Aliev on November 2, 2008 of some sort of a non-aggression pact in the form of the “Declaration by Three Presidents). The natural and unavoidable condition of revanchism in the Azerbaijani political elite, as shown by the world experience, can be retained for a long time. As noted by Karl von Clausewitz, a military defeat is never regarded by the losing party as an absolute and final reality, “for the losing country can see it as only a transient evil, that has to be corrected in the future by subsequent political relations” [19]. In the same way, a change of the regional political background against the losing country does not always reduce the acute character of the conflict perception or boost its peacekeeping dispositions.

Nonetheless the temporal factor is playing a certain role in the deactualization of radical dispositions in the societies of countries conflicting with their neighbours. Radicalism of the country having lost an ethnopolitical conflict, can only be deflated when it loses the internal hope of another winning party. In an historical perspective that can result either from a substantially increased potential of the winner over the loser and the awareness of a requital being useless, or from a repetitive or multiple defeat of the revenge seeker. An even more essential factor is the dynamic characteristics of the outer-political background and the corrected approaches by the leading world-wide and regional players or a change of the existing status-quo in the region. However, the latter event – a change or formation of a completely new status-quo in South Caucasus after the Five-day war-has already taken place and has become a political reality.

November, 2008.

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