

Military conflict between Russia and Georgia escalates

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The war that erupted August 7 between Russia and the former Soviet republic of Georgia escalated over the weekend. Some 2,000 people are thought to have been killed, according to estimates given by both sides. Tens of thousands have been injured or driven from their homes by shelling and air attacks.

The US-backed regime in Tbilisi sent troops into South Ossetia last Thursday and carried out bombing attacks on the capital of Tskhinvali in an attempt to reassert Georgian control over the breakaway region, which has exercised de facto self-rule since the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Russia has deployed “peacekeeping” troops in the region, which is allied with Moscow against the government of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili.

In the face of a large-scale military response by Russia, Georgia claims to have withdrawn its forces from South Ossetia. Russian forces are now in control of Tskhinvali, the republic’s capital.

Underlying the military confrontation is US imperialism’s drive to isolate Russia and establish American hegemony over the energy resources of Central Asia and their transit routes through the Caucasus, utilizing the Saakashvili regime as its cat’s paw. The Russian ruling elite, for its part, is seeking to reassert its control over a region that was ruled by Moscow for two centuries before the break-up of the USSR.

Russian forces have carried out attacks beyond the borders of South Ossetia, including air attacks on the Georgian town of Gori that reportedly killed at least 60 civilians in two apartment blocks. There are reports that Russian jets bombed the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, but failed to damage it. The Russian Black Sea fleet has moved to blockade the Georgian port of Poti, which was attacked by Russian jets on Saturday. Tbilisi airport and military facilities near the airport have also come under air attack.

At least two Russian fighters have been shot down. The Georgians claim to have downed six Russian jets.

By Sunday the conflict threatened to extend to other parts of the Caucasus, as forces of Abkhazia, another Russian-backed breakaway republic, launched attacks on Georgian positions in the upper Kodori Gorge. Russian jets were reported to be supporting the Abkhaz ground troops.

“At this point we are particularly concerned that the conflict appears to be spreading beyond South Ossetia into Abkhazia,” the UN assistant secretary-general for peacekeeping, Edmond Mulet, said.

A war on three fronts seems to be opening up as the Abkhazian border, South Ossetia and the area of Gali and Zugdidi come under

attack from Russian and Russian-backed forces. Georgian President Saakashvili has appealed for a ceasefire and for international help to open up corridors for the evacuation of wounded and trapped civilians.

Refugees fleeing into Russia described how Tskhinvali and surrounding villages came under heavy bombardment from Grad missiles and tanks as the Georgian forces advanced. There are claims of Georgian atrocities against the civilian population.

The outbreak of war between Russia and Georgia is the culmination of long-escalating tensions. It can be understood only in the context of US foreign policy in the former Soviet republics and the former Yugoslavia.

Following the break-up of the Soviet Union, Washington pursued a policy of weakening Russia by isolating it and curtailing its influence in the former Soviet spheres of influence in Central Asia and Eastern Europe. The dismemberment of Yugoslavia, encouraged by both the US and the Western European powers, was directed above all against Moscow, which had long considered Belgrade an important ally. This reached a culmination in the 1999 US-led NATO air war against Serbia, followed in 2000 by the toppling of the Milosevic regime in the first of the US-engineered “colour revolutions” of this decade.

Saakashvili was brought to power in Georgia by the so-called “Rose Revolution” of 2003. Like the “Orange Revolution” of 2005 in Ukraine, it was engineered by Washington to place a pro-American regime in power on Russia’s doorstep.

Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze was forced to resign and was replaced by a group of younger Georgian politicians who had been among his protégés. Saakashvili was one of this group. A Columbia University-educated lawyer, he presented himself as a suitable figure to act as the US point-man in the Caucasus, with a mission to introduce “free market” economic measures and protect the vital Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil and Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipelines.

Since the US-engineered regime change in Georgia, Washington has flooded the country with military aid and deployed 160 military advisers to build up its armed forces.

US policy in Georgia is part of a strategy to incorporate former Soviet republics into NATO, create military bases and deploy anti-missile defence systems on Russia’s borders. The US has established military bases in former Soviet republics in Central Asia and the Baltic states.

President Bush promised Saakashvili NATO membership at the

NATO summit earlier this year. Washington's NATO allies in Western Europe, however, blocked any early admission of Georgia into NATO, seeing such a move as an unnecessary provocation against Russia, upon which they depend for energy supplies.

Tensions between Georgia and Russia over the status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were exacerbated by Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia last February. Washington was the prime mover behind Kosovo's secession, which was carried out in violation of a number of international agreements. Russian President Vladimir Putin threatened at the time to use the precedent of Kosovo to support South Ossetian and Abkhazian demands for separation from Georgia, and soon after, Moscow granted Russian passports to citizens of the two nominally Georgian republics.

The eruption of military conflict between Russia and Georgia was all but inevitable given the highly aggressive and provocative character of US policy in the region and the nationalist and expansionist aims of the Putin regime in Moscow. There is little doubt that Washington gave Tbilisi the green light to attack South Ossetia. The Georgian offensive came only weeks after US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited Tbilisi and held talks with Saakashvili. Rice denounced Russia during her visit and reiterated US backing for Georgian membership in NATO.

After the fighting erupted last week, the US agreed to fly home the 2,000 Georgian troops who make up the third largest contingent of "coalition" forces in Iraq.

The response of US and its Western allies to the conflict between Russia and Georgia has been thoroughly hypocritical. President Bush, who is in Beijing for the Olympic Games, on Saturday demanded "an end to the Russian bombing." Backing Saakashvili's call for a cease-fire, he declared, "Georgia is a sovereign nation and its territorial integrity must be respected." He urged "a return by the parties to the status quo of August the 6th."

Bush failed to square his concern for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia with the US invasions and occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan and its support for the secession of Kosovo from Serbia.

Senator Barack Obama, the Democratic candidate for the US presidency, responded in almost identical terms. "I condemn Russia's aggressive actions and reiterate my call for an immediate ceasefire," Obama said in a statement. He also demanded that Russia withdraw its ground forces from Georgia.

Republican presidential candidate John McCain likewise placed the entire blame for the war on Russia, saying, "For many years, I have warned against Russian actions that undermine the sovereignty of its neighbours."

A statement from the European Union took a similar tone. It expressed "commitment to the sovereignty and the territorial integrity of Georgia" and urged Russia to respect Georgia's borders.

It is widely recognized that the US and its Georgian client regime badly miscalculated in launching last week's offensive against South Ossetia. Moscow's rapid and massive military response evidently took them both by surprise. Russia has seized on the Georgian provocation to consolidate its control over the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and

demonstrate its ability and readiness to use military force to secure the interests of the nationalist regime in the Kremlin.

In a thinly veiled attack on the United States, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said on Saturday, "Those who have been supplying arms to Georgia, I believe they should feel part of the blame for the loss of life of civilians, including many Russian citizens and peacekeepers. I think those who have been appeasing Mr. Saakashvili's aggressive intentions and who helped create a feeling of impunity among the Georgian leadership should think twice."

The eruption of war in the Caucasus, containing the threat of a direct military confrontation between the US and Russia—the two biggest nuclear powers—reflects the extraordinarily tense and explosive state of international relations. The sharpening of conflicts between the major powers is itself a product of the deepening economic crisis of world capitalism, which finds its most concentrated expression in the decline in the global economic position of the United States. The reckless and provocative character of US foreign policy, and its increasing reliance on military violence, are bound up with the attempt of the American ruling elite to offset its economic decline by utilizing its continued military dominance.

The Russian ruling elite, for its part, wants to utilize its newfound oil wealth to promote its imperial ambitions in the former Soviet sphere of influence while whipping up Great Russian chauvinism within its own borders.

The conflict in the Caucasus contains the seeds of a far wider conflagration, raising the specter of a new global eruption of imperialist war. Alluding to the events that followed the June, 1914 assassination of Archduke Ferdinand and culminated in the outbreak of World War I two months later, Dmitri Trenin, senior associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and deputy director of its Moscow center, issued the following warning in a piece published on the *Washington Post* web site on Sunday:

"So far, each step in the Caucasus drama has put the conflict on a yet higher plane. The next step will no longer be just about the Caucasus, or even Europe. Remember the Guns of August."



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