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Caucasus: Winning the Shooting War, Losing the Media Battle

Ong Wei Chong

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The rapidity and magnitude of Russia's military response suggest that the Russian military is once more able to prosecute high-intensity joint-operations albeit of a limited kind. While Russian feat of arms might have won the day on the battlefield, in the arena of international opinion, it was a case of strategic defeat.

Military Success

WITHIN HOURS of the Georgian incursion into South Ossetia, the Russian 58th Army was able to mobilize and put into the field a motorized rifle division accompanied by armour, towed-artillery, Multiple Rocket Launch Systems and the necessary logistical support. Russian media reported that elements of the 76th Airborne Division based at Pskov were airlifted into the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinvali. These airborne units operated alongside the ground forces of the 58th Army in the Battle of Tskhinvali and went on to occupy Gori, a key Georgian Army base and the birth place of Joseph Stalin. Such was a clear demonstration of the Russian military's long-range airlift capability and its ability to integrate airborne troops with ground units in a joint-operations environment.

In the air campaign, the Russian Air Force fielded over 300 combat aircraft including Su-27 multi-role fighters, Su-25 ground-attack aircraft and Tu-22 bombers. The Russian Air Force had little difficulty establishing air superiority over the Georgian Air Force's tiny fleet of 8 Su-25s. Russian air power destroyed key military facilities in Tbilisi, Gori and the port of Poti. The crucial factor however, was the vast improvement in Russian close air support capabilities. The bitter lessons from its Chechen campaigns resulted in a significant improvement in Russian air-ground coordination. The effects were clear in South Ossetia where Georgian defences blocking the Russian ground advance were pummelled from the air. In short, effective close air support in no small way aided the Russian ground units in their rapid advance into South Ossetia.

Advancing across two fronts, Russian forces took Tskhinvali, key Georgian military bases at Gori, Senaki and Poti in less than a week. Russian mechanized and armoured spearheads came within 55

kilometres of Tbilisi but went no further. In short, these events confirm Russia's new found confidence and ability in her military prowess. Compared to its military campaign however, Russia's diplomatic and media efforts have been largely visceral and defensive.

Performance in the Media War

What was essentially a failed military operation by Georgia has been turned by Western governments and media into a successful diplomatic and campaign against the Russian Bear. Russian actions were portrayed as belligerent aggression while the trigger point, the Georgian incursion into South Ossetia on 7 August, has been largely played down. There is evidence to indicate that much of the extensive damage suffered in Tskhinvali was inflicted by Georgian fire in the 7 August offensive. However, the story carried by most Western media is one of Russian military aggression epitomized by pictures of shelled-out buildings, burned-out wrecks and forlorn faces of Georgian refugees; all supposedly the handiwork of indiscriminate Russian firepower.

In the war of words, it was Georgia that held the initiative. Evoking memories of Prague 1968, Budapest 1956 and the spectre of the Russian Iron-Fist clamping down on emergent democracies, 'plucky' Georgia won the hearts and minds of large sections in the Western media and governments. Reminiscent of John F Kennedy's 1963 "*Ich bin ein Berliner*" speech, Republican presidential hopeful John McCain recently declared: "We are all Georgians now". The historical comparisons of Prague 1968, Budapest 1956 and the Cold War are worlds away in terms of international, political and military contexts, but these facts seem to be lost on those sold on the idea of the Russian threat.

The recent airlift of American humanitarian aid into Georgia and the delivery of similar supplies by the Arleigh Burke-class destroyer, USS McFaul, have received much attention from the Western media. The Russian government's decision to allocate at least US\$420 million for post-conflict reconstruction in South Ossetia however went largely unreported by English language media in the West. When it comes to the media war, Russia has yet to learn to play the role of the media darling. Not that Russia wants to nor does it feel the need to do so.

During the shooting war, most of the Western media were based in Georgia while the Russians were less than forthcoming in allowing access at their end. In the words of a BBC correspondent: "Their authoritarian government might never do so." Indeed, in the foreseeable future, it is difficult to see Russia transforming its stereotypical image of a 'Grizzly Bear' to that of a 'Teddy-Bear'. The 'Grizzly Bear' might triumph in a show of force, but physical (military) coercion does not necessarily guarantee strategic victory.

Crux of the Matter

Historical analogies of the Cold War have freely flowed both in prose and speech of policy makers and the media in the past few weeks. If history does teach us anything, it is that military coercion alone rarely works; particularly against the face of public/international opinion. The observation by Napoleon I that "public opinion is a mysterious and invisible power, to which everything must yield" is as relevant today as some two centuries ago. Indeed, cognisance of the strategic reality that NGOs and the global media are part and parcel of the 21st Century battlefield and the willingness to engage them are just as important as winning the shooting war. In short, 'talking the talk' (the war of words) has become as much an imperative as 'walking the walk' (military operations).

If there is anything to take away from recent events in the Caucasus, it is that NGOs and media networks are ever-prescient elements of post-modern conflict zones - actors prone to manipulation, but at the same time, crucial to winning the war of words and the war on hearts and minds. Whether one likes it or not, having the international media and public/international opinion on your side is as good as winning one third of the war.

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