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## **Georgia and Russia: What Caused the August War?**

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### **Abstract**

*Ce document est une analyse systématique des causes de la guerre entre la Géorgie et la Russie en 2008. La première section donne un bref historique du conflit. La deuxième section propose trois hypothèses pour déterminer la cause immédiate de la guerre. La dernière section analyse la validité des hypothèses sur les effets de l'évolution des structures de pouvoir, la rhétorique nationaliste et de faux optimisme sur la guerre et ce sur la base des discussions théoriques.*

**O**n August 8th, 2008, Russia took unilateral action and invaded South Ossetia, a secessionist region of the internationally recognized state of Georgia. What followed was a five-day military conflict that would challenge the geopolitical setting of the Caucasus region. The complex and multifaceted nature of this conflict has important implications for regional and international power politics.

The decisive military move by Russia was the first of its kind, beyond Russian borders, since the Afghan war of the 1970's and 1980's. The war apparently served to restore Moscow's control over the geopolitically crucial region of the South Caucasus, which is enormously important for Europe since it enables the transportation of Caspian oil to the West. However, it also raised critical questions over the tension between Russian identity and other

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ethnic groups living in the Caucasus region, nationalistic rhetoric within the domestic politics of Russia and Georgia, the role of the United States in the region where important allies are expecting NATO membership, and finally, the image of Russia as a resurgent Great Power. This paper attempts to answer the questions: what motivated Russia and Georgia to believe that a war was necessary to meet their national interests and how critical was the influence of domestic politics in making those decisions? The paper has three parts in total. The first part gives a brief overview of the events that resulted in war between Georgia and Russia; the second part is about the research design; and the concluding part critically analyzes the causes of this war from theoretical perspectives.

### **Background of the Conflict**

Since the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, a handful of territorial struggles have been playing out within the Caucasus region. Conflicts have been driven primarily by quests for independence and manifested themselves through continuous fighting over territorial borders, the redefining of ethnic identities, and domestic power-politics (Tishkov, 2008: 23). The breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, both situated within Georgian territory, have declared de facto independence from Georgia since the early 1990's. The influential role played by Russia during this decade in shaping the peace process transformed the separatist conflicts into a dispute between Georgia and Russia. Most residents of South Ossetia and Abkhazia were granted Russian citizenship and passports, and it became increasingly clear that Russia was playing the identity politics well. Both Abkhazia and South Ossetia became politically aligned with Russia and both wanted their regions to be part of Russia.<sup>1</sup>

Despite continuing efforts by the United Nations Secretary-General, the OSCE, and the EU to negotiate a peace settlement, the relations between the breakaway regions and the Georgian government have remained stalled. Friction has been escalating since the 2004 election of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili who focused on furthering democratic reforms and pushing for Georgia's accession into NATO, as two of his top priorities for national policy. This hero of the so-called "Rose Revolution" increased pressure on South Ossetia in 2004 by tightening border controls and

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<sup>1</sup> This section (background of the conflict) is written on the basis of information provided by the Congressional Research Service. See, Nichol, Jim (2008), "Russia-Georgia Conflict in South Ossetia: Context and Implications for U.S. interests", *CRS Report for Congress* RL34618 (Oct 24), pp. 1-35.[available at <http://openocrs.com/document/RL34618>]

dismantling a large-scale smuggling operation in which Russian organized crime groups and corrupt Georgian officials were allegedly involved. He also reportedly sent several hundred police, military and intelligence personnel into South Ossetia and argued that the move was made in order to bolster the peacekeeping contingent set up by the previous peacekeeping agreement. Russia, on the other hand, reportedly assisted paramilitary elements from Abkhazia, Transnistria and Russia to enter into South Ossetia. The subsequent clashes between the paramilitary groups were inconclusive, and by late 2004 both Russia and Georgia pulled back most of the guerrillas and paramilitary forces, and the quick intervention by the international community deescalated the crisis.

In July 2005, when President Saakashvili pronounced a new peace plan regarding South Ossetia, the 'president' of South Ossetia, Eduard Kokoiti, discarded it. Later in October of that year, Kokoiti asserted, "we [South Ossetians] are citizens of Russia."<sup>2</sup> However, in December 2005, Kokoiti proffered a South Ossetian peace proposal presuming that South Ossetia would be independent. It is worth mentioning here that the South Ossetians, who had Russian citizenship, voted in both the 2004 and 2008 Russian presidential elections. President Putin, it seemed, was very popular with the South Ossetians. In 2006, a popular referendum was held in South Ossetia to reassert its 'independence' from Georgia, and in a separate vote, Kokoiti was reelected as president. But the U.S. State Department and the OSCE did not recognize the 2006 vote. However, an alternative balloting allowed the ethnic Georgians of South Ossetia – who were displaced from South Ossetia – to elect pro-Georgian Dmitriy Sanakoyev as governor and to approve a referendum that called for the preservation of Georgia's territorial integrity.

President Saakashvili again proposed another peace plan in March 2007, which called for creating transitional administrative districts throughout the region. In July, he decreed the formation of a commission, which would work out the status of South Ossetia as a part of Georgia. But a subsequent meeting in October 2007 did not produce any result because the Russian Foreign Ministry claimed that the Georgian emissaries made objectionable demands with the purpose of deliberately sabotaging the outcome of the meeting.

In July 2008, Russia conducted a military exercise that involved more than 8000 troops (code named – Caucasus 2008) near its border with Georgia.

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<sup>2</sup> Open Source Center (2005), *Central Eurasia: Daily Report*, CEDR, Oct 7, Doc. No. CEP-15001. [available at <https://www.opensource.gov/>]

The exercise included a hypothetical attack by ‘unnamed’ forces on Georgia’s breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Concomitantly 600 Georgian troops, along with 1000 U.S. troops and token forces from Armenia, Azerbaijan and Ukraine conducted an exercise in Georgia aimed at, at least officially, increasing troop interoperability for NATO operations and coalition actions in Iraq. This operation was code named – immediate Response 2008. Both the parties blamed each other for rising tensions and many observers saw these events as a rehearsal of a war likely to be fought soon.

On July 3, 2008, an Ossetian village police chief was killed by a bomb, and Dmitriy Sanakoyev – the head of the pro-Georgian ‘government’ in South Ossetia - escaped injury by a roadside mine. During that night both the Georgians and South Ossetians launched artillery attacks on each other’s villages and checkpoints killing and injuring dozens. The European Union, the OSCE and the Council of Europe (COE) urged both parties to resume peace talks. On July 21, 2008, the UN Security Council discussed the violation of Georgian airspace by the Russian military planes that occurred on the 8th of July. While the US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, was in Georgia for two days of discussions on ways to defuse the tension, she called for Russia to respect Georgia’s territorial integrity.<sup>3</sup>

During the last week of July 2008, paramilitary forces from both sides escalated what had been an on-going and consistent level of moderate violence. Georgia claimed that paramilitary volunteers were coming from Russian North Ossetia to attack Georgian villages. On the evening of August 7, 2008, South Ossetia again accused Georgia of launching a massive bombardment against Tskhinvali. On that evening Saakashvili announced a unilateral ceasefire and reaffirmed that Georgia would give South Ossetia maximum autonomy within Georgia as part of a peace settlement. But on the morning of August 8th, the Georgian military decided to officially respond with military force, arguing that South Ossetian forces did not end their shelling of Georgian villages. Georgian troops soon controlled much of South Ossetia, including Tskhinvali.

Russian military, which had been steadily advancing into the breakaway regions, quickly responded to South Ossetia’s defense with a massive-counter attack, leading to five days of intense fighting throughout the region. Russian

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<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of State. Press Release. (2008), *Secretary’s Remarks: Remarks En Route Prague, Czech Republic*, (July 8), [Available at: [http://nato.usmission.gov/Recent\\_Speeches.htm](http://nato.usmission.gov/Recent_Speeches.htm)]

warplanes destroyed Georgian airfields near the capital Tbilisi, recaptured Tskhinvali, occupied the bulk of South Ossetia, and reached its border with the rest of Georgia. It was reported that thousands of volunteer military men from North Ossetia fought along with the Russian troops. Faced with this overwhelming show of firepower by Russia, Georgian officials requested Secretary Rice to act as a mediator to settle the conflict. They also informed Russian Foreign Minister, Sergei Lavrov, that Georgian forces had been withdrawn from South Ossetia. However, Lavrov countered that Georgian troops were still in Tskhinvali. Later, Russia extended the attacks to include Gori - situated within undisputed Georgian territory - and occupied that city on August 11, 2008. At the same time, it was alleged that the Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia allowed the Abkhaz forces to fight against the Georgian forces in Kodori Valley, Gali region, and Zugdidi district. Russia also sent ships from its Black Sea Fleet to deliver troops to Abkhazia. After securing positions along Georgia's coastline, Russian troops occupied a Georgian military base in the town of Senaki, near Poti.

On August 12, the Russian government announced that the aim of their military operation - coercing the Georgian side to peace - had been achieved and that the operation had been concluded. On August 26th, Russia formally issued a press release recognizing both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. In doing so, Russia justified its actions under the principle of the responsibility to protect Russian citizens, regardless of where they live. French President, Nicolas Sarkozy, played a leading role in the mediation efforts to create a "six-point plan" and the August 12th cease-fire agreement. The post-war situation is still very unstable and as many observers believe, it will take years to ease the tensions within the region.<sup>4</sup>

## Research Design

While analyzing the actions of both Georgia and Russia to understand the causes of the August war, this research paper evaluates three testable hypotheses:

- Russia felt convinced that a quick victory would improve Russia's image as a resurgent power.

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<sup>4</sup> For an excellent overview of the conflict, see International Crisis Group report, (2008), "Russia vs Georgia: The Fallout", Europe Report No. 195, (22 August), pp. 1-29. [Available at <http://www.crisisgroup.org>]

- Putin's manipulative identity politics over Russianness and Saakashvili's nationalistic rhetoric within Georgia caused the war.
- Saakashvili's false optimism over the U.S. involvement in the conflict led him to risk the war.

In order to test the hypotheses, several factors are taken into consideration. First, the changed international setting after the Cold War is critical in understanding Russia's present behavior. Putins' evident desire to elevate Russia's Great Power image in global politics is also an important indicator of the motivations that guided the decision to engage in war with Georgia. Furthermore, the politics over pipelines had significant impact on Putin's confidence to invade Georgia since Russia is enjoying relative prosperity due to her large oil and gas reserves. Realism, the most dominant theory of International Relations, can be applied in analyzing Russian behavior in this war. According to realist worldview, the survival of states must be guaranteed by promoting national interests and strengthening military capabilities (Dunne & Schimdt, 2008: 93). War, from this viewpoint, is a legitimate instrument of statecraft. Moreover, states cannot rely on other states or international institutions to ensure their own security. Russia's self-help approach in this war and its sheer negligence of the international community clearly indicates the realist worldview of Kremlin. Second, the power struggle within Georgian politics and the nationalistic rhetoric of Saakashvili seem to have made things worse just before the war broke out. On the other hand, Putin's frequent rhetoric regarding Russian identity had manipulative impact on the escalation of the crisis. Chris Hedges discussion on the politics of nationalism, as this paper will show, is quite relevant here. His analysis of the Argentinean and the Serbian war illustrates how nationalistic rhetoric can undermine reality and how the public become the prisoner of that kind of politics (Hedges, 2002: 45). Third, the unwarranted optimism of President Saakashvili that led him to risk a war with a major regional power is the most critical issue in discussing the causes of this August war. According to Geoffrey Blainey, optimism is a vital prelude to war and anything, which increases that optimism is a cause of war (Blainey, 1988: 53). Therefore, Saakashvili's personal relationship with the United States has important implications for understanding his decision to go to war. This paper, thus, looks beyond the dyadic level to consider the influence of third parties, particularly the influence of the United States on the actions of Saakashvili. Questions will be asked whether his decision was based on considering relative military capability, rational miscalculation or just on non-rational thinking. Finally, the paper will probe into the question of whether this war could have been avoided. Differences between necessary and sufficient

causes will also be analyzed. Furthermore, the paper will raise critical questions such as why these two democracies, albeit ostensible, fought each other and whether this war refutes the democratic peace theory that essentially says that democracies never fight wars with each other. In this respect, the argument over the likeliness of young democracies to engage in war, made by Edward D. Mansfield and Jack Snyder<sup>5</sup>, will be taken into consideration. These theoretical perspectives are essential in answering the very research question of this study and testing the hypotheses that it proposes. However, attempts will be made to distinguish between the ultimate causes of the conflict and the proximate causes of the fighting in order to construct a logical chain that includes all of the hypotheses.

## Analysis

Understanding the Russian motivation and objectives that influenced its decision to engage in the August War is crucial for an assessment of the causes of the war. And any such assessment has to take into account the timing and form of the Russian military incursion into South Ossetia<sup>6</sup>. This paper hypothesizes that Russia wanted a quick and decisive victory over Georgia in order to improve its Great Power image. Let us consider a few counterfactual issues that might challenge the validity of this first hypothesis. For example, according to Moscow, Russia engaged in war in response to Georgia's attack on Tshkinvali and on the Russian peacekeeping forces. Therefore, Russia's action was defensive and retaliatory and the war has nothing to do with Russia's image as a resurgent power. Such a simplistic explanation on the cause of Russia's engagement can be refuted by the fact that, long before the war broke out, Russia had established the infrastructure and logistical support for a military invasion. During June-July 2008, a battalion of Russian railroad troops repaired a 54 kilometers of a strategic railway in Abkhazia that enabled the rapid forward deployment of troops and armour during the August war with Georgia. Besides, the integrated combat planning provides strong evidence that the Russian invasion of South Ossetia and then deeper into Georgia was indeed planned long before the actual military conflict broke out. Furthermore, the Russian claim that its war

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<sup>5</sup> Mansfield, Edward; Snyder, Jack (1995), "Democratization and War", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74 No. 3 (May), pp. 79-97

<sup>6</sup> Allison, Roy (2008), "Russia Resurgent? Moscow's campaign to coerce Georgia to peace", *International Affairs*, Vol. 86 No. 6, (Nov), pp. 1145-1171.

was in fact a 'peace coercion operation'<sup>7</sup> could be challenged by the fact that 'international agreements limited Russia's peacekeeping role in South Ossetia to monitoring the ceasefire, with no provision for peace enforcement'.<sup>8</sup>

The above discussion suggests that Russia must have had other deep rooted reasons to engage in a war with Georgia. Putin's decision, it seems, had been guided by a number of geopolitical interests that Russia sought to advance through a decisive victory. Russia considers Georgia to be a revisionist state that has the potential to challenge the kind of balance of power in the Caucasus, which fits Russia's doctrine of 'spheres of influence'. Furthermore, Russia feels threatened by the eastward expansion of NATO and the increasing presence of US military in the Caucasus. Moscow, in recent years, showed antipathy towards the building of twin oil and gas pipelines from Azerbaijan to Turkey across Georgia. This fresh conflict will act as a deterrent against building any further pipelines along the same route, specifically the EU initiated Nabucco project that would connect Turkmen or Kazakh reserves to Europe via the South Caucasus energy corridor.

This war has also enabled Russia to halt the process of NATO membership that Georgia has been seeking for a long time. Russian military adventurism also sent a strong signal to Ukraine, another candidate for NATO membership. Since spring of 2008, Russia has also been talking about claims to the Crimean peninsula which is home to its Black Sea fleet and where a large number of ethnic Russians live. Besides, it is widely believed that Russia's move toward recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia is directed against the recognition of Kosovo by the Western powers. Therefore, by 'punishing' Georgia, Russia wanted to consolidate its strategic independence that would ultimately confirm Russia's status as a potential global power.<sup>9</sup> The causes of Russia's war with Georgia, thus, are not about territorial domination, but about image, respect and above all – recognition. However, Russia's decision to engage in war was not free from strategic miscalculations. For example, the war exposed Russia's failure to accomplish

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<sup>7</sup> The Russian Officials even describing its troops of the 58th Army and other units to South Ossetia as a 'reinforced Russian peacekeeping contingent'.

<sup>8</sup> See, Allison, Roy (2008), "Russia Resurgent? Moscow's campaign to coerce Georgia to peace", *International Affairs*, Vol. 86 No. 6, pp. 1145-1171

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion on Russia's role in the war, see, Stephen Sestanovich (2008), "What has Moscow Done?", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, Issue. 6 (Nov-Dec), P. 12. And Charles King (2008), "The Five-Day War", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 87, Issue. 6 (Nov-Dec), p. 10.



political objectives without recourse to violence. Furthermore, Georgia's fate has been closely monitored by other neighbors, and it is very likely that Poland and Ukraine will act more closely with EU and NATO out of security concerns. Many observers have warned Russia that its complete disregard for international organizations and law may result in international isolation. Besides, the Russian recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, soon after the war, had little impact and could not attract international support.

Now, if the lust for power and prestige guided Russia's decision to engage in the war, then Realist scholars would point out that such behavior is not uncommon to major powers. Neo-realist scholars<sup>10</sup> would argue that the cause of Russia's war lies within the structure of the regional power system where countries like Georgia and Ukraine are challenging Russia's hegemonic position by their increased interest in the Western security system. Russia certainly wants to remain the only security provider in the larger Caucasus region. Neo-realists would also argue that the dynamics of balance of power, especially the changes that take place in the distribution of power, is a key tool for understanding the causes of wars initiated by the major powers. Russia's economic recovery in recent years and the enormous dependence of European countries on Russia's energy sources put Russia in an advantageous position from which it can act, at least regionally, to secure its geostrategic interests. Russia's negligence of the international organizations during the war also indicates the realist worldview of the Kremlin that Russia will act on its own if its interests clash with the desires of the international community. The war with Georgia, thus, provided Russia the opportunity to shift the balance of power, once again, in its favor. But critics would point out that Russia's action in Georgia has also created a 'security dilemma' for other CIS states that might force them into creating a new alliance system with active support from the West. However, Russia's desire to be respected as a global power and its impact on the decision to go to war can be regarded as an ultimate cause of the war. It is, albeit, a necessary cause, but this cause alone is not sufficient enough to bring about this war since the aspiration of Russia to become a resurgent power is not a new phenomenon. Therefore, the first hypothesis cannot explain the proximate cause of the war.

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion on Realism and Neo-realism, see, Dunne, Tim & Schimdt Brian C. (2008), *Realism*; in Baylis, John et al (eds), *The Globalization of World Politics: An Introduction to International Relations*, New York: Oxford University Press, p. 93.

In order to understand the second hypothesis of this study, it would be helpful to consider the ideas of Chris Hedges<sup>11</sup>, one of the most insightful observers of modern-day warfare. He analyzed how nationalist regimes and populist leaders use rhetoric in order to create and sustain support for wartime violence. While describing the 'nationalist triumphalism' during the Serbian war, he showed how state-controlled media can create a past in order to legitimize the present. Myths became facts and history became a tool for nationalists to construct identity of enemies and to instill hatred against them. Even the intellectuals served the nationalists and the masses began to see themselves only as victims, not as killers. Citing examples from the Argentinean war in the Falklands, Hedges also showed how nationalistic rhetoric during the war helped to sustain a collapsing military regime. Criticism against the state's policy over war became impossible. Conspiracy theories became popular and people could hardly imagine that Argentina was losing the war. It would be interesting to see what role nationalistic politics played in making the decision to engage in the August war that we are dealing with in this paper. And the second hypothesis is that both Putin and Saakashvili used identity politics and provoked ethnic/nationalist tensions that led to the outbreak of the war.

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili spoke frequently about the territorial integrity of Georgia during the last two elections held in January and May of 2008. It is not at all surprising that he, quite consciously, modeled himself on the medieval Georgian king, David Agmashenebeli ('the Builder')<sup>12</sup>. Saakashvili's nationalist rhetoric concerning the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia<sup>13</sup> became the primary tool for maintaining support for his government. But the rhetoric put local and regional politics onto a perilous course toward each other. His anti-Russian approach won him support from the masses, and even when Georgia lost miserably in the war, thousands of people rallied in the street showing solidarity toward his government. On the other hand, Putin's rhetoric about Russian identity and protecting Russian

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<sup>11</sup> See, Hedges, Chris (2002), *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, New York: Anchor Books, pp. 43-61.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed discussion on the identity politics, see, Rayfield Donald (2008), "The Georgia-Russia conflict: lost territory, found nation", *Open Democracy*, (August 18), [Available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net>]

<sup>13</sup> See, Krastev Ivan (2008), "Russia and the Georgia war: the great-power trap", *Open Democracy*, (August 31), [Available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net>]

citizens heightened the tension as well<sup>14</sup>. The state-controlled media in Russia was much active in informing the Russians about the Georgian 'aggression' and 'genocide' against South Ossetians, a large number of whom has Russian passports. Russia's war was depicted as a response to the humanitarian disaster brought about by Georgia. In an attempt to appeal to a higher normative agenda, Russian leaders frequently talked about upholding international norms regarding the 'responsibility to protect'. Conspiracy theories, popularized by the leaders, informed the Russian public that President Bush planned the war in order to secure the victory of the Presidential candidate, John McCain, and also that the US needed the war to convince Poland to sign a missile defense agreement. Although hundreds of people died and thousands of people were displaced from South Ossetia and Georgia, Putin and Saakashvili kept telling about the victimization of 'their people', while remaining silent about the crimes committed by their armies on both sides. Putin became more popular after the war and he is certainly very much in charge of his country, now more than ever. Few people have forgotten that it was the 1999 war in Chechnya that brought Putin to power.

Thus, it can be safely said that nationalistic politics is crucial in understanding the causes of the August war as this politics provided both Putin and Saakashvili the much needed public support in waging a war. Again, nationalistic politics is a necessary cause of the war in question, not a sufficient cause because the tension between Georgians and South Ossetians or between Georgians and Russians existed long before the war started. The existence of nationalistic politics or ethnic tension cannot by itself trigger a war. Therefore, the identity politics behind the war can be regarded as an ultimate cause of the war, not a proximate one.

The third hypothesis of this paper suggests that the unwarranted optimism of President Saakashvili led him to risk the war with Russia. This is perhaps the most important cause of the war since it is now known that it was Saakashvili who first initiated the war. Before discussing Saakashvili's motivations and strategy behind the war, it would be appropriate to analyze Geoffrey Blainey's concept of optimism which he discussed in his classic 'The Causes of War'. According to Blainey, optimism operates beyond rationality: that is, it does not rely on a rational assessment of relative capability. Optimism can even come from a 'failure to imagine what war is like'. Moreover, the prospect for foreign intervention can also increase optimism, which in turn

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<sup>14</sup> For a discussion on Putin's legacy, see, Kathryn Stoner-Weiss (2008), "It is Still Putin's Russia", *Current History*, Vol. 107 Issue. 711 (October), pp. 315-321

influences the predicted outcome of the war. All of these seem to be applicable in Saakashvili's case. Let us consider, for the moment, Saakashvili's version of the causes of the Georgian war. He claimed that his was a pre-emptive attack in the face of an advancing Russian army on the borders with South Ossetia. But the way Georgian army attacked the densely populated Tskhinvali can hardly be described as pre-emptive. It is highly probable that Saakashvili wanted to make the 'frozen conflict' of South Ossetia into an international crisis in which the West, especially the US, would intervene and settle the issue in Georgia's favor. Officials in Georgia have admitted that they did not expect the massive response from Russia and thought that Russia would only 'assist' the South Ossetian paramilitary groups. Sympathizers with Saakashvili might argue that there were reasons to be optimistic. For example, from Russia's perspective, Abkhazia has far more strategic importance than South Ossetia, and Saakashvili thought if a war ever breaks out between Georgia and Russia, it would be fought in Abkhazia, not in South Ossetia. Secondly, Saakashvili's decision to wage war can be seen as an opportunistic move and calculated gamble or even a rational miscalculation in the sense that he might have thought that Georgia needed a 'CNN moment' to position itself in the global spotlight (Antonenko, 2008: 25). He expected that the West would intervene and Russia's position as a mediator in the conflict would be discredited forever. Furthermore, both the US and the EU failed to send a strong signal to Saakashvili that risking a war with Russia would not be supported by them.

Whatever strategic goals might have guided Saakashvili's decision to go to war, it is certain that he clearly failed to imagine what the outcome of the war would be. Political scientists, thus, would find it difficult to judge his decision to risk a war with Russia as rational. Therefore, Saakashvili's optimism over possible U.S. involvement can be regarded as the proximate cause of the war since it was his wishful thinking about the outcome of his adventurism that ultimately triggered the war.

## **Conclusion**

Could this war have been avoided at all? One possible answer is that if Saakashvili's optimism could have been checked, then war could have been avoided. In this connection, the role of the United States needs more scrutiny (Alexander & Lincoln, 2009: 35). The US, for the past few years, stood firm in support of Saakashvili in spite of the fact that his regime became increasingly authoritarian. The US military assistance to Tbilisi continued at a time when its leaders were employing increasingly bellicose rhetoric towards the breakaway regions. Georgia's unilateral 'peace plans' also got unconditional US support although Saakashvili did little to promote peace

and reconciliation. And most surprisingly, the US did nothing to stop Saakashvili from starting a military strike against South Ossetia that ultimately dragged Russia into the war.

From a larger perspective, it can be argued, that the cause of the August war is also a product of the type of regimes that both Russia<sup>15</sup> and Georgia have. Supporters of the 'democratic peace theory' would feel upset about this war since both Russia and Georgia are democracies. But as Mansfield and Snyder showed in their research that transitional democracies, in which nationalist politics go hand in hand with authoritarian elite politics, have high probability to engage in wars.<sup>16</sup> Because in those young democracies, nationalist sentiments and the politics over the legitimacy of the ruling class tend to be intense and militarism becomes a popular tool for gaining mass support for the regimes. Therefore, the root cause of the Georgia-Russia war of August 2008 can be attributed to the transitional nature of their democracies<sup>17</sup>.

In summary, the causes of the August war were indeed complex and multifaceted. From Russia's perspective, the war was necessary not only to show that it is capable to act as a great power, but also to advance its geo-strategic interests through a quick victory over Georgia. From Georgia's perspective, the war failed to bring about the expected outcome that Saakashvili wished for. Domestic politics, especially the nationalist rhetoric of the leaders and growing militarism in both Russia and Georgia played a crucial role in the decision of a military solution to the conflict. The failure of the Western nations, particularly the US, in deescalating the tension also contributed to the outbreak of this limited war that has far-reaching consequences for the security and stability of the region.

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<sup>15</sup> For a discussion on Putin's power-politics within Russia, see, Zbigniew Brzezinski (2008), "Putin's Choice", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 31 No. 2 (Spring), pp. 95-116

<sup>16</sup> See, Mansfield, Edward & Snyder, Jack (1995), "Democratization and War", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74 No. 3 (May), pp. 79-97

<sup>17</sup> For a discussion on Russia's problems with democratization, see, Sarah E. Mendelson and Theodore P. Gerber (2005-6), "Soviet Nostalgia: An Impediment to Russian Democratization", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 29 No. 1 (Winter), pp. 83-96.

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